Gender Inequality, Class-Bound Relationships, and Filial Piety: Contextualized Use of Dating Apps in China

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Abstract

China's large population of unmarried individuals presents significant potential for dating and marriage practices, traditionally overseen by parents. The emergence of dating apps has provided young adults with the opportunity to take control of their partner search, expanding the dating pool and potentially challenging traditional marriage patterns. However, existing research in China has not adequately explored the relationship between app usage and contextual factors such as gender inequality, class-based relationship orientations, and filial piety. This study aims to investigate the influence of contextual factors on dating app usage in the Chinese context, including motives, app preferences, and partner preferences, in order to contribute to our understanding of changing dating practices in China. Additionally, this study seeks to examine how income, education, occupation, hukou (household registration system), and housing, which define social class, shape dating app usage. It also aims to address the limitations of the Uses and Gratifications Theory in explaining context-specific app usage. A combination of questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and online observation data will be used to address the core research questions. The quantitative data will be analyzed using SPSS, while thematic analysis will be employed to analyze the qualitative data. Based on 977 surveys, 25 interviews with dating app users, and a 2-year online observation, this study applies Bourdieu's theory of class and habitus, as well as gender theories, to explore how gender and class inequality are reflected and perpetuated in dating apps in China. The findings

demonstrate that class-related elements, such as income, education, and occupation, have a significant influence on users' motivations for selecting potential partners on dating apps. Furthermore, users' habits and preferences, shaped by their social class, impact their engagement with dating apps, their motives for usage, and their preferences for potential partners. These differences hinder users from establishing long-term or close relationships with partners from different social classes, despite the opportunities dating apps provide for connecting with them. Consequently, dating apps perpetuate and reinforce class-based relationships, as users are more comfortable interacting with individuals from similar backgrounds. Additionally, the study reveals that dating apps do not alleviate the presence of double sexual standards, whereby men are often praised while women are stigmatized for engaging in sexual activities. Instead, these platforms perpetuate and amplify the significance of male users' socioeconomic status and female users' physical attractiveness. Furthermore, this study demonstrates that contemporary Chinese users pragmatically utilize dating apps as a supplementary channel to traditional blind dating in order to fulfill the societal expectation of "getting married at the right age." While dating apps can offer women the opportunity to challenge male-dominated relationships, satisfy their sexual desires, and question traditional notions of long-term relationships and gender roles, users ultimately endorse conventional dating values and marriage. These findings support the central argument that dating apps reflect and perpetuate gender inequality, filial cultures, and class-based relationships in China. The practical and theoretical implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords: Dating Apps, Gender Inequality, Filial Piety, Social Class, Motivation, China, Sex, Marriage.

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1. Research Interests

My initial interest in the current research stems from my experiences using Chinese dating apps. Chinese dating apps were invented over a decade ago. However, the name “hook-up app” discouraged me from using them. Ironically, the first time I was courageous enough to use and study Chinese dating apps, I was not in China but in Australia, where dating culture is prevalent and dating apps are considered less harmful. There, I felt relaxed talking about my use of dating apps with friends. The experience of using dating apps aroused my interest in investigating the cultural impacts of dating app use. For example, compared with their Australian counterparts, I found that Chinese partners found through dating apps tended to avoid referring directly to sex. Instead, they would use “that” or other implicit words to suggest sexual issues. Also, Chinese partners seemed keener than their Australian counterparts to display their economic success as a strategy to win favour. Such findings excited and motivated me further to investigate the use of dating apps in China.

1.2. Research Significance

The present research is significant in identifying contextual factors that influence the use of dating apps in China. Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) (Katz, et al., 1974) falls short in providing a comprehensive understanding of the contextual factors underlying the utilization of dating apps. This inadequacy may stem from the inclination of previous studies, influenced by individualistic perspectives, to prioritize the examination of individual dissimilarities. As a result, the broader sociocultural and environmental aspects that shape the motivations and behaviours associated with dating app usage have often been overlooked or insufficiently addressed. The collectivist nature of Chinese society, the continuing existence of filial piety, the importance of marriage mobility, the culture of face, and traditional gender views and the social stigma attached to sex profoundly impact the dynamics of dating and marriage practices in China. These factors also have the potential to intersect with the use of dating apps. Banduras' social cognitive theory (1962) proposes reciprocal interactions between personal factors, environmental factors, and behaviour. China is an ideal setting for examining contextual effects on dating app usage because it is a collectivist society where people are sensitive to environmental factors. This study addresses this gap in the relationship between contextual factors and dating app usage. It investigates how Chinese dating and marriage cultures (e.g., face, male superiority, class-bound romance, filial piety) are reflected and perpetuated in

dating apps. It will give policymakers several insights into potential measures regarding dating and marriage to improve people's well-being.

Further, this study provides a clearer understanding of changes in Chinese dating and marriage practices. Prior studies of dating apps were conducted mainly in Euro-American[1] countries. Existing findings indicate that Euro-American-based studies can be challenging to apply to China due to the cultural, economic, social, and political differences that affect attitudes toward relationships.

Compared to other East Asian countries (excluding North Korea), China has more stringent legal restrictions on prostitution. For example, while the sex industry in Japan is legal and prostitution is illegal but largely unregulated in South Korea, China imposes fines and detention for engaging in prostitution (ProCon.org., 2018). Such suppression on seeking sex through sex workers in China might motivate individuals to seek other channels for sexual encounters, including dating apps.

[1] While we acknowledge that European countries have their own cultures and traditions, here we use the terms "Euro-American countries" and "Euro-American culture" instead of "Western countries" and "Western culture" to specifically refer to most Western European countries and the United States that possess well-developed social welfare systems and share a common cultural characteristic of sexual openness and tolerance.

Dating apps, defined as applications which are specifically designed for mobile phones, and which can be downloaded and used to search and initiate conversations with potential partners (Rauen, 2019), provide users with great potential to choose and date partners without the interference of parents, and therefore significant potential to challenge traditional norms of dating and marriage in China. Indeed, dating apps are top-rated in China. In June 2019, *Momo* reached 114.5 million monthly active users (CIW Team, 2020). Research on dating apps could offer a lens to view Chinese dating and marriage culture changes. Future researchers would benefit from this study of China's culture.

There is a scarcity of existing research on dating apps that specifically considers social class as a variable, with only a limited number of studies addressing this aspect (Xiao & Qian, 2020; Ren & Wang, 2022). Perhaps because the social welfare systems in Euro-American societies are more advanced and provide residents with basic economic security, the division between different classes in Euro-American societies is less noticeable than in China. This study fills this research gap by comparing the use of dating apps between lower- and middle-class users in urban China and by adding insights to dating app studies. Based on China's context, apart from income, occupation, and education, which are widely used measures of class in Euro-American contexts, the definition of the Chinese middle class must also consider *hukou* and housing. *Hukou*, or the household registration system, is a distinct system in China that plays a significant role in determining an

individual's social position. It has a profound impact on the structure of urban society and social integration (Lu, 2008). *Hukou* is closely associated with income, occupation, and educational attainment in China (Fu & Ren, 2010; Knight & Song, 1999; Zheng & Lu, 2002; Lu, 2008). This research will provide future researchers with a more comprehensive description of social class, especially when studying dating and marriage. It also contributes to dating app research, the new social class variable. Through this research, app companies could optimise their design and services to improve user experiences.

1.3. Research Objectives

The primary aim of this study is to investigate how Chinese dating and marriage cultures, including but not limited to concepts such as face, male superiority, class-bound romance, and filial piety, manifest and endure within the context of dating app usage. By exploring the intricate interplay between these cultural norms and the behaviour exhibited on dating apps, this research seeks to shed light on the ways in which traditional values and beliefs are reflected and perpetuated in the digital realm of romantic interactions. The study aims to contribute to the existing literature on dating apps by exploring the influence of traditional norms on dating and marriage dynamics and highlighting the role of social class as a determining factor in shaping the use of dating apps. Furthermore, this research addresses the limitations of the Uses and Gratifications Theory in explaining the nuanced contextualised use of dating apps. A critique of the Uses and Gratifications Theory in studying dating

app usage in China is its lack of attention to how cultural and social norms shape motivations. Traditional Chinese values, family expectations, and societal norms significantly influence why individuals use dating apps. In a collectivist culture that emphasizes filial piety and "face," motivations extend beyond personal desires to include societal and familial pressures. To enhance the theory's relevance, a nuanced understanding of these cultural influences on the gratifications sought through dating apps is essential. Addressing this critique can improve the theory's applicability, revealing the complexities of digital dating in China and the interplay between individual motivations and cultural dynamics.

1.4. Overview of Research Methods

This study integrates data from online questionnaires, online and offline one-on-one semi-structured interviews, and online observations to investigate the critical research questions. Online questionnaires aim to provide a comprehensive overview of users and examine the influence of social class as a newly introduced variable in the context of dating apps. Conversely, the incorporation of semi-structured interviews and online observation provides rich contextual insights into the influences that shape the use of dating apps. With a predominant emphasis on qualitative analysis, this study delves into the "how" and "why" aspects underlying the dynamics of dating app usage. It seeks to explore users' experiences and perceptions, which cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measures alone.

1.5. Research Background

Rapid economic development and accelerated urbanization in China in recent years have been likened to the industrial revolution that occurred in Euro-American countries in recent centuries (Jacka & Gaetano, 2004). It has generated numerous middle-class households and reinforced social inequality, changes in lifestyle, and a larger population of singles and dating app users. Unlike the gradual evolution of this process over centuries in Euro-American countries, however, China's changes are compressed into mere decades (Jacka & Gaetano, 2004), which seems to be resulting in a gap between economic and cultural development.

1.5.1. Rapid Economic Development

In the 21st century, China is increasingly growing in global prominence and power. China's gross domestic product (GDP) is the second largest in the world (O'Neill, 2023) and, along with the U.S., is considered to be the leading economic power in 2019 and the largest country in terms of exports (Textor, 2020d; Duffin, 2020a). Globalization has become increasingly Sino-centric, evidenced by China's global factories, new dollar zones shared by China and the U.S., and China's development as the fulcrum of the integration of the United States with the global economy (Palley, 2012). Moreover, China initiated the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a huge overseas investment scheme designed to enhance the connection between China and other countries in the

world in 2013. By the end of 2021, China had signed more than 200 cooperation agreements with 145 countries and 32 international organizations to collectively build the Belt and Road, encompassing various fields including investment, trade, finance, science and technology, society, humanities, people's livelihood, and other areas (Xiong, 2022).

In conjunction with the increase in prosperity, China possesses a sizable cohort of mobile internet users. As per Thomala's (2023a) report, in June of that year, approximately 1.08 billion individuals in China utilized mobile devices to connect to the internet. According to a recent report, the number of social media users reached 1.04 billion and the penetration rate of social media in China rose to 72% in January 2020 (Kemp, 2020). On average, every Chinese Internet user owns 9.3 social media accounts and spends two hours and 12 minutes a day using social media (Hootsuite, 2020). While messaging, networking, and shopping apps remain the most popular, it was reported that 14% of Internet users utilize apps for dating and friendship monthly (Hootsuite, 2020).

However, it cannot be ignored that the prosperity of China’s economy comes with a larger disparity between the rich and the poor. According to Global Bank, China’s Gini coefficient was 0.29 in 1978, ranking among the lowest in the world countries (Li, 2002). It jumped to 0.42 in 1995, exceeding the level of Eastern Europe, South Asia and high-income countries (Li, 2002). In 2018, China’s Gini Index reached 46.8%, which is above the warning level of

inequality (Textor, 2020). While the emerging middle class enjoys better life chances in urban places, the migrant workers (*nongmin gong*) as the representative group of the lower class remain a huge proportion of the population in urban areas. Based on the *2018 Migrant Workers Monitoring Survey Report*, the migrant worker population has escalated to 288.3 million, equivalent to roughly 20% of the entire population. Out of this demographic, 44% work in provinces other than their hometown, predominantly under the age of 40, and primarily employed in eastern provinces such as Shanghai and Beijing (National Bureau of Statistics, 2019). As the majority of them have received less education (73.5% have less than 12 years), their average annual income is around 49,284 yuan ($6,911) (National Bureau of Statistics, 2019), and they do not possess an urban *hukou*, they are more likely to be categorized as belonging to the lower class.

In big cities, where the majority of dating app users reside (Castro, Barrada, & Castro, 2020), and where most studies on dating apps are conducted (e.g., Chan, 2019; Licoppe, 2020; Shapiro, 2017), different social classes exhibit distinct practices in dating and marriage (Kilanski & McClendon, 2017; Sassler & Miller, 2011; Meier & Allen, 2008; Wang & Kao, 2007). However, there has been no research conducted on the relationship between the use of dating apps and users' social class. This study aims to address this gap by examining and comparing the use of dating apps among the lower-class and middle-class populations in urban China, thus contributing to the existing body of knowledge on using dating apps.

1.5.2. Chinese Middle Class

China's urbanization, which refers to the proportion of the urban population in the total population, has increased from 19% in 1980 to 59% in 2020 (Hootsuite, 2020). The rapid urbanization of China has also created more opportunities for the lower class to move up and become part of the middle class (Chen & Qin, 2014). In 2012, the proportion of the Chinese middle class increased to 54.8%, approximately three times as much as that in 1995 (Chen & Qin, 2014), and it is largely gathered in urban and coastal cities (Yuan, Wan & Khor, 2011).

The Chinese middle class emerged towards the end of the 19th century and developed to a significant extent in the first half of the 20th century. This group consists of educated and affluent individuals such as entrepreneurs, professionals working abroad, managers, government employees, professors, artists, and lawyers (Zhou, 2002). However, during the social revolution of 1949-1978, a substantial portion of the middle class was stigmatized as the "counter-revolutionary bourgeoisie" and faced severe repercussions in political campaigns (Zhou, 2002). The rebirth of the Chinese middle class started with Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening Up policy in 1978, which led to considerable social class stratification driven by economic prosperity.

The new policy provides the middle class with a strong and positive political base (Zhou, 2002). Firstly, it shifted the focus from class struggle to economic

development, destigmatizing the name of the middle class and allowing them to pursue economic success. Secondly, sustained and stable economic growth, along with adjustments in the economic structure, expansion of the tertiary industry, increased marketization, and accelerated urbanization, have created favourable conditions for the emergence and growth of the Chinese middle class. Thirdly, cultural diversification and the transition from elite education to mass education have also provided a cultural and spiritual foundation for the middle class, particularly the new middle class. The new middle class is characterized by their high-salaried intellectual labour roles (Zhou et al., 2016; Mikayilov, Suleymanova, Salifova, & Suleymanov, 2019; Jing, 2010) and relatively limited possession of material wealth (Zhu, 2017). In contrast, the old middle class comprises individuals who possess material wealth and traditionally work as self-employed individuals engaged in manual labour (Jing, 2010). While economic growth has benefited both the old and new middle class, the new middle class has gained more from the reform policies and has become the dominant group within the middle class, with the rapid growth of the white-collar workforce (Li, 2001).

The new middle class in China can primarily be attributed to three main factors: formal education, professional skills, and marketization (Li, 2005; Li, 2015). Since the resumption of the college entrance examination in 1977, obtaining a university education has become the primary formal pathway for social mobility. Alongside formal education, acquiring professional skills allows individuals to secure decent jobs with substantial salaries, which is particularly

advantageous for those who have received limited inheritance from previous generations. Additionally, with the shift from manufacturing industries to service industries since 1978 as part of the industrial transformation process, individuals from rural backgrounds have been able to improve their social status by entering profitable service sectors. This transition to the service industry has become the primary channel for individuals to join the middle class.

The growing prosperity in China has had a profound cultural impact, particularly on the Chinese middle class. With increased affluence, more Chinese citizens have been exposed to Euro-American cultures, referring to the general cultural atmosphere associated with Euro-American countries. Based on the Ministry of Education's data (2018), a considerable number of Chinese students have enthusiastically embraced international education opportunities. In 2017 alone, 608,400 Chinese students opted to pursue their studies overseas, with 480,900 students returning to China after completing advanced degrees from prestigious foreign institutions. Over the past forty years, the number of Chinese international students has surpassed 5,194,900, as reported by the Ministry of Education (2018). Developed countries, including the US and various European nations, are known to be popular destinations for Chinese students seeking overseas education. A report by The Telegraph (Smith, 2019) highlights a steady increase in the number of Chinese tourists visiting the UK. The figures have risen dramatically, surging from 10.5 million in 2000 to a staggering 149.7 million in 2018.

Chinese middle-class consumers exhibit a growing inclination towards adopting Euro-American tastes, referred to as *xiaozi* or the petite bourgeoisie, as observed by Xin (2013). They engage in activities such as attending Euro-American concerts and shows, listening to Euro-American music, and watching Euro-American movies (Xin, 2013). The Chinese upper middle class, in particular, exhibits similarities to Euro-Americans and spends a larger proportion of their income on healthcare, entertainment, education, and durable goods, while allocating less towards basic necessities like food and clothing (Chen & Qin, 2014). These cultural shifts signify the influence of increased wealth on the Chinese middle class, allowing them to embrace and adopt aspects of Euro-American cultures in their consumption patterns and lifestyles.

While the Chinese middle class strives to adopt an Euro-American aesthetic, it differs significantly from its Euro-American counterparts (Li, 2001). Firstly, the pace of change within the Chinese middle class surpasses that of Euro-American countries, resulting in a distinct age composition. In Euro-American countries, the middle class comprises individuals of various ages, including both older and newer members. Conversely, China's middle class is characterized by a younger cohort, typically around 30 years old, juxtaposed with an older segment aged 40-50 (Li, 2001).

Secondly, intergenerational inheritance patterns in China diverge from those in Euro-American countries due to unique contextual factors. In Euro-

American societies, the middle class underwent a protracted growth process, leading to substantial intergenerational inheritance within many middle-class families. Conversely, the majority of Chinese middle-class emergence is unrelated to parental middle-class backgrounds prior to the socialist revolution and socialist construction era (1949-1978), which greatly diminished the older generation of the middle class due to political movements (Zhou, 2002). During this period, the government championed egalitarianism and criticized the bourgeoisie.

Thirdly, compared to Euro-American countries, the formation of the Chinese middle class relies heavily on rebalancing the state-society relationship after economic system transformations and shifts in the global industrial structure and labour market caused by globalization (Zhou, 2002). This distinguishes the Chinese middle class and its development trajectory.

Such analysis lends support to the contention that research conducted on dating apps within Euro-American contexts may not be directly applicable to the Chinese context. Consequently, a more extensive investigation exploring the comparative use of dating apps among the middle class and lower class in China becomes imperative. This endeavor aims to enrich our comprehension of contemporary dating and marriage practices in China by encompassing a broader spectrum of societal strata.

In contrast to conventional methods of seeking prospective life partners, such as orchestrated introductions facilitated by one's social circle or familial connections, which are predominantly confined within the boundaries of pre-existing social networks and physical settings, dating apps transcend spatial constraints. By fostering interactions among individuals from diverse social backgrounds, these digital platforms enable users to contact potential dates outside of their existing social circles (Haywood, 2018; Illouz, 2013). As a result, there is a prospect of attenuating the entrenched social divisions embedded in conventional dating practices and facilitating the convergence of middle-class and lower-class users.

1.5.3. Single Population

The new Chinese middle class seems less likely than ever before to marry (Daily Economic News, 2019) and more likely to divorce (Thomala, 2020c), creating a climate seemingly ripe for the introduction of dating apps, which, along with marriage, can also be associated with emerging hook-up cultures (Ren, 2017) and the breakdowns of traditional ways to look for spouses (Tantan, 2019). According to statistics, there are 260 million single people in China (Xing, 2023).

One reason for this is that with increased economic status and personal freedom, these individuals view casual sex, premarital sex, divorce, and cohabitation as more acceptable than in the past (Yang & Neal, 2006),

replacing the traditional notion of marriage as a prerequisite for sexual relationships. The divorce rate has increased from 1.71‰ in 2008 to 3.2‰ in 2018 (Thomala, 2020c), while the marriage rate has also dropped significantly. According to statistics from the Ministry of Civil Affairs, in 2018, the marriage rate reached an 11-year low, becoming the lowest recorded marriage rate in China (Daily Economic News, 2019). In Shanghai, one of the wealthiest provinces in China, the marriage rate is only 4.4 ‰ (Daily Economic News, 2019). Reports suggest that in more economically developed provinces, there is a correlation between higher housing prices and lower marriage rates (Daily Economic News, 2019). This trend is also observed in developed countries like Italy (Statista Research Department, 2020), the U.S. (Duffin, 2020b), Australia (Hinton, 2019), England and Wales (Clark, 2019), where a declining marriage rate has been witnessed over the past decade.

Furthermore, the encouragement of dating app usage has created opportunities for middle-class single individuals in China when it comes to finding potential spouses. Middle-class urban-dwelling Chinese adults, who have recently risen in socioeconomic status, often hold specialized occupations such as engineers and accountants. As a result, their social networks tend to be limited, reducing offline dating opportunities. For instance, professions like accounting, auditing, and financial roles are female dominated, while technical positions are largely filled by men (Anjuwang, 2020). Consequently, industries such as advertising media, public relations, and conventions have the highest proportion of singles, with more than half of

the professionals being single (Boss Zhipin, 2018). The financial, automotive, and Internet sectors also have a significant number of single individuals (Boss Zhipin, 2018). Singleness has emerged as a key predictor for using dating apps (Castro, Barrada, Ramos-Villagrasa & Fernández-del-Río, 2020).

Furthermore, the fast-paced and busy professional urban life makes offline meetings more costly. Leisure time has also decreased, averaging 2.27 hours per day in 2017 (Gu, 2018), with urban dwellers having even less leisure time (for example, people in Shenzhen had only 1.94 hours per day, and Shanghai had 2.14 hours per day) (Gu, 2018). Working overtime, frequent business trips, and limited social circles are considered significant barriers for Chinese adults in seeking and maintaining romantic relationships (Boss Zhipin, 2018). For the new emerging generation, particularly post-95 adults (those born after 1995), online dating is seen as a much more efficient way to find a date (Tantan, 2019). Those with higher incomes are eager to get married (Boss Zhipin, 2018) and are more likely to view online dating as a reliable means to find a spouse compared to blind dating (Tantan, 2019). Social media has now become the second most common way to meet a spouse, second only to meeting through acquaintances (Thomala, 2020b).

1.5.4. Emerging Use of Dating Apps in Urban China

It is perhaps the combination of increased technology and internet access (Thomala, 2023a; Hootsuite, 2020), decreased leisure time (Gu, 2018),

urbanization (Hootsuite, 2020; Chen & Qin, 2014), economic affluence (O'Neill, 2023; Textor, 2020d; Duffin, 2020a), and the corresponding increase in single people (Xing, 2023), as well as the increasing influence of Euro-American culture (Xin, 2013; Ministry of Education, 2018), that has led to China being reported as the third country where users are most likely to download dating apps from the mobile App Store ('Russia, Brazil, and China', 2017). Between 2017 and 2019, the number of dating app downloads in the iOS market in China has shown a consistent year-on-year increase, reaching nearly 40% growth (App Annie, 2020). Dating apps can fill the void created by the breakdown of traditional methods of finding a spouse.

Undoubtedly, dating apps have gained substantial popularity within the Chinese context. According to App Annie's data (2020), some of the popular Chinese dating apps include *Tantan, Momo*, and *Soul*. *Momo,* for instance, stands out as a versatile application that consistently expands its array of features and updates its interface (Chan, 2019). Notably, this platform serves as a conduit for facilitating connections between strangers, enabling casual encounters, and nurturing relationships (Liu, 2016). Its primary demographic comprises young individuals aged 15 to 34 (Li, 2016). Filing documents reveal that in 2014, *Momo* boasted an impressive 180.3 million registered accounts alongside 2.3 million paid subscribers (Xiang, 2014). Moreover, as reported in June 2019, *Momo* achieved a notable milestone with 114.5 million monthly active users (CIW Team, 2020). Similarly, *Soul*, another prominent dating app, has effectively entrenched itself among the upper echelons of the most

extensively downloaded free social networking applications on the China App Store. With a global user base surpassing 100 million and a monthly active user count of 30 million, Soul has firmly established its position (Soul App, 2021). As 2022 drew to a close, the Chinese app *Tantan*, which resembles *Tinder,* boasted a monthly active user community of 18.4 million individuals (Thomala, 2023b).

In the following section, I will delineate the distinctive characteristics of the three prominent dating apps in China, vis-à-vis Tinder, underscoring how they align with prevailing Chinese cultural values such as preserving face, prioritizing group interests, and avoiding discussion of sexual topics.

1.5.4.1. Tantan

The 'gender' and 'sexual orientation' settings are more rigid in *Tantan. Tinder* users have more options to choose their gender, including male, female, bigender, etc., while *Tantan* does not offer sexual orientation as an option, indicating that it may not expect non-heterosexual users. *Tantan* users are limited to 'male' and 'female', and the gender cannot be changed once the profile has been set, unlike *Tinder* where users can change their gender afterwards.

Tantan provides more explicit options on user profiles. Users can choose their industry, job title, company, birthplace, sports, music, food, movies, books,

and places visited from a list of designed options. They can also fill in details about their hangouts (what they often do), the *About Me* section, answer selected questions on dating attitudes, and add hashtags to categorize themselves.

The basic features of *Tantan* are very similar to *Tinder*, including the swipe logic to match users (left for 'dislike' and right for 'like'), and users can have more free likes (120) per day. In addition to the basic features, *Tantan* offers additional features such as *Cross Path*, which allows users to see the number of times potential daters have crossed paths and missed each other when viewing profiles. The more times they have crossed paths, the closer their life circles are, and the more potential predestined relationships they may have. Mutually liked users can send various types of messages, including texts, voice messages, emojis, pictures/videos, games, gifts, gifs, location information, mild Q&A, and intimate Q&A. In comparison, on *Tinder,* users are limited to sending emojis, gifs, and texts.

Tantan, unlike *Tinder,* has a feature called *Album* that allows users to approach potential dates even without a successful match. Users can post texts, photos, videos, hashtags, polls, and voice messages on their *Album*, which will be displayed in the *Explore* section under *Tantan Topics, Follow,* and *People Nearby.* Other users can view these posts and engage with them by liking, commenting on, or reporting the content. Users can follow each other, increasing their chances of matching. The *Album* has specific guidelines for

content: Users may opt to conceal their location or display their real-time location within the country. However, it is not possible to simultaneously post both photos and voice messages. Furthermore, only one video can be included per post, and videos and photos cannot be combined. Lastly, users can add up to nine photos in a single post. *Tantan* also has a feature called *LIVE*, where users can enter a live studio and watch performances while sending gifts to the hosts. Users can send text messages to the hosts and follow them. With its diverse features, users have various avenues to connect with potential partners, increasing their chances of finding a suitable match and reducing any apprehensions they may have.

Another unique feature of *Tantan* is *Secret Crush*, which is designed for those who already have feelings for someone offline. Users can select contacts from their mobile phone's contact list that they have a crush on. The system will then anonymously send a text message to that person's phone number, helping the user express their feelings. The recipient can choose whether or not to use the app and enable *Secret Crush*. If they do, they can reverse the selection and choose someone who might have a crush on them. If the recipient correctly guesses who has a crush on them, the two parties will be matched and can start chatting. If the secret admirer is not guessed correctly, the information of the secret admirer and the fact that they have a crush will remain undisclosed, avoiding any potential embarrassment for both parties. Although this characteristic may appear intricate and less efficient, it serves

the purpose of saving the face of both parties involved, while potentially facilitating successful connections in offline environments.

Tantan places a stronger emphasis on protecting the female user experience. In *Tantan*, if a male user mentions sensitive words such as "date" or "sex" during a chat, a prompt will appear asking the female user if she feels harassed. If she confirms feeling uncomfortable, a human customer service agent will step in to investigate and address the issue promptly. If the harassment is confirmed, the male user will be blocked and prevented from registering again.

In terms of premium features, *Tantan* offers similar options to *Tinder* but at lower membership fees. The VIP membership of *Tantan* costs ¥12 ($1.67) per month and includes benefits such as unlimited daily likes, the ability to change current locations, unlimited rewinds, and 5 “super likes” per day. In *Tantan*, VIP members enjoy various perks such as having an exclusive badge and highlighted nicknames, which boost their visibility on the app. This feature aims to provide greater exposure to VIP members and increase their chances of getting matches. If users want to see who liked them in order to potentially match with them, they can upgrade to premium for ¥60 ($8.35) per month. Additionally, *Tantan* offers a *Quick Chat* feature for ¥48 ($6.68) per month, allowing users to have real-time conversations with three new people every day and unlock their profile photos as they get to know each other. Only subscribers of *Quick Chat* can send messages to other *Quick Chat* users. This

feature enables instant matching and communication with blurred profile photos initially, which gradually become clear after 20 sentences are exchanged.

Compared to *Tinder, Tantan* provides users with more opportunities to approach potential partners through various channels. This compensates for the limited chances of matching solely based on swiping right. It suggests that Chinese females may be more cautious when selecting potential partners, making it more challenging for users to get matches based solely on their profiles.

1.5.4.2. Momo

Launched in 2011, *Momo* is the first and most popular dating app in China. The name "*Momo*" means "stranger stranger" in Chinese, indicating its purpose of facilitating communication between strangers. Categorized as a multi-functional app, *Momo* continuously expands its features and updates its interfaces (Chan, 2019). It serves as a platform for strangers to connect, engage in casual encounters, and develop relationships (Liu, 2016). The app primarily caters to young users, aged between 15 and 34 (Li, 2016). According to filing documents, *Momo* had 180.3 million registered accounts and 2.3 million paying members in 2014 (Xiang, 2014). As of June 2019, *Momo* has reached 114.5 million monthly active users (CIW Team, 2020).

Momo is only available in a Chinese version and is supported by *QQ, WeChat*, and Apple ID. The basic information required to use *Momo* is similar to *Tantan*, except for profile photos. *Momo* allows users to utilize profile photos from third-party platforms such as *QQ;* real portraits are not necessary for basic use. In comparison to *Tantan, Momo*'s additional information can be more detailed. Along with industry, company, birthplaces, hangouts, "about me" section, answers to chosen questions, and hobbies available on *Tantan, Momo* users can also voluntarily indicate their workplace (office buildings), monthly income, height, and educational background. Furthermore, as users of the *Momo* platform, their *Momo*-related identities, encompassing aspects such as *Momo* status, duration of *Momo* usage, online or offline presence, participation in *Momo* groups, engagement in games, as well as accomplishments like received gifts, garnered likes, fan count, and earned badges, are automatically showcased on their profiles. They can upload up to 8 profile photos on *Momo.*

Compared to *Tinder* and *Tantan, Momo* offers a wider range of entertainment tools within its platform. One of its features, called *Diandian*, functions similarly to *Tinder* and *Tantan,* allowing users to swipe and match with unknown users. Mutual matches can then communicate via text, voice messages, emojis, pictures, videos, game invitations, gifts, gifs, video chat, voice chat, share locations, and engage in Q&A sessions. The *Cross Path* feature is also available when using *Diandian.* Like *Tinder* and *Tantan, Momo* allows free filtering based on age, distance, and gender. Although *Diandian*

allows users to swipe right without authentic profile photos, the number of right swipes is limited without real photos, which encourages users to upload genuine personal pictures. Female users can ask a question for male users to answer, and females can express their desired partner's characteristics through “making a wish”.

However, there are other methods to attract potential dates on *Momo*. Similar to *Tantan's Album, Momo* offers *Moments*, where users can post texts, photos/videos, emojis, and gene tags representing their hobbies and personal traits along with their location. The rules are similar, except that *Moment* users can choose who can see their posts. Content can be visible to the public (anyone), friends, people nearby, special friends, selected friends, excluded people, or only themselves. Users can like, comment, and repost *Moments,* as well as initiate conversations with the poster.

Furthermore, *Momo* provides a wider range of *LIVE* features, including *Recommendations, Nearby, Male/Female, Dating, Outdoor, Music, Shopping, Games, Talk Shows, Radio, Watch (a Film) with you, Dancing,* and *Discovery.* Apart from watching performances such as singing, dancing, and playing games by the hosts, users can have real-time interactions with other users through *LIVE Chatting Rooms* via voice chatting, video chatting, playing games, or texting.

Additionally, *Groups Nearby* allows users to create free groups of up to 20 people based on their current location. Users can join groups through channels like *Recommendations, Heated Chatting, New, Nearby Search*, or by searching for a specific group number. Group members can communicate via text, voice messages, emojis, pictures, videos, game invitations, gifts, gifs, video chat, share locations, send lucky money (red packet), and play Chinese string puzzles. Users can follow others, chat with them, and send gifts to users within the groups.

Momo offers various VIP and SVIP privileges to enhance the user experience and differentiate itself from other dating apps like *Tantan* and *Tinder*. The VIP membership is relatively affordable, starting at just ¥3 ($0.4) for the first month and ¥30 ($4.2) for three months. By subscribing to VIP, users can enjoy several benefits. VIP users on *Momo* have the option to filter their search results to view only users who are currently online or have real profile pictures. They can also choose to see only other VIP users, excluding passive users. Additionally, VIP users can specify their preferred roaming location to connect with more local users. VIP members have the ability to filter potential matches based on criteria such as star signs, occupation, and identity. This feature allows for more precise matchmaking and enhances the chances of finding a compatible match. Furthermore, *Momo* VIP provides various additional features, including the ability to light up a VIP badge, highlighting their profile in the *Nearby* list. They can also view all visitor records during their membership period and hide their distance and last login information

from selected users. VIP members receive 5 “super likes” per day, allowing them to express stronger interests in potential matches. Having a VIP membership accelerates the user's “active value”, which contributes to upgrading their *Momo* grade. They can add a recorded self-introduction to their profile and upload up to 16 profile photos. Moreover, VIP users can limit their visibility to certain groups of users and enjoy member-exclusive chat bubbles, making conversations more engaging. They can synchronize chat records during their membership period and make personalized settings in the profile picture area. VIP members have the benefit of following an additional 100 people, with a maximum limit of 400 people. They can also join 10 groups and create a group with up to 50 members, displaying a membership logo.

In addition to the VIP privileges, SVIP membership provides even more exclusive benefits. SVIP users have a flagship identification, allowing them to stand out as superior members. They can upgrade their groups to accommodate up to 500 members and enjoy animated features in the chat room. SVIP members can view active visitors and enjoy additional perks. By offering these features, *Momo* aims to provide an all-in-one platform that extends beyond mere dating and seeks to downplay its image as a hook-up app. It aims to offer a more comprehensive entertainment experience while reducing the perception of purposefulness in app usage.

1.5.4.3. Soul

Soul, launched in 2016, has gained popularity among young adults, particularly those born after the 1990s. With a user base exceeding 100 million globally and a monthly active user count of 30 million, it has firmly established itself as one of the top five most widely downloaded free social networking apps on the China App Store (Soul App, 2021). It positions itself as a platform to find a soulmate and emphasizes the personal chat experience rather than focusing on appearance. Users can choose from eight recommended avatars generated by the system or customize their own avatars with various details such as hairstyle, face shape, eyebrows, eyes, nose, and clothing. This allows users to create unique avatars that showcase their personality and hobbies.

Unlike other dating apps that require profile photos, *Soul* requires users to complete a personality test when they first join. Based on the test results, users are allocated to different "planets" and recommended friends for voice chats, video chats, location-based chats, or text chats. The *Love Bell* feature matches users based on their test results and notifies them to chat with potential partners.

While text chatting is free, the chances for voice chats are limited, and users have to pay for additional chances and location filters. However, female users have more free chances to initiate voice chats and video chats with strangers compared to male users. For example, male users have three free voice chats

per day, while female users have more than five times that amount. *Soul* also offers extra chances to female users who receive likes. This reflects the imbalanced sex ratio of users on the platform. Premium subscribers have access to more virtual decorations, competition filters, longer video posts, and the ability to set their preferred matching locations.

Similar to *Tantan's Album* and *Momo's Moment*s, *Soul* has a feature called *Square* where users can publish text, images, videos, and voice posts. Users can customize the visibility range of their posts and the content is intelligently recommended to other high-matching *Soul* users. *Square* provides various channels such as *Follow, Recommend, Latest*, and search portals to help users find the person they are looking for. Additionally, *Soul* allows users to interact with others by creating or joining themed chat rooms.

According to Albury et al. (2019), dating apps commonly employed in Euro-American contexts, such as *Tinder* and *Bumble*, exhibit a distinct reliance on integration with various social media platforms including Instagram, *Facebook*, and *Twitter*. In contrast, popular Chinese dating apps like *Tantan* and *Soul* tend to operate independently, displaying a reduced level of interconnectedness with social networks. Notably, while users have the option to access these dating apps through *WeChat*, their personal *WeChat* accounts remain concealed from potential online dating partners, ensuring complete isolation between individuals' acquaintances and strangers. This design feature holds particular significance within the Chinese cultural milieu, where conversations

regarding sexuality and the utilization of dating apps carry significant social stigma. By safeguarding personal privacy and augmenting users' sense of security, this approach addresses concerns prevailing within the Chinese cultural context.

The functionality of Chinese dating apps such as *Tantan, Momo*, and *Soul* differs from popular American apps like *Tinder* and *Bumble*. Chinese apps offer diverse functions and cater to multiple user motives. The all-in-one nature of these apps aims to reduce the stigma surrounding sex in China. Consequently, research conducted on Euro-American dating apps cannot be directly applied to the Chinese context, highlighting the need for studies that investigate the contextual impacts upon the use of dating apps in China.

Given their popularity, *Tantan* and *Soul,* the two most prevalent dating apps in China, were selected for this study to examine user interactions through posts, comments, replies, and more. While *Momo* was also a representative dating app, only one participant reported using it, and the majority of participants expressed negative opinions and did not utilize it. Therefore, to ensure a cohesive analysis, the focus was primarily on observing and analysing the interactions among users on *Tantan* and *Soul,* which were widely used and highly regarded by the interview participants.

Chinese dating apps can offer more functions and features compared to their Euro-American counterparts. They include features like *Moments* and *Live*

Streaming, which allow users to interact with others without having to match with them first. This all-in-one feature enables users to engage with a larger group of people simultaneously. This aspect aligns with the collectivist culture in China, where individuals are integrated into groups with consistent values (Wang et al., 2005; Lin & Wang, 2008). Since interactions on these apps are visible to the public, users may adjust their posts and comments to maintain their social desirability. In contrast to private one-on-one conversations, public discussions on Chinese dating apps enable users to express their opinions openly and potentially gain favour from potential partners in the competitive dating market, given the imbalanced gender ratio. However, due to double sexual standards, Chinese female users are less likely than their Euro-American counterparts to approach strangers or initiate conversations on dating apps. This allows male users to take the lead in interacting with potential partners and increasing their chances of further interactions.

1.6. Structure

The thesis consists of ten chapters. In this chapter, I have presented my research interest and research significance, introduced the research aims and research questions, outlined the methods used to collect and analyse data, introduced the contexts of China, and ended with an outline of the thesis. The following section provides an overview of the other chapters of the thesis: Chapters 2 and 3 present the literature review and theoretical framework;

Chapter 4 introduces the methodology; Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8 present the findings and discussion; and Chapter 9 concludes the thesis.

Chapter 2 aims to provide an overview of the literature on dating apps. First, it reviews the development of dating apps and illustrates how dating app research focuses on Euro-American contexts that highlight individual differences while ignoring the contextual factors in using dating apps, leaving a significant gap in research on contextual factors, which are particularly important in collectivist societies such as China. It then reviews the unique cultural factors associated with dating and marriage in China, such as the stigma attached to sex, gender norms, class-bound relationships, face culture, and filial piety, and proposes their potential associations with the use of dating apps. This shows that the existing research from Euro-American contexts cannot be applied to China, and therefore calls for the need to study the use of dating apps among Chinese people.

Chapter 3 outlines the theoretical framework, indicating how UGT (Katz, Blumer, & Gurevitch, 1974), theory of Class and Habitus (Bourdieu, 1984), and gender theories (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002; Wiederman, 2005) can be deployed to explain the contextualised use of dating apps in China.

Chapter 4 offers a thorough examination of the research methodology utilized in the study. The chapter initially introduces the research design of mixed methods. It outlines the specific techniques utilized, including surveys, semi-

structured interviews, and online observations. The rationale behind selecting these methods is justified, with a clear explanation of how they effectively address the research questions. Moving forward, the chapter delves into the research procedures. This includes the process of survey design, sampling techniques, distribution of surveys to participants, analysis of survey data, and the assessment of validity and reliability of the survey instruments. Additionally, ethical considerations are thoroughly addressed within this chapter.

Chapter 5 examines the impact of dating apps on gender inequality in China. It reveals that these apps not only fail to dismantle existing gender disparities, but also reinforce patriarchal norms surrounding sex and relationships in society. Users' behaviours on these apps reflect and perpetuate inequality and double standards, with little evidence of progress. The chapter begins by discussing how both men and women in China feel uncomfortable discussing sex due to the persistent social stigma, particularly women who face more pressure to suppress their sexual desires. This negativity extends to dating apps, leading to a devaluation of the technology, especially among female users who encounter hostility and internal guilt.

Moreover, the chapter highlights the connection between this negativity and the potential for dating apps to challenge patriarchal control over female sexuality. It argues that while women can use these affordable platforms to pursue sexual encounters independently, society only accepts such activities

and desires when they align with male users and masculinity. As a result, men gain social status while women are stigmatized for their sexual activity, evident through collective pressure within the app community.

Lastly, the chapter explores how female users, in particular, navigate the tension between their sexual desires and societal expectations for social acceptability when seeking a partner. It also delves into the concept of women experiencing a "loss" due to engaging in sexual activities and using dating apps, leading to a need for economic compensation. Consequently, wealth becomes a key criterion for men to attract women, while women face harsh judgment based on appearance. In summary, Chapter 6 underscores dating apps' limited ability to address gender inequality in China. Instead, they tend to perpetuate patriarchal norms, reinforce societal pressures on women's sexuality and appearance, and hinder substantive change.

Building upon Chapter 5, Chapter 6 extends the argument that dating apps in China perpetuate gender inequality and double standards while also highlighting how they distinguish tastes and habitus among users from various social positions. By applying Bourdieu's class theory (1984), the chapter demonstrates how class inequality is reflected and perpetuated in Chinese dating apps. Using self-reported class attributes like income, education, occupation, *hukou* (household registration), and housing, the chapter explores how middle-class and lower-class users engage with these apps, connecting their habitus and taste with social standing. The chapter commences by

highlighting the potential of dating apps to facilitate social class mobility by enabling interactions between users from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. This holds particular significance for women, who exhibit a greater proclivity towards elevating their social status through matrimonial alliances.

This chapter further illustrates the association of dating apps with "lowbrow" culture and the perception of being aligned with lower-class groups. Furthermore, the chapter examines the differing engagement and motivations between users from different social classes. Surprisingly, lower-class users, regardless of gender, are more inclined towards seeking long-term relationships and marriage compared to their middle-class counterparts. These distinct motivations lead to less flexible judgment criteria among lower-class users, including considerations of age difference, sexual history, education, and income. In conclusion, rather than breaking down social barriers, dating apps in China perpetuate social divisions by maintaining distance between users from different class backgrounds.

Chapter 7 delves into the evolving dynamics of marriage and relationships in Chinese society, highlighting how these changes are reflected and navigated through dating apps in the online space. The chapter begins by providing an overview of the traditional constructs of dating and marriage in China. It emphasizes the significant role that parents and extended families play in these arrangements. The chapter then explores how dating apps in China have

transformed this matchmaking process. These apps have assumed the role previously held by parents and extended families in facilitating connections between potential partners. This adaptation occurs through users deploying the apps to seek marriage partners in order to satisfy their parents, with the apps operating as a digital extension of continued parental involvement when selecting a partner who adheres to parents' preferences.

Chapter 8 offers convincing empirical evidence of the potential for dating apps to challenge traditional dating and marriage norms in China, albeit with relatively few users having taken advantage of this opportunity. The chapter begins by demonstrating the empowering effect of dating apps on female users, enabling them to satisfy their sexual desires and critically evaluate traditional concepts of long-term partnerships and gender roles embedded within them. Subsequently, it explores how dating apps have emerged as a means to challenge the conventional notion of filial piety by facilitating the search for partners with reduced parental involvement and promoting the pursuit of DINK (Double Income No Kids) partnerships. Lastly, it illustrates how dating apps serve as a platform for users to support one another in breaking free from unhappy marriages and pursuing individual happiness.

Chapter 9 comprehensively summarizes the pivotal findings of the research, effectively highlighting its significant theoretical and practical contributions. Furthermore, it meticulously outlines the strengths and limitations encountered during the study, providing a balanced perspective. In addition,

this chapter offers valuable recommendations for future research, establishing a pathway for further exploration and advancement in the field.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

This research seeks to explore the influence of wider cultural factors on the use of dating apps in China. It aims to contribute to existing research on dating apps by exploring the significance of traditional Chinese constructions of social norms and conventions on the use of this new technology. Specifically, the thesis aims to illustrate the significance of contextual factors such as gender perspectives, filial piety, and social class in shaping the usage of dating apps in China.

This chapter is divided into three sections. First, it reviews the development and significance of dating apps as a globally popular and convenient means through which to seek and form relationships. Second, it illustrates how research into dating apps focuses largely upon Euro-American contexts, and how such studies tend to highlight individual differences while ignoring wider contextual factors that also impact upon and shape such use. Finally, it examines the cultural influences on dating and marriage in China, including the stigma surrounding sex, gender norms, class-based relationships, filial

piety (both *xiao,*supporting parents and having children, and *jing,* following parents'wishes), and face culture, which encompasses *lian,* relating to moral integrity and conformity to social norms, and *mianzi,* involving the assessment of one's social status and personal value relative to others (Earley, 1997; Ho, 1976; Liang & Walker, 2011).

It argues that these factors contribute to the differentiation of dating app usage in the Chinese context, thereby highlighting the imperative for further scholarly inquiry into the patterns and implications of dating app utilization in China.

2.2. Emerging Use of Dating Apps

Along with the blossoming of smartphone technology in 2007, *Zoosk, Skout* and other location-based platforms (location-based platforms have a built-in global positioning system to enable users to connect with each other by the visible geolocation distance) introduced mobile dating for the first time, a development closely followed by *Grindr* in 2009, which focused on homosexual dating. Defined as applications specifically designed for mobile phones, and which can be downloaded and used to search and initiate conversations with potential partners located around the user (Rauen, 2019), dating apps differ from apps originally developed from websites (e.g., *OkCupid* and *Jiayuan*), which, although they have an app-version that can run on mobile devices, retain their web-based interface design and running logic.

In 2012, *Tinder* became the first swipe-for-matches dating app and became the most popular and primary representative of heterosexual dating apps globally, with 10 million active users on a daily basis (Smith, 2020). *Tinder* is free to download, register, upload a profile photo, search people nearby, swipe left unlimitedly, swipe right for 100 times per 12 hours, and swipe one "super like" per day (Sina Finance, 2019). By 2016, the app had been downloaded more than 100 million times (Dent, 2016), and in 2020 there were around 57 million *Tinder* users in 190 countries using 40 different languages (Goodwin, 2020). *Tinder* contributed $1.2 billion in income to Match Group, the parent company of *Tinder* in 2019 (Dallas, 2020). On Sunday, March 28th, 2020, *Tinder* witnessed 3 billion swipes a day, the highest daily activity in its history (Kellyseal, 2020) though the 'premium' version of *Tinder* was not 'free' during the pandemic.

Following *Tinder, Bumble* was launched in 2014. *Bumble* also targets heterosexuals and applies swipe logic; however, it requires women to initiate the conversation, a feature designed to protect women from sexual harassment. Similarly, it is free to download, create profiles, swipe, chat, and to have one re-match with an expired connection per day. Subscribers of *Bumble Boost* ($24.99/month) are able to extend connections for 24 hours, re-match with expired connections, see a list of people who already swiped right, and "super swipe" ("*Tinder* vs *Bumble*", n.d.). With over 55 million users in 150 countries (Gross, 2019), *Bumble* is positioned as a direct *Tinder* competitor (Kellyseal, 2019b). Compared with *Tinder,* the ratio of female users of *Bumble*

is higher though both dating apps have more male users than female users. The gender ratio (male/female) is 65.5:34.5 on *Bumble* (Clement, 2020a) while this is 78.1:21.9 on *Tinder* (Clement, 2020b). Other dating apps such as *Hinge, Badoo, Coffee Meets Bagel, Plenty of Fish, Lumen, Hily, Facebook Dating* and so on are also popular among young people looking for relationships around the world.

According to MarketWatch, online dating has become the second most popular way for heterosexuals to find a partner, second only to meeting through friends (Lin, n.d.). Dating apps have become "intimate networks", allowing users to flirt, court, and continuously seek love and satisfaction (primarily) through mobile phones (Hobbs et al., 2017). It is easy to understand why dating apps have been so successful. The apps make dating much easier and less time-consuming, saving users money, time and effort while the majority cost nothing to download. They also enable users to approach a large dating pool, match by algorithm, and communicate with their potential dates (Finkel et al., 2012). It is also easy and quick to start using dating apps, as users can sign in with other existing social media, such as *Facebook* and *WeChat* (Chin, Edelstein & Vernon, 2019). The linkage with mainstream social media also strengthens the authenticity of dating apps (Lutz & Ranzini, 2017; Chan, 2017). Additionally, dating apps are also more picture-oriented (Chan, 2017) and leave little room for texts (Chin et al., 2019). Users just need to upload a few pictures of themselves and answer some basic questions (instead of long surveys) in order to complete their profiles. The

location-based system built in to dating apps allows users to approach others based on their location (Chin, Edelstein & Vernon, 2019), increasing the rate of matching success. Due to geographic proximity, users of dating apps spend less time chatting online before meeting (Yeo & Fung, 2018). The dating apps can also be downloaded on mobile devices, such as laptops and smartphones that can be used wherever the users go (Schrock, 2015; Chan, 2017).

The current body of research concerning the utilization of dating apps is extensive. These studies predominantly concentrate on individual variances and their correlations with usage patterns, such as frequency, motivation, and self-presentation, as well as the outcomes associated with dating app use, such as risky sexual behaviour. Multiple studies have outlined the characteristics of users, claiming that dating app users tend to be single (Timmermans, De Caluwé & Alexopoulos, 2018; Castro et al., 2020), young (Phillips et al., 2014; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2016; Ranzini and Lutz, 2017), rich and educated (Zou and Fan, 2017; Phillips et al., 2014; Sumter, Vandenbosch & Ligtenberg, 2017), men (Lim, 2022; Sumter & Vandenbosch, 2019; Castro et al., 2020), men having sex with men (MSM) in particular (Castro et al., 2020; Hahn et al., 2018; Badal et al., 2018), and living in urban areas (Smith & Duggan, 2013) which may explain why existing research largely centred on these groups. Other studies have investigated the consequences of using dating apps, such as risky sexual behaviours (Bickham, Moukalled & Rich, 2020; Wang, Chen & Wu, 2023) and decreased well-being (Her & Timmermans, 2021).

Scholars also paid much attention to examining why people use dating apps and identified various key motives, ranging from romance goals, including seeking long-term and short-term relationships, to socializing and entertainment goals, such as making friends and expanding social circles and killing time (Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017; Miller, 2015; Sumter, Vandenbosch, & Ligtenberg, 2017). Yet overall, it is difficult to summarize a coherent body of findings, as different projects focusing on different groups of people in different contexts seem to present very different results. For example, Sumter et al (2017) concluded six motives for Dutch users: love, casual sex, self-worth validation, ease of communication, thrill of excitement, and trendiness; whereas Timmermans and De Caluwé (2017) found Belgian users use dating apps for 13 reasons: curiosity, belongingness, flirting skills, peer pressure, social approval, friends, sexual partners, relationships, entertainment, sexual orientation, getting over ex-boyfriends or girlfriends, a distraction from work or study, travelling.

Research about dating apps linked the motivations of dating apps to various personal characteristics, such as gender (Gatter & Hodkinson, 2016; Ranzini, Lutz, & Hjorth, 2017; Griffin, Canevello, & Mcanulty, 2018; Sumter & Vandenbosch, 2019), age (Ranzini et al., 2017; Sumter et al., 2017), sexual orientation (Badal, Stryker, DeLuca & Purcell, 2018), relationship status (Timmermans et al., 2018), personality (Orosz et al., 2018; Crimmins & Seigfried-Spellar, 2017), and psychology (Botnen et al., 2018). Nonetheless, there has been scarce exploration pertaining to how and why contextual

factors, such as dating cultures, shape the ways in which dating apps are utilized.

Research indicates that there are differences in user motivations on dating apps based on gender. It suggests that males are more inclined than females to utilize these apps for the purpose of hooking up or seeking casual sexual encounters (Gatter & Hodkinson, 2016; Ranzini et al., 2017; Sumter et al., 2017; Griffin et al., 2018; Sevi, Aral & Eskenazi, 2018; Botnen et al., 2018; Orosz et al., 2018; Chan, 2019; Sumter & Vandenbosch, 2019). Sumter et al (2017) found that more men than women had experienced one or more one-stand nights (having a sexual relationship for one night only). Men are also more likely to establish contact with daters and develop short-term relationships (Botnen et al., 2018). In comparison to their male counterparts, women tend to utilize dating apps with a greater sense of seriousness in pursuit of relationships and love (Bryant & Sheldon, 2017; Orosz et al., 2018). Additionally, studies have indicated that women exhibit a preference for seeking partners with higher income and education levels (Ward, 2017; Neyt, Vandenbulcke, & Baert, 2019). On the other hand, research has also found that within the male population, men who identify as MSM (Men who have Sex with Men) are more inclined to use dating apps for casual sexual encounters when compared to heterosexual men (Holloway et al., 2014; Badal, Stryker, DeLuca & Purcell, 2018; Rice et al., 2012). In addition, males are found to use dating apps more frequently and intensively, while females tend to use dating apps more selectively (Timmermans & Courtois, 2018).

Empirical evidence further indicates that personality traits and psychological characteristics can serve as predictors of motivations, particularly in the context of casual sexual encounters. Specifically, concerning the Big Five personality traits of Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism (Digman, 1990), it has been observed that Openness (Timmermans, De Caluwé & Alexopoulos, 2018) and Neuroticism (Orosz et al., 2018) exhibit a positive correlation with casual sex motives. Conversely, Conscientiousness (Orosz et al., 2018) and Agreeableness (Timmermans et al., 2018) demonstrate a negative association with such motives. Additionally, Agreeableness (Orosz et al., 2018) and traits aligned with the light triad (belief in humanity, humanitarianism, and Kantianism) (Sevi & Doğruyol, 2020) display a positive relationship with the pursuit of love. Moreover, it has been discovered that casual sex motives exhibit a positive relationship with the degree of sexual permissiveness (Sumter & Vandenbosch, 2019), psychopathic tendencies (Timmermans et al., 2018), self-esteem levels (Ranzini et al., 2017), Machiavellian traits (Timmermans et al., 2018), and sociosexuality (Sevi et al., 2018). Conversely, these motives display a negative association with the sensitivity to sexual disgust (Sevi et al., 2018).

Existing research also suggests that overall, the users of dating apps are relatively young, typically ranging from mid-twenties to mid-thirties (Gatter & Hodkinson, 2016; Phillips et al., 2014; Ranzini and Lutz, 2017). However, the relationship between dating app motivation and age varies in different contexts. While some researchers claimed that age was positively associated

with love motives (Sumter et al., 2017), Orosz et al (2018) asserted that age was not significantly associated with love but significantly related to sex motive. The study by Sumter et al (2017) was conducted with Dutch people while the study by Orosz et al (2018) was conducted in the U.S. Compared with the Netherlands, the United States has a more prominent hook-up culture (engaging in sexual activities without necessarily involving feelings and commitments), which may lead to emerging American adults with more prominent casual sex motives (Joshi, Peter, & Valkenburg, 2014).

2.3. Social Norms and Using Dating Apps in China

The predominant utilization of dating apps by individuals in Euro-American countries during their initial rise may have contributed to the concentration of previous academic research on this subject within these regions. As a consequence, the majority of scholarly investigations pertaining to dating apps have been conducted within the context of Euro-American contexts. Consequently, these studies tend to primarily examine the experiences and behaviours of white/Caucasian individuals (e.g., Aaron, 2017; Rauen, 2019), which limits the amount of data available beyond the Euro-American context and has the potential to perpetuate research that focuses solely on Euro-American culture. In particular, due to the individualistic culture of these nations which places emphasis upon an individual's own values as well as the similar Euro-American cultural context the studies remain within, existing research tends to neglect the wider external environment of participants. Such

studies tend to associate the motivation for using dating apps with personal characteristics, such as gender, age, and personality. This results in a gap in the knowledge about the contextual influence of wider society on dating app use. This context is actually a significant influence upon individuals' personal factors, such as personality, beliefs, behaviour and motives (Bandura, 1986), all of which impact upon the engagement with this technology. Yet very few studies investigate the impact of these wider contextual factors in the use of dating apps.

As Chapter 1 illuminates, China is home to a significant population of unmarried individuals, and the proliferation of dating apps has been notable. However, it is important to acknowledge that the depth and breadth of scholarly inquiry focused on the distinct features and dynamics of Chinese dating app usage remains somewhat restricted. The lack of contextual specificity makes such Euro-American-based studies difficult to apply to China, a highly collectivist country with very different social attitudes toward relationships yet which also has a high use of dating apps. The small number of existing studies that address dating apps in the Chinese context demonstrate some consistency with Euro-American studies (e.g., Sumter et al., 2017; Sohail et al., 2019; Rauen, 2019). For instance, casual sex and long-term relationships are both important motives for using dating apps in China (Chan, 2019; Chan, 2018a), while male users are also more likely to seek out casual sex than women (Chan, 2019). However, in a recent study by Ren and Wang (2022), casual sex is denied as a key motive for using dating apps among Chinese users

and attributed it to Chinese cultural factors, which is ignored in the previous research.

Yet there are several differing Chinese social norms towards gender, sex, family, marriage, class, and relationships that must be addressed when studying dating apps in China. These include the collectivist nature of Chinese society, the continuing existence of filial piety, the importance of marriage mobility, face culture, traditional gender views and the social stigma attached to sex and using dating apps. Such aspects influence and change the motivations for using and engaging with dating apps in this context.

2.3.1. Sex Stigma

One significant contextual element that must be taken into account when studying dating apps in China, is the wider social attitudes towards and constructions of sex. Despite the social changes with economic growth, China remains a typical collectivist country in which people tend to see individuals as a part of their community (Hofstede et al., 2010; Kolstad & Gjesvik, 2014). Personal identity is relational and demonstrated through one's reputation and respectability with others (Ho, 1976). Compared with the guilt cultures of individualist societies, collectivist societies are shame cultures, in which if one member of a group disobeys the social rules, every member of this group would feel ashamed (Hofstede et al., 2010). For example, in Chinese collective culture, a person's stigma could ruin a whole family as it is believed that

negativity (bad luck, deviance and even death) is contagious and individuals are bound to their families (Yang & Kleinman, 2008). The stigmatized group would suffer from social distancing and rejection and would lose their social capital (Yang & Kleinman, 2008). In a collectivist society such as China, where individuals were closely tied to their respective social groups, men had to exercise discipline on the behaviour of those around them to avoid potential shame and maintain their personal honour (Hinsch, 2011). To accomplish this, it became necessary for men to regulate the sexual practices of female family members as a means of protecting their own reputation.

In China, the traditional views of sex and gender still influence many young people (Liu, 2012). This view constructs sex as a private matter, a cultural taboo, a function of reproduction, and behaviour with social and moral consequences, moreover, it regulates and imposes control over female sexuality through the perpetuation of cultural idealization of virginity and fidelity (Liu, 2012). Sex education further enforced the stigma of sex. Chinese students are cautioned by their parents and teachers about the potential risks of "premature love" (*zaolian*) or engaging in sexual activity prior to marriage and punished for having sex before getting married (Farrer, 2008). Also, instead of providing comprehensive education about reproductive health, contraception, and sexual wellness, Chinese sex education usually emphasizes the importance of abstinence, promoting "good" morals, and adhering to traditional gender roles (Farrer, 2008). Teachers who attempt to educate about sex receive complaints from parents, who suggest this education

involves teaching children how to get pregnant and distract students' attention from studying, and books about sex education are removed from educational establishments (Phoenix Weekly, 2020). Although people's attitudes toward sex have become opener in recent years and engage in sexual activities at an earlier age (Pan, 2018), many young adults perceive sex as an activity that mainly occurs within serious relationships (Guo, et al., 2012). Chinese people are therefore less likely to ask for sex, more likely to feel moral pressure, and more likely to worry about the consequences of having sex (Huang, 2017).

The increased autonomy and independence offered by dating apps clash with this collectivist control over the individual's sexual activity. The users of online dating tools had once been stigmatized as socially incompetent, desperate, immature, and self-centred in North America (DePaulo & Morris, 2006; Finkel, Eastwick, Karney, Reis, & Sprecher, 2012; Smith & Duggan,2013; Dowlat & Donaldson,2017). Today, despite localized efforts to empower female users, dating apps in Southeast Asia also still face the challenge of the stigma attached to online dating in conservative societies (Lim, 2022).

In China, independent dating culture is still not widely accepted and the notion that *bu yi jiehun wei mudi de lianai jiushi shua liumang* (Love that is not intended for marriage is a hooligan) is still prevalent in China. As a result, existing research demonstrates evidence of a significant social stigma towards dating apps in China, in which the media uses the term "*yuepao shenqi*"

(powerful hook-app tools), and an individual's reputation, especially a woman's reputation, may be damaged by using dating apps in China (Chan, 2018a). Although *Momo* in particular has repositioned itself as social and entertainment media after being accused of hook-up promotion (Liu, 2016), it is still widely seen as a hook-up app in China.

Perhaps as a result, the use of the apps also seems to be more cautious, with Chinese dating app users tend to use much more passive language in communication with potential dates, in contrast to their Euro-American counterparts who tend to express their desires more directly. Indeed, Euro-American users like using *Tinder* in particular for its efficiency and immediacy (Chan, 2019). While it is acceptable to have a goal in using dating apps in China, it is seen as problematic to express sexual desires too early, or to be too direct or overt (Chan, 2019). For example, Chen (2019) noticed that some participants are more comfortable using the Chinese word "*buchun"* (impure) to replace the term 'sexual'. In China's contexts where hook-up is highly stigmatized, users may tend not to admit that they are looking for casual sex on dating apps (Ren & Wang, 2022).

Momo users show a strong aversion to *mudixing* (purposefulness), a term used to describe the straightforward, overt relationship-seeking practice (Chan, 2019). De Seta and Zhang (2015) found that sexually charged conversations are thought to be uninteresting and are disdained by Chinese users, and female users in particular set warnings to reject overt and rude

approaches and ignore them. Indeed, one reason why users prefer using *Momo* (than other methods such as marriage websites, parental arrangement to establish relationships and other dating apps) is that the 'all-in-one' feature of *Momo* enables multiple kinds of social relationships and so has far less *mudixing* (Chan, 2019).

2.3.2. Gender Norms

The construction of and engagement with the apps is also influenced by the wider patriarchal nature of Chinese society. In this system, women are not treated equally in terms of resource allocation in the family (Shen, 2016) and workplace (Jankowiak & Li, 2014; Zhang & Wu, 2016). Sons are still preferred in the family with more than one child, particularly in rural areas (Shen, 2016; Jin, 2011; Tang, Ma, & Jin, 2009). In Shen's study (2016), many women have no heritage rights, and they are expected to earn money to support their brothers' education and weddings.

Moreover, the increasing income and education levels in recent years seem to make it more difficult for women to find a compatible husband in China. From the males' perspective, women's independence could be seen as a threat to their manliness and self-worth (Xie, 2020). Women tend to lose physical attractiveness as they age, and their educational and career achievements often discourage male partners who are expected to have an even higher social status (Xie, 2020). Female entrepreneurs are often criticized as *'nü qiang*

ren' (powerful women) and perceived as less feminine and virtuous (Osburg, 2013). To's study (2013) also showed that Chinese men tend to reject women with better socioeconomic status. Since men prefer women with lower educational levels and achievements, many mature and successful female professionals remain single (Chan, 2018a).

Despite the overall male-to-female ratio (105.07:100) leaning slightly in favour of women (Xinhua, 2021), the gender distribution in major urban areas presents a less optimistic scenario. Specifically, in Shanghai, the male-to-female ratio stands at 1:1.1, indicating a slight surplus of women (Economic Observer, 2018). These statistics highlight the significant demographic imbalance within big cities, posing challenges for single women and underscoring the intense competition for partners.

Despite the gap in education level between women and men narrowing in recent years, gender segregation remains strong in the job market which reinforces gender inequality in the marriage market. Women are still placed in subordinate positions to men (Yu, 2016). It is considered that women are limited to service industries, such as secretaries, while men have more options, including management and leadership positions in China (Jankowiak & Li, 2014). Take the new Chinese middle classes that mainly consist of professionals and managers, for example, while women are in charge of half of the professional jobs, men occupied over 70% of managers (Zhang & Wu, 2016). Compared with managers, professionals are younger, more educated,

and more accepting of democracy but earn less (Zhang & Wu, 2016). Women would not be likely to take charge of the most profitable professions that potentially involve sexual entertainment (Xie, 2020).

This potential increased autonomy for young people and women is also realized professionally, with dating apps giving women, in particular, a means to better promote themselves and their business by reaching male consumers online (due to the generally unbalanced gender ratio on the apps). As women are largely restrained in the workplace in offline settings ("Chinese women's workplace", 2020), in addition to the more general motivations (such as looking for entertainment, sex, relationships, and friendships), research indicates that Chinese women use dating apps to build business connections (Chan, 2018b). For Chinese women, dating app usage is also perceived as a method to accumulate bonding and bridging social capital other than seeking sexual and romantic relationships (Chan, 2018b). This involves three kinds of business use: general sales, sex workers selling sexual services, and alcohol promotors (Chan, 2018b). Indeed, Chinese male participants strongly believed that women use dating apps to promote their social status and pursue the corresponding benefits (Chan, 2018b). This is in keeping with wider research around location-based apps, which indicates how these are used to attain and incorporate symbolic cultural capital to trigger economic benefits and social mobility (Hsiao & Dillahunt, 2017).

Different expectations for men and women make women suffer moral loss while men gain benefits from casual sex (Avant, 2018). Gender inequality in sexuality is even more serious in China where the long history of polygamy and concubines makes husbands' extramarital relationships less stigmatized (Farrer & Sun, 2003). The cultural valuation of conservative notions of female sexuality and bride virginity are still entrenched (Martin, 2018). Women's sexual reputation is severely associated with their morals and is closely related to their social status in China (Liu, 2017). Private using of dating apps provides women with the opportunity to remove the traditional one-way gaze of men on women (Chan, 2018a) and employ their own sexuality without being criticized.

On the other hand, dating apps become an arena in which women are able to negotiate and get involved in hook-ups. Given that the Chinese education system failed to offer enough room for people to think about sexuality and love, dating apps allow women to explore their sexual desires and consider their intimate relationships (Chan, 2018a). Further, women find they are given more power on dating apps than in their workplace when facing sexual harassment: They can easily report the harassers and they will be removed by the app runners in a few minutes while they find it hard to report the office harassers otherwise, they might lose their jobs (Chan, 2018a).

2.3.3. Class-bound Relationships

Dating apps also further intersect with female autonomy by offering increased opportunities for marriage mobility, particularly for women seeking social security. Marriage and dating in China remain very class-bound and can be an important means of social mobility, particularly for women, who express more interest in their potential mates' pragmatic qualities, such as education, wealth, success and ambition (Blair & Madigan, 2016). The apps enable users to contact potential dates outside of their existing social circles (Haywood, 2018; Illouz, 2013).

In addition to factors such as education and military service, cross-class marriage, also known as marriage mobility, is an opportunity for social mobility (Sorokin, 1927; Yu, 2016; Li, 2015; Glenn et al., 1974). Both men and women can move upward or downward in the existing social hierarchy (Lipset & Bendix, 1959; Sorokin, 2019) through hypergamy (upward marriage) or hypogamy (downward marriage), however, women are generally expected to marry up while men are expected to marry down (Wang, 2012; To, 2013; Xie, 2020). Hypergamy is a significant means to cross class boundaries and ensure social stability and security for women in China (Yu, 2016) with Chinese women exchanging their sexuality for an increase in social status (Wang, 2012; Xie, 2020).

Given the insufficient social welfare in China, this view and practice are widespread, with more and more people seeking material security through marriage. In Zhang's research (2013) 66.7% of female Chinese college students believed that it is better to have a good marriage (in which husbands are supposed to be well off) than a good job and consider financial capability when choosing husbands. In one episode of 'If You Are the One', a popular Chinese dating show, Ma Nuo, a female participant rejected a young man who appeared not very rich, saying she would rather cry in a BMW (luxury car brand) than smile on a bicycle.

Indeed, women have higher expectations of potential partners. In Hu's research (2014), most women expected their husbands or future husbands to earn at least twice as much as they do. Another report by Baihe group shows that the average expectation for male partners' income is 11941 yuan/month, almost three times that for female partners of 4488 yuan/month (Baihe, 2021). According to To (2013), women's parents also hold the belief that their daughters should marry individuals with higher social status, and that the son-in-law should assume the role of the primary breadwinner in the family. Urban parents especially expect their sons-in-law to be homeowners with cars and stable, high incomes (Li, 2015). The rise in housing prices in China is partly due to women's preference for husbands who own real estate properties (Wei et al., 2012; Blazyte, 2022b). According to the third issue of the *2016 Singles Current Status Report Series*, there has been an observed increase in women's economic expectations from men, in line with the development of the

material economy. The report reveals that over 80% of single women believe that a monthly income of 5,000 yuan should serve as the minimum benchmark for men (CCTV Finance, 2017).

Since dating apps are increasingly becoming channels for users to form romantic relationships, social class emerges as an important factor in selecting potential partners. For example, female users of dating apps prefer those with better income and education levels (Ward, 2017; Neyt, Vandenbulcke, & Baert, 2019). However, existing research generally does not address the impact of class on dating app use, potentially reflecting the Euro-American-centric nature of such studies. It is possible that the more advanced social welfare systems in Euro-American societies contribute to a relatively narrower wealth gap between different social classes compared to China. These welfare systems provide residents with basic economic security, resulting in a less noticeable disparity between classes. This might be a reason why there are few scholars considering class a key variable in dating app research. Further, the limited available Euro-American literature asserts that online dating has little to do with income or education (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007) so potentially discouraging scholars from examining the relationship with social class in China.

In the Chinese context, in addition to income, occupation, and education—which are commonly used measures of social class in Euro-American contexts—the definition of the Chinese class should also incorporate factors

such as *hukou* (household registration) and housing. In this study, the Chinese class is defined based on several criteria, including income, education, occupation, *hukou*, and housing.

2.3.3.1. Income

In many contexts, annual income serves as the predominant indicator of social class, making it the most widely utilized criterion for measuring socioeconomic status (e.g., Anagnost, 2008). Given its pivotal role as the primary financial resource for the majority of individuals, income is commonly employed as a reliable yardstick for assessing one's position within the social hierarchy. The middle class is the group that falls in the middle of their social class hierarchy. Those with an economic status above the middle class are categorized as upper class, while those below the middle class are considered lower class. However, the exact salary range defining the middle class can vary in different contexts. Anagnost (2008) characterized the middle class as individuals earning between 80,000 and 120,000 yuan ($10,000 - $15,000), while Helen Wang used an annual income ranging from 67,000 to 400,000 yuan ($10,000 to $60,000) as one of the indicators of the middle class in her books (Wang, 2010). According to China's National Bureau of Statistics, the Chinese middle class consists of households earning between 60,000 and 500,000 yuan ($7,250 to $62,500) annually.

On the other hand, living costs vary across different cities, resulting in significant differences in salary standards. For example, statistics indicate that the average monthly wage in Beijing (a top-tier city) is ¥10,910 ($20,000/year), while the average monthly income for employees nationwide is ¥5,750 ($10,600/year) (Sohu, 2019). Given that this study focuses on urban areas, the minimum annual income for being considered middle class is defined as ¥130,000 ($20,000), while the maximum income of ¥500,000 ($62,500) remains consistent with the statistics from China's National Bureau of Statistics.

2.3.3.2. Education

Education attainment reflects an individual's potential to generate income and contribute to upward social mobility (Yuan et al., 2011). According to Yuan et al. (2011), there is a positive association between the educational level of household heads and their status within the middle-class category. Several researchers agree that education plays a crucial role in defining the middle class in China (Wang, 2010; Yuan, Wan & Khor, 2011; Xin, 2013). However, different studies have varying perspectives on the educational level of the Chinese middle class. For instance, Yuan et al. (2011) found that the higher middle class typically has an average schooling duration of more than 12 years, whereas the lower middle class has less than 10 years of education. In Wang's study (2010), however, the middle class is defined as individuals with college degrees. Consequently, this study considers the educational level of

the middle class to encompass both technical vocational education degrees and college degrees.

2.3.3.3. Occupation

Occupation serves as a significant indicator of social class as it reflects an individual's social networks. Xueyi Lu, a renowned Chinese sociologist, proposed a ten-class classification system for China's social class based on occupation: state and social management positions, managerial personnel positions, private business owners, professional and technical personnel positions, low and middle levels of government civil servants, small business owners and self-employed individuals, commercial services workers, industrial workers, agricultural workers, the unemployed, and semi-employed (Lu, 2003). In this study, Lu's occupational classification will be utilized to measure social class, defining middle-class occupations as those ranked in the middle of the classification, spanning from industrial workers to professional and technical personnel positions. On the other hand, lower-class occupations encompass the unemployed, semi-unemployed, agricultural workers, industrial workers, and commercial services workers.

2.3.3.4. Hukou

The household registration system (*hukou*) was initiated in 1958, dividing the population into urban and rural categories based on their birthplace. Urban

individuals have enjoyed better living conditions, including access to education, job opportunities, improved housing, advanced medical care, and food resources, compared to their rural counterparts (Song, 2014; Chan & Zhang, 1999). The rural population faced severe restrictions on working outside their designated agricultural areas or engaging in non-agricultural industries.

Following the reforms in 1978, rural individuals were permitted to migrate to urban areas in search of employment. However, local governments continued to tightly control the household registration system, leading to the exploitation of rural migrants because they had no equal access to local facilities (Pun, 2016). These migrants faced restrictions in buying houses, enrolling their children in local schools, and accessing certain job opportunities, exacerbating social inequality between different *hukou* groups. The household registration system remains a significant factor contributing to the income gap between urban and rural residents. Industry barriers and occupational segregation based on *hukou* have resulted in lower incomes for migrant workers compared to local workers in cities and towns (Wu & Zhang, 2014; Wang, 2017; Song, 2014).

Apart from the division between rural and urban *hukou*, the market value of *hukou* also varies between major cities and smaller or less developed cities due to disparities in economic development levels and the unequal distribution of social resources (Gong, 2004). For instance, *hukou* in highly

developed cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen is generally regarded as more advantageous compared to *hukou* in smaller cities such as Wenzhou and Quanzhou.

The economic prosperity and abundance of opportunities in larger cities contribute to the higher market value of *hukou* in those areas. Additionally, possessing a superior *hukou* is seen as an advantage in the dating and marriage market since it can lead to potential spouses and children gaining access to the benefits associated with that *hukou*. For example, having a Beijing *hukou* is a prerequisite for finding a date in the dating corner in Beijing ('Changlunshijin', 2023).

Despite the significant influx of migrants to urban areas driven by the trend of urbanization, their mobility does not alter the *hukou* system. For instance, in Shenzhen, by the end of 2020, only 43.5% of residents held a Shenzhen *hukou* (Anjiabao, 2023). The Talents Settlement Policy has made it challenging for migrants without specialized skills to obtain a *hukou* in major cities (Shanghai Residence Permit Points website, 2020). This further highlights the distinction between different *hukou* holders, suggesting that *hukou* in major cities is a resource limited to those with higher levels of education or better occupations.

Consequently, incorporating *hukou* as a significant indicator of social class becomes imperative. According to their economic, political, and cultural

development capacities, cities in China are categorized into different tiers. The old tier 1 cities, such as Shanghai, belong to the highest tier, followed by the new tier 1 cities like Hangzhou. Tier 2 cities, for example, Fuzhou, come next, followed by tier 3 cities like Putian. Tier 4 cities, including Sanming, and tier 5 cities, like Bijie, are at the lower end of the tier system.

The middle-class level of *hukou* includes those in new tier 1, tier 2, and tier 3 cities, while upper-class *hukou* refers to *hukou* in the old tier 1 cities. Lower-class *hukou* usually pertains to tier 4, tier 5 cities, and rural areas.

2.3.3.5. Housing

The concept of housing class traces its roots back to Weber's theories on consumption relations, which posited that social status was determined by the nature of family property (Davies & Ground, 1991). Building upon Weber's ideas, Rex and Moore (1967) argued that people could be classified into different classes based on their housing arrangements.

In China, housing has emerged as a symbol of urban "status groups" due to the significant role played by housing rental and sales in residents' financial gains (Li, 2009). Housing has long been recognized as a crucial indicator of resource accessibility (Tomba, 2016), and individuals' ability to acquire housing resources reflects their power and marketability (Li, 2009). This is particularly evident with the implementation of the School District Housing Policy

(*Xuequfang*). Under this policy, students are required to attend schools located near their residences (General Office of the Ministry of Education, 2017). Consequently, individuals residing near reputable schools can access better educational resources, enhancing their competitiveness in the college entrance examination (*gaokao*). In pursuit of securing admission for their children in urban schools, Chinese urban migrants are eager to purchase houses in urban areas (Anagnost, 2008), further driving up housing prices. According to statistics, the average price of an apartment in Shanghai reached 36,741 yuan ($5,200) per square meter in 2020 (Anjuke, n.d.).

In addition to skyrocketing housing prices, the policy of restricting house purchases has further exacerbated the challenges faced by migrants in owning a house in major cities. For instance, in Shanghai, the purchase policy mandates that non-Shanghainese individuals must provide proof of Shanghai social insurance and individual tax payments for at least 60 out of the past 63 months before they can sign a sales contract (effectively requiring them to reside in Shanghai for over 5 years before being eligible to purchase a house). Moreover, unmarried individuals are still restricted from buying a house (Shanghai Social Insurance, 2020). Similar to *hukou* privileges, owning a house in different cities signifies access to varying levels of local amenities and carries different economic values. Housing consumption serves as an indicator of social stratification (Li, 2007), with its value measured by the location within cities of different tiers.

2.3.4. Filial Piety

Alongside the emerging use of dating apps, filial piety, an important element of Chinese collectivist culture, remains important in contemporary China despite the considerable social changes in recent years (Hu & Scott, 2016; Blair, & Madigan, 2019; Chow, 2001; Cong & Silverstein, 2008). The concept of filial piety carries two meanings in China's context: *xiao* and *jing* (Hu & Scott, 2016). *Xiao* requires adult children to financially support their elderly parents (Chan & Tan, 2004). Since social security systems such as pensions and healthcare are insufficient in China, most elderly people rely upon their adult children to support them in later life. Sons are still preferred in the family with more than one child, particularly in rural areas (Shen, 2016; Jin, 2011; Tang, Ma, & Jin, 2009) as they are expected to take more responsibility for attending to parents in their later lives and can also pass on their family names.

Single adults' failure to have children is seen as a significant offence to parents, with a common Chinese saying stating "*Bu xiao you san, wu hou wei da"* (There are three forms of unfilial conduct, of which the worst is to have no descendants) (Lin, 2014). Singleness is a significant stigma in the context of patriarchal heterosexual culture according to filial piety (Lin, 2014; Qi, 2014; Xun, 2011). Therefore, single adults, particularly those born between 1980 and 1995, experience notable pressure to get married, and traditional attitudes regarding marriage continue to prevail, as highlighted by Boss Zhipin (2018). A recent survey shows that approximately 82% of 30-year-old singles had

experienced the pressure of getting married from their families (Blazyte, 2022a). In the case of women, most parents tend to be quite conservative and expect their daughters to marry rather than involve themselves in other forms of relationships, such as cohabitation or remaining single (To, 2013). Dating apps can therefore potentially help fulfil *xiao* by establishing connections with potential partners for singles.

In China, marriage has traditionally been viewed as a union between two families rather than two independent individuals (Pan, 2005), and this perspective still exists today. Parents have felt a sense of obligation in finding suitable partners for their adult children (Zhang & Sun, 2014; Zavoretti, 2016), and some parents continue to gather in matching corners at parks, such as Shanghai's People's Park, in the hopes of finding future in-laws (Judy, 2016). People living in underdeveloped areas are more likely to date individuals connected through kinship compared to those in developed areas (Farrer, 2002).

Traditionally, parents would pre-screen potential candidates and choose one that meets their criteria, arranging a first meeting for their children, which is known as *xiangqin* or blind dating. Blind dating events are still popular among single people in major cities, especially in new Tier 1 and Tier 2 cities. It is reported that over 60% of Chinese individuals aged 22 to 35 have participated in blind dating (Thomala, 2019c). However, blind dating is largely limited to existing social networks and can be rigid, pragmatic, and sometimes forced by

parents. Additionally, with urbanization, an increasing number of young adults migrate to cities, living away from their parents and parental control. Finally, blind dating can be inefficient, as both parties must arrange an official offline meeting, resulting in wasted time and money if it does not succeed. Dating apps can therefore potentially help fulfil *xiao* by establishing connections with potential partners for singles.

However, the practice of independently seeking partners through dating apps can contradict the concept of *jing*, the other concept associated with filial piety. *Jing* expresses children's thankful attitudes to their parents' dedication in their growth: children are expected to show respect for and obedience to their parents (Hu & Scott, 2016). In *jing* culture, adult children are expected to be submissive to parents and to avoid arguing with them, even in the topic of the children's marriage. Parents' opinions are still significant and will still be taken into account in adults' mate selection, with young Chinese adults still seeking to satisfy their parents when choosing partners (Gui, 2017; Blair, & Madigan, 2019).

Unlike the independent lifestyles in Euro-American countries, Chinese people develop a closely dependent relationship with their parents even after they become adults. Many young Chinese individuals remain dependent on their parents' support and protection (Yan, 2013; Chen, 2013). For example, a report indicates that parents still pay for their children's weddings and other necessities for getting married, including houses, the wedding service industry

etc. (Lu, 2007). A recent report shows that the high price of housing and the difficulty in settling on a job make 47.2% of young adults rely on their parent's financial support to rent an apartment after graduation (Tian, 2023).

Parents, therefore, have significant power to intervene in their adult children's lives, including in marriage and divorce, even in the increasingly autonomous wealthy urban middle classes (Yan, 2013). Traditional patrilocality is still prevalent in China and most married couples reside with the husbands' families after marriage, with the parents' initial acceptance of the union therefore making the family more harmonious after marriage (Gruijters & Ermisch, 2019). Xie (2020) found that meetings with both parents could critically affect the relationship and that consent from parents is important for the marriage decision. The independent use of dating apps represents a potential loss of *jing*, specifically that of parental control over children's dating decisions. Given the significance of filial piety in Chinese dating and marriage practices, it is worth investigating the impacts of filial piety on using dating apps.

2.3.5. Face Culture

As one of the most important Chinese cultural elements, the concept of face has a significant impact on individual behaviour during social activities (Zhang et al., 2011). Goffman (1955) defined face as an individualized identity that is unique to each person and developed through the performance of self in front

of others. Concern over how one is perceived by others is shared in all societies (Goffman, 1955), however, the concept of face in China's contexts is particularly emphasized in terms of interpersonal relations that are not fully encapsulated in other contexts (Qi, 2011).

The Chinese concept of the face consists of two components: one moral aspect known as *lian,* which is associated with the respect of social norms, and the other social aspect known as *mianzi,* which assesses one's position in the social structure, involving the evaluations of oneself and others on their personal value (Earley, 1997; Ho, 1976; Liang & Walker, 2011).

Mianzi is similar to the face concept in Euro-American contexts and most research on facework focuses on the concept of *mianzi.* For example, many researchers have associated face with an individual's social status and situated identity (Buckley et al., 2006; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Alexander and Knight, 1971). Brown and Levinson (1987), and other researchers defined face as a person's desire for positive social affirmation and recognition from others (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). As per Qi's (2011) perspective, *mianzi* is a social representation that reflects the level of confidence, esteem, and respect that others have for them. In China, *mianzi* is bound to social resources. Those with 'greater' faces would gain resources more easily (Hwang, 1987). Hurting a person's face (*mianzi*) through the refusal of others' requests, or hurting their feelings, could damage the *guanxi* (social relationships) with them (Kipnis, 1995).

While *mianzi* is related to personal achievement and prestige that can be higher or lower, *lian* is a fixed quantity, which can be obtained by obeying or being lost for disobeying social norms (King & Myers, 1977). It shows that individuals are keen to maintain face to satisfy both their own and others' expectations (Zhang, 2016). Chinese face is not solely an individual matter but is shared among members of their social network (Zhang, 2016). In a collective society, in which an individual's personal image is bound to his community, the face loss of an individual can also harm the reputation of the group (Jacobs, Gao, & Herbig, 1995; Ho, 1976). Therefore, it is particularly more important for Chinese individuals than their Euro-American counterparts to regulate their behaviour and protect their reputation (Hwang, 1987, 2011).

With regard to dating and marriage, following traditional social norms would contribute to obtaining face (*lian*). For example, young adults are expected to get married at the 'right age' and maintain a harmonious family (with children) otherwise they will lose their face. To meet such expectations, young adults are highly stressed to seek a spouse (Makinen & Lee, 2013). Also, researchers found that Chinese non-heterosexual people are keen to satisfy their parents by engaging in performative marriage or formality marriage (Choi & Luo, 2016; Ren, Howe, & Zhang, 2019). Formality marriage is defined as a cooperative marriage between lesbians and gay men where both parties are aware of the other's sexual orientation (Ren, Howe, & Zhang, 2019). Such cooperation aims not at living a meaningful family life but conforming to societal expectations regarding family life (Choi & Luo, 2016).

Also, Chinese people show a strong desire to increase their face (*mianzi*) when dealing with marriage rituals, with large investments in weddings and bride prices. As observed by Wang et al (2020), the bridegroom's family tend to offer the bride more bride price to earn more face (*mianzi*) for both his and his bride's family, though it is uncertain for them to gain returns.

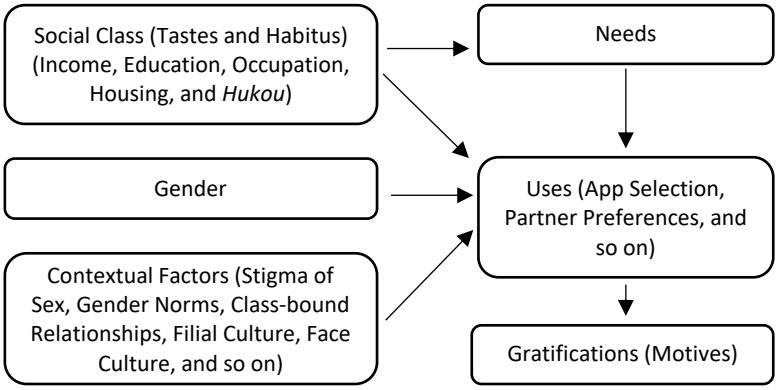
While the importance of meeting social norms of dating and marriage in China's contexts, the impact of face culture in romance seeking on dating apps has been rarely investigated. While multiple studies show that face-gaining, face-giving, and face-keeping are important for users to engage with online social networking (Lim & Basnyat, 2016; Lim, Vadrevu, Chan, & Basnyat, 2012), there remains a gap in dating app research in terms of face culture. Face culture could play a significant role in the use of dating apps. For instance, users may tend to embellish their income in order to enhance their social standing on these platforms. Considering the stigma associated with dating app users, it is plausible that individuals conceal their engagement with such apps to protect their reputation or "face". Consequently, it becomes crucial to consider the influence of face culture when conducting research on dating apps in China.

2.4. Core Concepts

In light of scholarly discourse on the potential consequences of cultural influences, this study has discerned the pivotal concepts and subsequently

developed a cohesive conceptual framework. This framework adeptly synthesizes the well-established uses and gratifications theory with pertinent contextual factors. By doing so, it provides an analytical foundation to comprehensively investigate and elucidate the intricate dynamics pertaining to the subject matter of this study.

Figure 2.4.1. Conceptual Framework



2.5. Conclusion

This chapter gave an overview of the existing knowledge and research on dating apps. Such wider information indicated how more and more people, the young in particular, are using dating apps to meet partners. However, the overview also indicated how previous studies have focused almost solely upon Euro-American countries and white/Caucasian participants. This results in a significant gap in data beyond the Euro-American contexts.

An overview of the different Chinese contexts and Chinese attitudes towards gender, sex and dating indicates how traditional constructions of and attitudes

toward marriage and dating, including the stigma attached to sex, filial piety, male superiority, face culture, and class-bound relationships must be taken into account when studying the motivations and patterns of using dating apps. Such an overview demonstrated how more research is needed to address non-Euro-American contexts and indicate how cultural differences and alternative social norms shape people's interaction with communication technology.

In the next chapter, I provide an overview of the theoretical background that can explain the gendered and class-shaped use of dating apps in China.

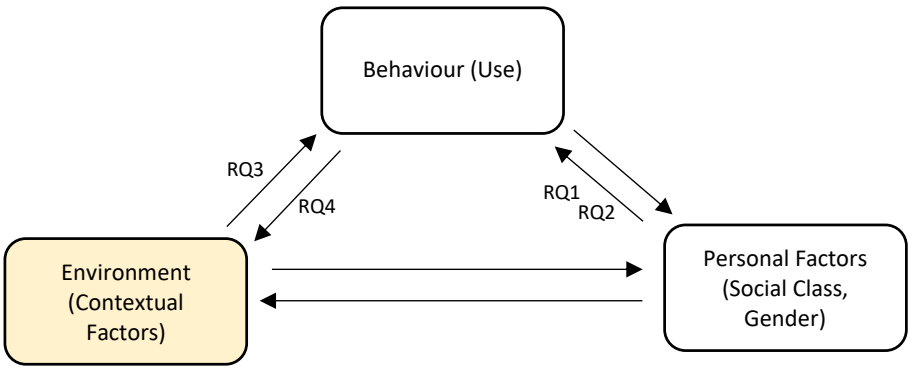
Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework

3.1. Introduction

This study is driven by the theoretical framework proposed by Bandura, known as social cognitive theory (1986), which asserts that individual behaviour is influenced through reciprocal interactions between personal factors, environmental factors, and behaviour. Existing research has predominantly focused on investigating the associations between personal factors such as gender and age with dating app usage, thus leaving a significant knowledge gap in regard to the impact of environmental factors, specifically the unique Chinese marriage and dating culture, on patterns of dating app usage. Considering the significant gender inequality and social class disparities within

Chinese society, this research aims to investigate the complex interplay between personal factors (gender and class habitus), contextual factors (such as stigma of sex, gender norms, class-bound relationships, filial culture, and face culture), and patterns of dating app usage, as illustrated in Figure 3.1.1.

Figure 3.1.1. Bandura's Reciprocal Model of Environmental Factors and Dating App Usage



As a means to better understand and interpret the impact of this wider Chinese context upon the use of and engagement with dating apps, this study deploys various wider theories associated with media use and social norms around gender and sex. The following section of the paper therefore gives an overview of the significant theories associated with motivations, class, and patriarchy for using and engaging with media (such as dating apps). The research deploys Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) (Katz, Blumer, & Gurevitch, 1974), theory of Class and Habitus (Bourdieu, 1984), and gender theories (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002; Wiederman, 2005) to demonstrate how concepts such as attitudes to sex, gender norms, class, filial piety, and face culture influence the motives and patterns of using dating apps in China.

It starts by examining the definition of the theoretical concepts in different contexts, then it moves to exploring the applications of the theories. Finally, it connects to the aims of the study and highlights the significance of the theoretical framework in explaining the use of dating apps in China's contexts.

3.2. Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) provides a theoretical framework to analyse the motives of using dating apps and has previously been deployed in studies of this technology (e.g., Van De Wiele & Tong, 2014; Miller, 2015; Ligtenberg, 2015; Sumter, Vandenbosch, & Ligtenberg, 2017; Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017). Multiple studies have validated UGT and affirmed that personal factors, such as gender (e.g., Gatter & Hodkinson, 2016; Griffin, Canevello, & Mcanulty, 2018; Sumter & Vandenbosch, 2019), age (e.g., Ranzini et al., 2017; Sumter et al., 2017), and sexual orientations (e.g., Badal, Stryker, DeLuca & Purcell, 2018) can lead to different uses of dating apps. This study emphasizes the significance of contextual influences, and UGT offers an important theoretical base to understand how and why people in China show different patterns of using dating apps.

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) (Katz, Blumer, & Gurevitch, 1974) originally primarily focused on individuals' personal characteristics and ignored the influence of the critical cultural environment on the use of dating apps. UGT is a psychological communication perspective (Rubin, 2002) concerning

the relationships between human needs and media consumption. UGT was first proposed to measure consumer behaviours in communication research in the 1940s and was formally conceptualized by Katz and his colleagues (Katz et al., 1974) and Rosengren (1974). The initial conceptualization of uses and gratifications advocated that individuals apply media to gratify their needs generated by the social and psychological environments (Rosengren, 1974). 'Uses' refers to consumers' purposefully choosing particular media (Lin, 1999; Lim & Ting, 2012; Wang, Tchernev & Solloway, 2012) while 'gratifications' refers to the results of media use, that is the types and levels of fulfilment consumers gained from using media (Lin, 1999; Lim & Ting, 2012). To make the concept of gratifications clearer, some UGT scholars distinguished gratifications sought from gratifications obtained (Palmgreen, Wenner, & Rayburn, 1980). Gratifications sought (GS) is considered as the expected satisfactions that may be attained from the use of media before they use, while Gratifications obtained (GO) is the gratifications that consumers actually gained from the media after they use (Palmgreen, Wenner, & Rayburn, 1980; Lin, 1999; Gibbs, O'Reilly, & Brunette, 2014; Ishii, Rife, & Kagawa, 2017; Leung & Zhang, 2016).

UGT aims to explain the driving force of using particular media and how the use of media meets consumers' needs (Blumler, Katz & Gurevitch, 1974; Ko, Cho, & Roberts, 2005). Instead of focusing on media's impact on humans, UGT emphasizes the power of individuals' intrinsic needs in media consumption (Palmgreen, Wenner & Rosengren, 1985). There are five fundamental

assumptions of UGT: (1) consumers or audiences of the media are active; (2) audiences choose and consume media based on their own needs; (3) social and personal characteristics could affect their media selection and consumption (4) and the media have to compete for being chosen and consumed by the audience; (5) audience's motivation is more powerful than media influence in deciding media usage (Katz et al., 1974; Rubin, 2009; Severin & Tankard, 2001; Papacharissi, 2010). It is social and psychological needs that generate the expectations for media usage and motivate people to get exposed to particular media (Katz et al., 1974). Different audiences choose to use different media based on their different needs and they tend to have different responses according to their personal characteristics when they are exposed to the same media (Lin, 1999).

In the context of UGT, consumers possess a clear understanding of their desires and actively select media options from a range of alternatives to fulfil their needs. Researchers have categorized these needs into five dimensions: cognitive needs, affective needs, personal integrative needs, social integrative needs, and tension release needs (Blumler & Katz, 1974; McQuail, 1994; Katz, Gurevitch & Haas, 1973; Severin & Tankard, 2001). Cognitive needs pertain to the desire for knowledge acquisition and information gathering. Affective needs, on the other hand, encompass the pursuit of aesthetic and emotional experiences through media consumption. Personal integrative needs revolve around the aspiration to enhance personal credibility, stability, confidence, and status. Social integrative needs involve the yearning to foster social

interactions through media engagement. Lastly, tension release needs refer to the inclination to seek respite and escape from the pressures of daily life.

UGT has been widely recognized by scholars as a valuable and influential theoretical framework for comprehending audience communication behaviour (Rubin, 2002; Ruggiero, 2000; Lin, 1998; Lull, 2000). For example, Lull (2000) noted that UGT was a valuable framework to uncover individuals' needs, the sources of the needs and the way the needs get satisfied. Papacharissi (2002a) also considered UGT as useful in understanding the motives of choosing and using media, factors that affect motivation, and the following outcomes for their media consumption. UGT has been extensively applied to various media studies to understand why people choose and consume particular media, including dating app research, a relatively new field of communication studies.

In the context of dating apps, gratification sought is defined as motives. For example, Sumter et al. (2017) concluded six motives for using Tinder: love, casual sex, ease of communication, self-worth validation, the thrill of excitement, and trendiness. Sumter and Vandenbosch (2019) categorized the motives into three goals: relational goals, intrapersonal goals, and entertainment goals. Despite the differences, multiple studies highlight the importance of relational goals of using dating apps: Seeking casual sex (short-term relationship) and serious relationship/love (long-term relationship) (e.g., Sumter et al., 2017; Sohail, Mahmood, Khan, & Gull, 2019; Rauen, 2019).

In this study, UGT (Blumler, Katz & Gurevitch, 1974) is utilized, along with Bourdieu's theory of Class and Habitus (1984), to elucidate the diverse motivations based on users' social classes. Additionally, it explores how contextual factors like filial piety and gender cultures can shape and influence the gratifications derived from seeking casual sex and relationships.

3.3. Class and Habitus

To examine the influence of class stratification on the utilization of dating applications, this research employs Bourdieu's theory of Class and Habitus (1984) to comprehend the variations in the usage patterns of dating apps among individuals from diverse social classes in China.

The concept of social class originally came from Karl Marx’s bourgeois and proletarian duopoly, arguing that the economy determined social class stratification. Marx’s theory depicts the relations between the working class and the capitalist class as the exploited and the exploiters based on the means of production (capital) they own (Galobardes, Shaw, Lawlor, Lynch, & Smith, 2006). However, economic ownership as the only indicator of social class fails to address the unequal social status in different social groups with the same economic position, for example, the wealthy Jewish were discriminated against for being pariahs. Then Max Weber’s theory, the second milestone in social class studies, sees a class as a group of people with similar life opportunities and economic interests shown in the market. In addition to

economic position, Weber introduced social prestige and social power to define social class and establish the three-component theory of stratification (wealth, prestige, and power), or the so-called Weberian System to analyse the dynamics of social class, arguing that class status can be mobilized through the interactions in the three components (Weber, 2002).

Based on Weber and Marx's work, Pierre Bourdieu (1984) developed his concept of social class to the effects of the given capitals, the habitus and tastes. Capital is conceptualized as the social resources that are legitimate, valuable, and exchangeable and those who possess capital would have certain social advantages (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984, 1986). The social class is determined by the volume of capital one owns. There are four primary capitals identified by Bourdieu in his *The Forms of Capital* (1986), economic capital, social capital, cultural capital, and symbolic capital. Each type of capital relates to a certain type of resource. Economic capital refers to monetary and financial resources. Social capital involves social networks and relationships. Cultural capital involves qualifications, dispositions, and cultural objects. Symbolic capitals are those capital associated with the highest social prestige and legitimacy.

The habitus is a universally internalized disposition that produces meaningful actions and perceptions while the taste is a set of unique preferences and lifestyles among individuals in one particular group that indicates the same expressive intent in their lifestyle (Bourdieu, 1984). The habitus and taste are not inherited but they are cultivated in certain social environments over a long

period of time and the changes of one's access to social capital and economic capital can hardly alter the habitus and tastes (Bourdieu, 1984). To Bourdieu (1984), social class is defined both by the exterior ownership of production and the interior habitus reflected in one's choice of necessity. Distinct social classes exhibit diverse tastes and habitus, which are also reflected in their patterns of consumption (Bourdieu, 1978). For instance, social class can influence the kinds of music and art that individuals enjoy (Van Eijck, 2001) as well as the clothing they prefer (Gillath, Bahns, Ge, & Crandall, 2012).

Bourdieu (1984) observed a profound relationship between musical preferences and social class, or the degree of capital possessed by individuals. He classified taste into three hierarchies: legitimate (highbrow), average (middlebrow), and popular (lowbrow). Legitimate taste pertains to a taste that enjoys social advantages and signals the preferences of the influential. It is an aesthetic inclination that apprehends objects of everyday life from the standpoint of artistic forms, instead of functionality, devoid of economic imperatives (Stewart, 2013). Legitimate taste is characterized as playfulness and those with such taste tend to see cultural objects as gratuitous and disinterested (Bourdieu, 1984). Legitimate taste is associated with the lifestyles of upper and professional middle classes who possess a high volume of cultural capital.

In contrast, popular taste tends to understand art from the perspective of human content and emphasizes functions over forms (Stewart, 2013). Popular

taste is characterized as seriousness and those with such taste tend to link the cultural objects to reality. For instance, within the scope of legitimate taste, a painting depicting an apple would be regarded as a remarkable artistic creation, emphasizing aesthetic qualities. Conversely, the popular taste group would place value on the extent to which the painted representation aligns with the visual attributes of a real apple. Popular taste is associated with the lifestyles of working-classes who possess a low volume of cultural capital.

The average, or middlebrow taste, refers to a taste that eclectically pursues legitimate taste and excessively seeks confirmation from scholastic resources (Bourdieu, 1984). For example, they tend to decorate houses based on practical living needs while buying books by famous authors (Bourdieu, 1984). Middle-brow taste is characterized as reverential seriousness and criticized as being between art and life. Although the middlebrow group has a reverential attitude toward the legitimate taste and imitates the gestures, they cannot understand the rules of the legitimate taste. Middle-brow taste is associated with the lifestyles of those located in the middle level of social space, such as the new petite-bourgeois.

Individuals in different social classes tend to spend money in different areas. Similar to the Euro-American middle class, the consumption patterns of the Chinese upper middle class spend a larger proportion of money on healthcare, entertainment, education, and durable goods while less on basic goods such as food and clothing (Chen & Qin, 2014). The upper-middle-class, also known

as Generation 2, is more inclined than the mass middle class to engage in the consumption of items such as laptops, digital cameras, and specialized products such as laundry softeners. This group tends to equate high cost with superior quality, while simultaneously pursuing heightened tastes and elevated social status for emotional fulfilment (Barton, Chen, & Jin, 2013). Conversely, the lower middle-class compartment allocates a comparable share of their expenditures towards education, entertainment, and durable merchandise, akin to those of the upper-middle class, but dedicates an equivalent financial proportion towards basic necessities in comparison to the lower-class cohort (Chen & Qin, 2014).

As a type of media product, the selection from various dating apps may also be dependent on individuals' tastes based on their needs. As was shown in previous research, people from similar class backgrounds shared the belief of the most important needs and the belief varied across classes (Gratton, 1980). Gratton (1980) conducted a study revealing that individuals belonging to the lower class exhibit a predominant inclination towards satisfying their basic biological needs, while those in the working class tend to prioritize the need for a sense of belongingness. Conversely, the middle class tends to focus on self-fulfilment, thus illustrating a direct relationship between social class hierarchy and the hierarchy of human needs. In line with Maslow's theory of need hierarchy, love-related motives are positioned at the third level, whereas sexual motives reside at the fundamental first level. Consequently, it is plausible to hypothesize that individuals from the middle class, in comparison

to their counterparts from the lower class, are more inclined to actively pursue love and long-term relationships through the utilization of dating apps.

The formation of individual tastes during the developmental process serves as a powerful mechanism for differentiation among social groups, effectively delineating the boundaries that define various social classes in terms of lifestyle and shaping their particular notions of necessity. Notably, individuals hailing from the working classes, who often face economic constraints and prioritize meeting fundamental needs, may view expenditures allocated to hosting an engagement party as excessive and nonessential. In stark contrast, the upper-middle class perceives such expenditures as imperative, signifying a symbol of status and social obligation (Stewart, 2013).

Media consumption is found to be associated with social class (Bourdieu, 1979, 1984) and it can help enhance existing social identities (Slater, 2007). Individuals can perform their tastes to fit social norms or gain social prestige (Bourdieu, 1979, 1984; Good, 2012). Dating apps are a kind of product that can be used at various prices. For example, there are different premium packages that enable different access to specific features on dating apps.

Various studies have examined the differences between social classes, characterized by income and educational level, and have identified distinct habitus and tastes associated with each class. Consequently, users from different social classes manifest diverse needs (Gratton, 1980), which in turn

may influence their utilization patterns of dating apps. It is worth noting that prior research has consistently indicated that individuals with higher levels of education and income are often regarded as more desirable (Ward, 2017; Neyt, Vandenbulcke, & Baert, 2019). Furthermore, empirical evidence suggests that male users are inclined to embellish their income more frequently compared to their female counterparts (Toma, Hancock, & Ellison, 2008). It is also noteworthy that a majority of dating app users possess a certain level of education (Statista Research Department, 2019a).

However, the use habitus of middle-class and lower-class has not been examined in previous studies. In the context of dating apps, the consumption habitus of different social classes can also be extended to the choice of apps, the access, the premium use, the duration, frequency, and context of use, the criteria for choosing a potential date, the techniques users employ to attract potential dates, to maintain and to develop their relationships etc.

In this study, the class theory (Bourdieu, 1984) is employed to elucidate how the use of dating apps is influenced by users' habitus and needs, as well as their inclination to form relationships with online partners from similar social classes. The class theory helps explain the disparities in the usage of dating apps between lower-class and middle-class users.

3.4. Theories of Female Sexual Suppression

This section introduces Female Control Theory (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002), Male Control Theory (McIntosh, 1978) and Sexual Scripting Theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1986) to discuss and explain how and why societies tend to suppress and control female sexuality. Such suppression can indicate how and why dating apps use (particularly seeking sex) tends to be significantly different for men and women.

3.4.1. Female Control Theory and Male Control Theory

Female Control Theory asserts that it is women that suppress female sexuality (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002). According to Baumeister and Twenge (2002), the suppression of female sexuality is a cultural phenomenon that discourages girls and women from experiencing sexual desire and engaging in sexual behaviour. The phenomenon of suppression encompasses the transmission of messages to females, promoting the notion that sexuality is a subject steeped in taboo or shame. Empirical research conducted by Du Bois-Reymond and Ravensloot (1996) revealed a tendency among women to exert greater efforts in suppressing their daughters' sexual desires. Moreover, additional studies have demonstrated that women also engage in the suppression of the sexuality of other young females (Petersen & Hyde, 2010). Particularly noteworthy is the work of Gurung and Chrouser (2007), who observed that

women wearing attire perceived as sexually provocative may face moral criticism from their female peers.

Female Control Theory posits that women hold the power of sexual possession, while men are driven by sexual desire. Consequently, women are motivated to enhance the incentives associated with engaging in sexual activities with men through the strategic control of sexual access (Baumeister & Tice, 2000). The theoretical framework of this perspective is rooted in social exchange theory, which examines human behaviour through the lens of costs and rewards. This theoretical paradigm assumes that social interactions involve reciprocal exchanges, wherein individuals offer rewards to acquire what they covet (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1961).

Suppression of female sex is similar to reducing the supply of products in the market, which could lead to a high price for sex (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002). The scarcity of sex would improve women's bargaining power concerning social rewards, such as financial rewards, commitment to long-term relationships and sexual fidelity, better treatment etc. (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002). The strategy of restricting sex highlights the interconnectedness of gender power dynamics and sexual relationships, where men tend to hold power and control over economic resources while women resort to sexual bargaining as a means of survival or improving their economic status. The group of women as a whole benefit when everyone adheres to the high price of sexual exchanges. However, any individual member can obtain an

advantage immediately by lowering the price slightly. Therefore, those women who sell sex at a lower price are perceived as threats and experience social criticism from the group of women (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002).

Along with females' worry about decreasing sex prices, Female Control Theory also suggests that women try to reduce their partners' infidelity by punishing those women with higher sexual availability. For example, they would describe those promiscuous women as 'cheap' and put moral pressure on them to regulate their behaviour and raise sex prices so the price of infidelity would be higher, and the chance of infidelity would be lower (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002). Dating apps allow more female users to express their sexual availability, which has the potential to challenge societal norms regarding female sexuality. Female Control Theory can help elucidate the attitudes of female users towards others' utilization of dating apps.

On the other hand, recent studies find that such suppression is contextualized in the mating ecosystem. For example, several studies found that sexual suppression by women is dependent on how available the potential male suitors are (Schacht & Bell, 2016) and how much the women rely on male resources (Price et al., 2014). Dating apps create a virtual environment where male users are outnumbered, potentially challenging the predictions of Female Control Theory regarding female attitudes towards women who openly express their sexual availability.

In contrast to the perspective of Female Control Theory, Male Control Theory postulates that men bear the responsibility for orchestrating the repression of female sexuality, citing diverse rationales (e.g., McIntosh, 1978). According to McIntosh (1978), sexual desires are considered a privilege exclusive to men, and patriarchal culture attributes to this suppression. Males worry about being compared with other males if their female sex partners have multiple sexual partners (Hyde & DeLamater, 1997). Other researchers considered social stability an important factor for males to suppress female sexuality, claiming that females' sexual drive would cause severe social chaos and suppressing their desires would bring peace (e.g., Hyde & DeLamater, 1997; Lerner, 1986).

Moreover, paternity uncertainty motivates males in particular to suppress their wives' sexuality (Wood & Eagly, 2002; Coontz & Henderson, 1986). According to Coontz and Henderson (1986), males have concerns regarding the transmission of their property to their offspring, and they may feel less confident in the legitimacy of their heirs if their wives are sexually available to other men.

Both Male Control Theory and Female Control Theory sit in the patriarchal context with double sex standards in sexuality, and both seek to reduce infidelity and associated repercussions. Male Control Theory focuses on suppressing the sexuality of women with whom they have long-term relationships, such as wives, and girlfriends, while Female Control Theory suppresses the sexual behaviour of single women seeking partners and

negotiating the exchange conditions for starting sexual relationships (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002).

In terms of dating apps, men tend to prioritize short-term relationships (Orosz et al., 2018; Chan, 2019; Sumter & Vandenbosch, 2019) which may eliminate paternity concerns thus less suppression from male users. Engaging with Male Control Theory would provide insights into males' attitudes towards females' use of dating apps.

3.4.2. Sexual Scripting Theory

The Sexual Scripting Theory argues that individuals' involvement in sexual behaviour can be likened to the use of scripts by actors in theatre (Simon & Gagnon, 1986; Gagnon, 1990). A script can be described as a coherent and anticipated sequence of events in which an individual partakes or observes (Abelson, 1976). Script theory posits that individuals tend to structure their social responses in order to exert control over a particular situation. This necessitates the ability to conceptualize scripts or stereotyped sequences of events pertaining to past, present, and future behaviours (Abelson, 1981). Within the realm of sexuality, sexual scripts are cognitive frameworks employed by individuals to navigate and assess social and sexual interactions (Simon & Gagnon, 1986; Byers, 1996).

It suggests that male-female differences are learned (Wiederman, 2005). Owing to inherent biological disparities, such as the potential for pregnancy in women, coupled with societal cultivation of distinct attitudes towards sexual activity in males and females, parents tend to be more inclined to caution their daughters rather than sons about the risks and perils associated with engaging in sexual behaviour (Fisher, 1986). Consequently, given the perception of sexual activity as fraught with hazards for women, they are expected to exercise greater self-restraint in matters of sexual conduct (Lippa, 2001). To compensate for the potential risks the sexual activity might cause, women need more motives other than physical pleasure for them to be involved in sexual activity (Wiederman, 2005) so their sexual behaviour is constructed in a meaningful relationship (Sedikides, Oliver, & Campbell, 1994). Having multiple sexual partners is either a failure to follow the traditional female sexual scripts or a deliberate deviation from the script (Wiederman, 2005).

In contrast, men are more likely to enhance their self-esteem through engagement in sexual activity with new female partners (Baumeister & Tice, 2002). Women's standards for partners are usually an obstacle that men need to overcome in order to obtain women's consent to have sex with them. The tendency is very consistent with the competition and achievement orientation of male gender roles and males should be desirable enough to persuade women to take the risk of sexual activity (Wiederman, 2005). As a result, masculinity requires being proactive and able to outperform opponents.

The enduring stereotype positing men as more likely to embody agentic attributes, such as assertiveness, confidence, dominance, instrumental proficiency, and forthrightness, while women are commonly ascribed with qualities of emotional expressivity, sensitivity, affability, and cordiality, continues to pervade contemporary society; and in turn, impinges on gender-based stratification, which favours men, amplifying their status and capacities over those of their female counterparts (Ridgeway, 2011). Indeed, individuals who secure high social standing tend to project an air of self-assuredness, autonomy, and positivity, while their low-status peers tend to exhibit more communal, expressive, and supportive tendencies (Ridgeway, 2011). As men possessed higher status and material resources, they would give an impression of being more agentic and competent than women (Glick & Fiske, 1999b, cited in Ridgeway, 2011). On the other hand, men need women to provide interpersonal intimacy thus enhancing women's competence in warmth and communality (Ridgeway, 2011).

Gender stereotypes are reflective of the entrenched gendered division of labour (Eagly, Wood & Diekman, 2000). Alice Eagly posits that a greater proportion of women assume domestic and child-rearing responsibilities, necessitating warmth and expressiveness, while men occupy more workplace roles that demand assertiveness (Eagly, Wood & Diekman, 2000). Observers may consequently infer a disparity in power between genders (Ridgeway, 2011). Moreover, the authority to publish and disseminate information predominantly resides within the purview of dominant groups, who often

institutionalize these stereotypes through media and policies, thereby solidifying them as societal norms governing gender dynamics (Ridgeway, 2011).

Research indicates that conventional sexual norms afford men a greater degree of sexual autonomy, leading to enhanced prospects of sexual contentment, security, and welfare compared to women (Amaro & Raj, 2000; Logan, Cole & Leukefeld, 2002). The suppression of sexuality appears to impede women from engaging with dating apps. Research findings indicate a negative association between females' inclination to utilize mobile applications for sexual relationships and the extent of social gender inequality (Gesselman, Druet, & Vitzthum, 2020). Although women possess agency and can actively participate in the dating sphere, exerting control over their perceived image often necessitates avoiding excessive availability (Lim, 2022).

Further, it appears that individuals exhibit partner preferences on dating apps that align with traditional gender norms and expectations. Specifically, Abramova et al. (2016) have demonstrated that women and men tend to show stereotypical preferences when selecting partners on these platforms. Furthermore, Humphreys (2006) and Toma & Hancock (2010) contend that profiles created by individuals on dating apps often conform to heterosexist gender norms. These findings indicate that societal expectations and deeply ingrained gender stereotypes play a significant role in shaping the choices and self-presentations of individuals within online dating contexts.

The theoretical frameworks pertaining to gender offer valuable insights into the examination of the gendered dynamics surrounding the utilization of dating apps. These theories illuminate the processes by which individuals cultivate their attitudes towards gender and sexuality, as well as the factors that contribute to discrepancies in motivations between male and female users regarding their pursuit of sexual encounters and relationship formation within the realm of dating apps.

3.5. Conclusion

This chapter presents an overview of the theoretical background that can account for the gendered, class-based use of dating apps in China. This framework delves into the intricate ways in which contextual factors, such as class-bound relationship orientations, filial piety, and gender cultures, can shape and influence the gendered and class-based gratifications derived from seeking casual sex and relationships.

The foundational use of the Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, Blumer, & Gurevitch, 1974) provides a comprehensive understanding of the motives driving individuals to employ dating apps, their specific app preferences, and their partner selection criteria. This theory could explain why individuals turn to dating apps and how they strategically utilize these platforms based on their specific needs and desires.

Furthermore, given the amplified social class disparities prevalent in modern-day China, it is crucial to acknowledge the potential impact of social class on individuals' utilization of dating apps. Drawing from Bourdieu's theory of Class and Habitus (1984), scholars can discern how individuals' social class backgrounds forge distinct dispositions, behaviours, and preferences that mould their users' motivations, expectations, and the specific gratifications sought through dating app usage. By integrating social class into the framework of Uses and Gratifications Theory, researchers can uncover the intricate dynamics between social class, motivational factors, and the gratifications obtained through dating app usage. This approach enables a more comprehensive understanding of how societal stratification influences individuals' needs, motivations, and the gratifications they seek when engaging with dating apps.

Moreover, gender theories, including Sexual Scripting Theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1986), Male Control Theory (e.g., McIntosh, 1978), and Female Control Theory (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002), provide valuable insights into how and why female and male users exhibit nuanced differences in their usage of dating apps within patriarchal contexts. Sexual Scripting Theory suggests that individuals' actions are influenced by societal norms and expectations. Gendered societal scripts shape individuals' beliefs about conventional gender roles and appropriate behaviour in romantic relationships. This theory highlights the importance of considering gendered expectations and societal norms when analysing the motivations and

gratifications sought through dating app usage. Male Control Theory posits that men are more likely to exert control and dominance over women in romantic relationships, while Female Control Theory suggests that women often use their femininity and sexuality to exert control over men. Integrating these theories within the framework of Uses and Gratifications Theory can help identify the ways in which gendered power dynamics manifest within the context of dating app usage and inform the specific gratifications sought or achieved by male and female users. This integrated approach helps elucidate the complex dynamics and factors influencing individuals' behaviours and preferences within the realm of dating apps.

In the next chapter, it will present the research methodology.

Chapter Four: Methodology

4.1. Introduction

This research contributes to bridging the research gap in understanding the relationship between the use of dating apps and users' social class in China. It provides valuable insights into the contextual factors influencing dating app usage and offers a deeper understanding of the changes in Chinese dating and marriage practices. This study targeted Chinese dating app users aged 18 and above, excluding those with vested interests. Through probability sampling,

purposive sampling, and snowball sampling, 977 adult users completed surveys with 24 questions, and 25 users were interviewed. The online observation phase spanned approximately 2 years, from May 5, 2021, to May 15, 2023.

This chapter introduces the methodology employed in the research. Firstly, it presents the research design, which is based on the integrated integration of qualitative and quantitative methods, including surveys, semi-structured interviews, and online observations. It provides justification for the selection and application of these methods in addressing the research questions. Secondly, it outlines the research procedures, encompassing survey design, sampling, survey distribution, result analysis, validity and reliability testing of instruments, design of interview frameworks, selection of dating apps for observing users' daily interactions, and analysis of qualitative data. Thirdly, it addresses ethical concerns and explains measures taken to ensure participant confidentiality and prevent any potential harm during data processing.

4.2. Research Design

Research methodology refers to the research design that determines the choice and utilization of specific research methods, integrating them with expected outcomes (Crotty, 2003). Well-designed research should effectively address the research questions (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). This study aims to develop a better understanding of the contextualized use of dating apps in

China's context, where patriarchal constructions and class-bound relationships continue to play a significant role in dating practices. It examines the relationship between new technologies and traditional views on dating and marriage in contemporary China. Additionally, it compares the usage of dating apps between the middle class and lower class to argue that social class contributes as a new variable in the use of dating apps. This study endeavours to examine the substantial impact of contextual elements such as patriarchy, filial piety, and social stratification on various aspects pertaining to the utilization of dating apps. Specifically, it aims to address the following research questions with respect to app selection, partner choice, and motivations:

RQ1. Do class elements (income, occupation, education, housing, or *hukou*) significantly impact the use of dating apps? How?

RQ2. How do the middle and lower classes differ in their use of dating apps?

RQ3. How do Chinese existing dating and marriage cultures such as male superiority, class-bound relationships, and filial piety shape users' attitudes toward sex and the use of dating apps?

RQ3.a. Why do male and female users differ in seeking sex on dating apps?

RQ3.b. Why do users seek serious relationships or marriage partners on dating apps?

RQ4. How do dating apps challenge traditional dating and marriage cultures in China?

As the research questions encompass both qualitative and quantitative aspects that cannot be answered by a single method (Tashakkori, Johnson & Teddlie, 2020; Mertens, 2015), this study employs a mixed methods design, which combines both qualitative and quantitative approaches to enhance the understanding of the research (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007; Creswell & Clark, 2017; Sutton & Austin, 2015; Johnson & Larry, 2008; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). Sutton and Austin (2015) suggest that while quantitative methods answer 'what' questions, qualitative methods explain 'why', making a mixed methods approach more comprehensive in understanding the contextualized use of dating apps in China. Additionally, the triangulation of different methods enhances the research's credibility (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011), as Wellington (2000) notes that using two or more methods improves accuracy and validity by leveraging the strengths of one method to compensate for the weaknesses of another.

This study follows an interpretive paradigm, where the researcher seeks to understand different perspectives and shared interpretations, and gain valuable insights into various situations (Wellington, 2000). By delving into the participants' world and understanding their subjective experiences, this study seeks to uncover the contextual influence on dating app usage in China, involving interpretation of users' views, actions, and connections to the broader social context.

The explanatory sequential design of mixed methods is particularly useful for examining social class as a new variable in dating app usage, even though qualitative methods are primarily employed to explore contextual factors related to sex and relationships. There are three main types of mixed-method research designs based on intent, sequence, and prioritization of different approaches: convergent, explanatory sequential, and exploratory sequential designs (Creswell & Clark, 2017). Given that the key variables are well-defined, and measurements are available, this study adopts an explanatory sequential design. In this design, quantitative data is collected and analysed first, followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data to explain the quantitative results (Creswell & Clark, 2017). However, unlike traditional explanatory sequential research that prioritizes quantitative approaches, this study is more driven by qualitative inquiry, focusing on understanding how and why dating app usage is shaped. It investigates users' experiences and perceptions in a way that cannot be captured solely by numbers. Qualitative methods capture the complexity of participants' views and experiences through their narratives (LaRossa & Wolf, 1985), making them a vital component of this research.

Therefore, this study combines data from online questionnaires, online and offline one-on-one semi-structured interviews, and online observations to address the core research questions. Online questionnaires provide an overview of users and explore social class as a new variable in dating app usage, while semi-structured interviews and online observations offer in-depth

information on the contextual impacts of dating app usage. Table 4.2.1 illustrates the research design employed to address the research questions.

TABLE 4.2.1. RESEARCH DESIGN

Research Questions	Data Collection Methods	Location in the Thesis
RQ1. Do class elements (income, occupation, education, housing, or hukou) significantly impact the use of dating apps? How?	Online Questionnaire; Semi-Structural Interviews (Online and Offline)	Chapter 5; Chapter 7
RQ2. How do the middle and lower classes differ in their use of dating apps?	Online Questionnaire; Semi-Structural Interviews (Online and Offline)	Chapter 7
RQ3. How do Chinese existing dating and marriage cultures such as male superiority, class-bound relationships, and filial piety shape users' attitudes toward sex and dating apps and the use of dating apps?	Semi-Structural Interviews (Online and Offline); Online Observation	Chapter 6 (RQ3.a. Why do male and female users differ in seeking sex on dating apps?); Chapter 7; Chapter 8 (RQ3.b. Why do users seek serious relationships or marriage partners on dating apps?)
RQ4. How do dating apps challenge traditional dating and marriage cultures in China?	Semi-Structural Interviews (Online and Offline); Online Observation	Chapter 9

4.2.1. Surveys

For the first stage, this study employed a self-administered online survey to collect data on social class, usage patterns, and key motives of dating app users. This survey aimed to illustrate the basic characteristics of users. Surveys are a method of collecting information used to describe, compare, or explain social behaviours, feelings, values, preferences, and personal and social knowledge (Fink, 2017). They involve asking all respondents the same set of questions (Bell & Waters, 2018).

Using an online questionnaire is appropriate for exploring the potential relationship between the use of dating apps and variables related to an individual's social situation and viewpoints. Firstly, the absence of an interviewer reduces biases related to social desirability (Bryman, 2016; Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2014). Web-administered questionnaires have been found to have less bias in social desirability compared to telephone interviews (Tourangeau, Conrad, & Couper, 2013). Participants may feel more at ease and provide honest answers to sensitive questions, such as their intentions for using dating apps. Secondly, self-administered questionnaires are cost-effective and reach respondents quickly (Bryman, 2016; Bell & Waters, 2018). Online questionnaires allow more people to participate and reduce missing entries compared to hardcopies and open surveys (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). Thirdly, completing the questionnaire is convenient and private for respondents as they can do so at any time and

place (Bryman, 2016; Fink, 2017; Fricker et al., 2005). The questionnaire can be randomly distributed without geographical restrictions, ensuring good representativeness.

Despite the advantages of using surveys, especially online surveys, there are limitations to consider. For instance, participants may misunderstand ambiguous questions, and there is no opportunity for clarification (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2000). Another concern is the response rate. While it is convenient for researchers to distribute questionnaires through various channels, the return rate may be very low due to factors such as questionnaire length, wording, research goals, and the specificity of the target population (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011; De Vaus, 2002). Given the sensitivity of the research topics and the need to clarify specific questions, it is therefore necessary to conduct interviews to investigate the use of dating apps in China.

4.2.2. Interview

To enhance the understanding and validity of the survey results, as well as address the limitations of online questionnaires in capturing the nuanced usage of dating apps, this study conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews with users of dating apps. Interviews are a commonly used method in studies related to dating apps (Ferris & Duguay, 2020; Filice et al., 2019; Ward, 2017). Interviews allow for an exploration of the interactions between individuals and their contexts, shedding light on their motivations, values,

beliefs, and attitudes (Gaskell, 2000). They provide a wealth of information that can complement the survey responses (Bell & Waters, 2018). Interviews offer insight into the experiences and perspectives of individual participants (Hine, 2020).

Through interviews, researchers can observe non-verbal cues such as tone, expressions, and hesitation, which are absent in written responses. Observing participants' behaviour goes beyond verbal communication, enabling a deeper analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). Skilled interviewers can pick up on these cues and further explore participants' thoughts, emotions, and motivations (Bell & Waters, 2018).

This study employed a semi-structured interview format, characterized by a flexible framework with predefined questions. The semi-structured approach allows researchers to guide the discussion while also allowing for additional questions based on participants' responses (Aborisade, 2013; Hine, 2020). Compared to unstructured interviews, semi-structured interviews maintain focus on the research topic, making them more effective in gathering relevant data to address research questions. Additionally, semi-structured interviews offer more control over timing compared to unstructured interviews.

Despite their advantages, interviews have been criticized for their subjective nature and limited generalizability (Kvale, 1996). Yanos and Hopper (2008) argued that participants may self-censor and provide findings that align with

researchers' assumptions, potentially hindering the exploration of research questions. As topics related to sex are sensitive and dating apps are stigmatized as hook-up apps in mainland China, dating app users may highlight positive aspects of themselves to gain social approval, resulting in reduced data validity. Moreover, due to the stigma associated with dating apps, approaching users and obtaining sufficient information from them can be challenging. For example, married individuals may be hesitant to disclose their use of dating apps due to concerns about potential negative effects on their marriage. Additionally, interviews have been criticized for overlooking participants' social interactions and the broader social contexts in which they exist (Kvale, 1996). Individual interviews with dating app users may not adequately capture their interactions with other users on dating apps, which is relevant to this research. Therefore, it is essential to incorporate other qualitative methods to expand upon and triangulate the results.

4.2.3. Online observation

Online observation is a method used to study interactions within online communities without interference (Nørskov & Rask, 2011). In this study, online observation allows researchers to observe users' interactions and gather data about their perspectives on dating cultures in a natural setting. This helps overcome the limitations of interviews where participants may avoid certain questions to present themselves in a socially desirable manner. The texts observed online include synchronous methods like instant messaging and asynchronous methods like email (Nørskov & Rask, 2011). In this study,

the observation focuses on tracking and analysing heated discussions, user posts, and comments regarding gender, marriage, family, and class on dating apps such as *Tantan* and *Soul*.

Researchers have classified observation methods into four types based on the degree of observer assimilation within the observation field: complete participant, participant-as-observer, observer-as-participant, and complete observer (Babbie, 2016). This research utilizes online observation to mitigate the limitations of interviews, where participants may be reluctant to discuss sensitive topics. By providing users with an environment that minimizes disruptions, they can freely exchange opinions. This study assumes the role of a "complete observer," maintaining distance from users' interactions and avoiding interference, thus adhering to the traditional concept of an "objective" observer (Adler & Adler, 1994). The internet facilitates the achievement of the complete observer role as researchers remain unnoticed and do not interact directly with subjects, maximizing the reliability of online data (Nørskov & Rask, 2011).

However, I acknowledge the potential risks of misunderstandings due to detachment from user interactions (Babbie, 2016) and the challenge of overcoming personal prejudices towards users' behaviours and customs (Nørskov & Rask, 2011). To reduce misunderstandings, I would click into users' profiles for more information and search online to gain additional knowledge

about their texts. For instance, searching for bride prices in specific regions can enhance understanding of users' reactions to this topic.

Through online observation, researchers can gain insights into the features of dating apps, popular topics among users, and patterns of usage. Comments and replies on platforms like *Tantan Discovery* and *Soul Square*, similar to *WeChat Moment* and *Facebook Stories*, provide valuable information about users' attitudes towards gender, filial piety and class-related relationships. Moreover, daily online observation offers a cost-effective and convenient means of collecting data on active users, unrestricted by time and space.

Tantan Discovery and *Soul Square* were chosen for several reasons: (1) *Tantan* and *Soul* are two of China's most popular dating apps ('The trend of', 2021); (2) *Tantan Discovery* and *Soul Square* allow for various media content, including text, emojis, images, videos, music, audio, location tags, and polls, offering researchers multiple avenues to understand users; (3) Posts, comments, replies, and polls on *Tantan Discovery* and *Soul Square* are publicly visible, enabling researchers to observe user activity without interference. I collected synchronous data from polls, user posts, comments, likes, and replies on dating apps to document user attitudes towards traditional dating cultures, such as social class, filial piety, and male superiority. Considering the research goals, this study adopts unstructured observation as a qualitative method to uncover the subtle meanings behind social actors' behaviours (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009).

4.3. Procedure

According to Creswell and Clark (2017), the explanatory sequential design involves the following steps: a. Collecting and analysing quantitative data. b. Summarizing the quantitative results and identifying specific quantitative results that need further explanation. c. Developing qualitative questions based on the results of the quantitative phase. d. Designing and conducting the qualitative phase, including collecting and analysing qualitative data. e. Integrating the qualitative and quantitative results and discussing how (to what extent and in what ways) the qualitative results explain and extend the quantitative results to address research questions.

Following the process of the explanatory sequential design of mixed methods research, the study started with a survey to provide a broad picture of the users' characteristics and to outline the association between the use of dating apps and class elements. These characteristics included income, education, occupation, housing, and *hukou*. Based on the survey results, I then designed and conducted interviews with users of dating apps to further investigate the motives of use and their attitudes toward gender, filial piety and class inequality. Apart from participant observation during interviews, I collected data through online observation of their discussions to compensate for the limitation of interviews. Finally, I combined the data from interviews and online observations to explain why and how the relationships are developed

between using dating apps and gender views and class. Table 4.3 shows the procedure of the research.

TABLE 4.3. RESEARCH PROCEDURE

<table>
<tr><td colspan="4">Research Procedure</td></tr>
<tr><td>Research methods</td><td>Quantitative Method</td><td colspan="2">Qualitative Methods</td></tr>
<tr><td>Instruments</td><td>Online Questionnaire</td><td>Guide of Semi-structured Interviews</td><td>Soul & Tantan</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Pilot study</td><td>Applying the Questionnaire (Small Scale)</td><td>Conducting Interviews (Small Scale)</td><td rowspan="2">/</td></tr>
<tr><td>Revised Questionnaire</td><td>Revised Interviews Guide</td></tr>
<tr><td>Sampling (Methods)</td><td>Probability Sample</td><td>Purposive Sample</td><td>Probability Sample</td></tr>
<tr><td>Data Collection</td><td>Applying the Questionnaire Large Scale</td><td>Conducting Interviews Small Scale</td><td>Writing Report and Taking Screenshot Everyday</td></tr>
<tr><td>Sampling (Methods)</td><td>Statistic Analysis</td><td>Thematic Analysis</td><td>Thematic Analysis</td></tr>
<tr><td>Answering the Questions</td><td colspan="3">Reporting and Discussion the Findings</td></tr>
</table>

4.3.1. Survey Design

The questionnaire was created on *wenjuanxing*, a widely used online platform for designing and distributing questionnaires in China. At the beginning of the questionnaire, I introduced myself as a Ph.D. student who studies the use of dating apps and is particularly investigating the relationships between using dating apps and social class. I explained my research objectives and potential

implications. I also informed them about the number of questions they would answer, and the estimated time required. The body of the questionnaire consisted of three parts: usage habits, motives, and personal demographics, specifically focusing on their class attributes (see Appendix 3). To measure the motives of using dating apps, Timmermans and De Caluwé's (2017) scale in motives of using *Tinder* was adopted. Additionally, the business motive, which is a unique motive for using dating apps in China's specific context (Chan, 2019), was added. Table 4.3.1 presents the items related to motives.

TABLE 4.3.1. MOTIVATIONS FOR USING DATING APPS

Motives		
Social aproval-6	To get an “ego-boost”.	So1.提升自尊
	To get self-validation from others.	So2.获得他人的认可。
	To see how desirable I am.	So3.看看我有多招人喜欢。
	To get compliments.	So4.获得称赞。
	To be able to better estimate my own attractiveness.	So5.能够更好地估计自己的吸引力。
	To get attention.	So6.为了得到关注。
Pass Time/Entertainment-6	When I have nothing better to do.	Pa1.当我没事干时消遣。
	For fun.	Pa2.为了娱乐。
	Because it is entertaining.	Pa3.因为它很好玩。
	To relax.	Pa4.为了放松。
	To pass time.	Pa5.打发时间。
	Because it passes time when I’m bored.	Pa6.因为我无聊时会打发时间。
	To occupy my time.	Pa7.使自己忙碌。
Relationship Seeking-5	To find someone for a serious relationship.	Re1.为了建立一段认真的关系。
	To fall in love.	Re2.为了坠入爱河。
	To meet a future husband or wife.	Re3.为了遇见未来的丈夫或妻子。
	To seek out someone to date.	Re4.找一个人约会
	To build an emotional connection with someone.	Re5. 为了与平台上的人建立情感联系。
Sexual Experience-6	To find a friend-with-benefits/fuckbuddy.	Se1.寻找有可以性交的朋友。
	To find a one-night-stand.	Se2.寻找一夜情。
	To see how easy it is to find a sex partner.	Se3.看看找到性伴侣有多容易。
	To increase my sexual experience.	Se4.增加我的性经历
	To live out a sexual fantasy.	Se5.满足性幻想
	To find a lover/mistress.	Se6.找情人
Flirting/Social Skills-6	To learn to flirt.	Fl1.要学会调情。
	To improve my social skills.	Fl2.提高我的社交能力。
	To increase my flirting experience.	Fl3.为了增加我的调情经验
	Because it is hard to talk to people in real life.	Fl4.因为在现实生活中很难与人交谈
	Because it is a more enjoyable to make the first move.	Fl5.因为在交友app上迈出第一步比较令人愉快。
	To gain more self-confidence in my social skills.	Fl6. 为了增强对自己社交技巧的信心。
Travelling-5	To get tips from locals (in restaurants, shopping, party, ...) when travelling.	Tr1.在旅行时向当地人（在餐馆，购物场所，聚会场所等）获取提示。
	To meet other travelers/locals when in a foreign country.	Tr2.在新的城市时结识其他旅行者/当地人。
	To learn about hotspots in foreign countries through locals.	Tr3.通过本地人了解国外或新城市的热门景点。
	To easily find people that are willing to party when in a foreign country.	Tr4.在国外或新城市轻松找到可以聚会的人。
	To broaden my social network when on an abroad/exchange experience.	Tr5.扩大我在新环境中的社交网络。
Ex-3	So that I do not focus my attention on my ex anymore.	Ex1.这样我就不再将注意力集中在我的前任身上。
	To get over my ex.	Ex2.忘记我的前任。
	To think less about my ex.	Ex3.少想我的前任。
Belongingness -4	Because everyone uses Tinder.	Be1.因为每个人都使用约会交友软件
	Because I want to be trendy.	Be2.因为我想变得时髦。
	Because it is a fad.	Be3.因为这是一种时尚。
	To be cool.	Be4.约会交友app很潮。
Peer Pressure -3	Because my friends thought I should use Tinder.	Pe1.因为我的朋友认为我应该使用约会交友软件。
	As suggested by friends.	Pe2.朋友推荐
	Because someone else made me a Tinder profile.	Pe3.别人帮我注册了约会交友软件的账号
Socialising-4	To make new friends.	so1.结交新朋友。
	To broaden my social network.	so2.拓宽我的社交网络。
	To meet new people.	so3.去见新朋友。
	To talk to people I don’t know personally.	so4.与我不认识的人交谈。
Sexual Orientation-3	To connect with other people with the same sexual orientation.	se1.为了与具有相同性取向的其他人建立联系。
	To get to know people with the same sexual orientation.	se2.认识具有相同性取向的人。
	To meet singles with a similar sexual orientation.	se3.结识具有相似性取向的单身人士。
Distraction-3	As a break at work or during a study period.	Di1.作为工作或学习期间的休息的方式。
	To procrastinate things I should be doing (working, studying, ...).	Di2.拖延我应该做的事情（工作，学习等）。
	To combat boredom when working or studying.	D13.为了克服工作或学习时的无聊。
Curiosity-3	To see what the application is about.	Cu1.看看这个软件是怎么玩的
	Out of curiosity.	Cu2.出于好奇。
	To try it out.	Cu3.尝试一下。
Business-3	To reach out to my potential customers	Bus1.为了接触我的潜在客户。
	To attract more people to buy my products	Bus2.为了让更多人买我的东西。
	To promote my product	Bus3.为了推销我的产品

Social class was measured across five dimensions: income, education, occupation, *hukou*, and housing. Income refers to the monthly earnings of individuals or, if respondents were current students receiving financial support from their families, the monthly income of the primary breadwinner (Wang, Dong, & Lv, 2014). Respondents were asked to select their income level from the following options: "under ¥2,000," "¥2,000-¥5,000," "¥5,000-¥15,000," "¥15,000-¥30,000," "¥30,000-¥50,000," "¥50,000-¥100,000," and "over ¥100,000."

Education pertains to the highest degree obtained by respondents, including their ongoing studies. They were asked to indicate their educational level by choosing from the following options: "below primary school," "primary school," "junior high school," "senior high school and vocational-technical secondary school," "bachelor's degree," "master's degree," and "PhD."

Occupation refers to the job position held by respondents or, for full-time students, the job position of the primary breadwinner. Respondents were asked to select their occupation from the following options: "unemployed or underemployed," "agricultural workers," "workers in commercial services and industry," "small business owners and self-employed individuals," "low and middle-level government civil servants and professional and technical personnel in private companies," "private business owners and managerial personnel," and "state and social management positions."

Housing represents the houses or apartments currently owned or potentially owned by respondents (e.g., inherited or soon-to-be-purchased properties). The value of housing was assessed based on the location of these properties in different types of cities. Respondents were asked to indicate the value of their housing by selecting from the following options: "village," "tier 5," "tier 4," "tier 3," "tier 2," "new tier 1," and "old tier 1."

Similarly, *hukou* status in different types of cities reflects varying living opportunities. Therefore, the value of *hukou* was assessed based on the types of cities it pertains to. Respondents were asked to indicate the value of their *hukou* by selecting from the following options: "village," "tier 5," "tier 4," "tier 3," "tier 2," "new tier 1," and "old tier 1."

The use of dating apps was measured through respondents' self-reported behaviour. This encompassed the selection of apps, the frequency of use, the adoption of premium features, and the level of selectivity in choosing potential dates. The respondents were first asked whether they had used dating apps recently. If they answered 'yes', they would be prompted to provide details regarding the specific apps they used and their favourite features. They were also asked about the frequency and duration of their app usage, the cost associated with premium user status, the premium features they found appealing, and the criteria they considered when selecting partners in subsequent questions.

Demographic variables encompassed gender, sexual orientation, age, relationship status, and current residence. Gender options included "male," "female," and "other." Sexual orientation options included "heterosexual," "homosexual," "bisexual," and "other." Age categories ranged from "under 18" to "56-60," with intervals such as "18-25," "26-30," and so on. Relationship status choices included "single," "married," "in a serious relationship," "in a casual relationship," and "other." Current residence was determined based on the types of cities respondents lived in.

4.3.2. Pilot Study

As the first part of the entire study, pilot studies involving a small scale of participants will help identify unexpected problems, most of which can be addressed by redesigning the research instruments and thus significantly reducing the number of processing errors (Arnold et al., 2009). Therefore, before commencing the main research, I conducted a pilot study involving 102 participants in the survey. I also gathered feedback from the participants who completed the surveys. Based on their comments from the previous test, I corrected wording errors and ambiguous expressions, made slight layout changes to enhance clarity, removed irrelevant questions, and added some additional questions. Furthermore, the pilot test provided insights into the time required to complete the survey. In the interview section, I also conducted interviews with two users and collected advice on improving the interview guides.

4.3.3. Quantitative Sampling and Questionnaire Distribution

Sampling is the process of selecting elements from a large group based on specific principles to reflect the characteristics of the larger population (Johnson & Larry, 2008). In the quantitative phase of my research, I employed a random sampling principle, where all units in the target population had an equal chance of being selected, highlighting representativeness (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2000; De Vaus, 2002). The study targeted heterosexual dating app users over 18 years in urban China. The questionnaire asks participants about the type of city they live in to ensure that the focus remains on the Chinese urban population. The survey link and QR code were randomly distributed across various platforms to ensure maximum participant access. This included promotion with the help of friends, advertisements on dating apps, direct contact with users via dating apps, and promotion through the *WeChat Official Account*.

Initially, I asked my friends and family to directly contact their friends who were dating app users and met the participant criteria. However, very few of my friends knew individuals who used dating apps. Additionally, since these participants were acquainted with my friends, they might have felt uncomfortable providing truthful answers to sensitive questions, which could have compromised the reliability and validity of the data. Therefore, instead of approaching target participants directly, which could have intimidated or embarrassed them, I requested my two best friends to post advertisements on

three popular social media platforms, *WeChat Moment, Weibo,* and *TikTok,* to attract interested individuals. Furthermore, they were asked to request two of their friends to advertise in the same manner. This snowballing advertising approach allowed the promotion to reach more users and gather more responses.

Secondly, I posted a survey link with a brief introduction to the research topic and objectives on my *Tantan, Tinder,* and *Soul* accounts to recruit users, following Chan's (2019) practice. Unfortunately, the advertisements were removed by *Tantan* as they violated the company's rules, and my accounts were permanently blocked due to users' reports. *Tinder* blocked my account for the same reason. I encountered greater difficulty in conducting research on dating apps in China due to the strict rules enforced by these platforms. Despite waiting for a week, I received no responses from *Soul* users. I later discovered that the link had been blocked by the *Soul* company, which was confirmed by one of my partners from *Soul.*

Thirdly, I reached out to certain users individually and invited them to participate. I introduced myself and explained my research, seeking their consent. However, some users still refused to participate, and others dropped out halfway through the questionnaire.

Finally, I approached several popular editors of *WeChat Official Accounts* who were writing articles about sex and love. I asked them to advertise the project

and invite their fans to participate. These editors also encouraged their fans to share the survey link and invite friends who met the criteria to fill out the questionnaire. This method proved to be effective in generating a significant number of responses.

In total, I received 1608 questionnaire responses. However, I deleted incomplete questionnaires (69), and questionnaires with extremely short completion times (less than 2 minutes) (562). Therefore, 977 responses remained valid and were used for analysis, resulting in a valid response rate of 60.82%. The results obtained from these 977 valid and completed questionnaires provide insights into the general characteristics of users, their usage habits, and the relationship between social class and the use of dating apps.

4.3.4. Quantitative Analysis Instruments

As mentioned earlier, the primary goal of utilizing questionnaires is to explore the influence of social class on the motives for using dating apps and to present user characteristics. Therefore, the questionnaire analysis primarily focuses on descriptive analysis to showcase user traits. Additionally, One-way ANOVA is used to examine the relationships between the 14 motives and users' income, education, occupation, *hukou* (household registration), and housing. The statistical analysis is conducted using SPSSAU, an automated

version of SPSS. Table 4.3.4 provides an overview of the instruments used for quantitative analysis.

TABLE 4.3.4. QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS INSTRUMENTS

Quantitative Data Analysis Tools			
Order	Answers	Data	Statistic types/testes
Q1	Actual use of dating apps	Using habits	Descriptive
Q2	Actual preferences of dating apps		
Q3	Actual preferences basic features of dating apps		
Q4	Actual subscription to premium		
Q5	Actual costs of monthly subscription		
Q6	Actual preferences premium features of dating apps		
Q7	Actual frequency of use		
Q8	Actual length of use each time		
Q9	Actual contents presented on dating profiles		
Q9	Actual concern over using dating apps		
Q11	Actual reasons for using dating apps	Motivation for using dating apps	Descriptive
Q12	Differences in attitudes toward the given reasons for using dating apps according to *hukou*, income, occupation, housing, education （58 items)		ANOVA
Q13	Actual types of *hukou* of users	Users' social status	Descriptive
Q14	Actual educational level		
Q15	Actual monthly income		
Q16	Actual ownerships of houses		
Q17	Actual types of cities of the owned houses		
Q18	Actual occupation the respondents take		
Q19	Actual types of residence cities		Descriptive
Q20	Actual marital status		

Q21	Actual age	Users' personal characteristics	
Q22	Actual gender identity of respondents		
Q23	Actual sexual orientation of respondents		
Q24	Actual interests in participating interviews	/	/

Reliability and validity are crucial aspects when assessing the quality of research (Heale & Twycross, 2015; Kumar, 2011; Neuman, 2003). Without reliability and validity, there can be measurement errors in the study (De Vaus, 2002). Addressing these factors is essential for enhancing the research quality. Reliability refers to the stability and consistency of the instrument used (Creswell, 2012; Heale & Twycross, 2015). According to Heale and Twycross (2015), reliability includes attributes such as internal consistency (homogeneity), stability, and equivalence. Internal consistency indicates how well the scale items measure a specific concept (Heale & Twycross, 2015). In this study, the quantitative phase focuses on inferential analysis of the motivation scales for using dating apps, thus evaluating internal consistency to determine the research's reliability. Researchers commonly use the Cronbach's alpha (α) coefficient to measure internal consistency (Heale & Twycross, 2015; Cronbach, 1984). This study also implements the Cronbach's alpha test to assess reliability. Table 4.3.4.1 presents the results of the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the 14 motives.

TABLE 4.3.4.1. CRONBACH A COEFFICIENT OF 14 MOTIVES

Items	N of samples	N of items	Mean	Std. Deviation	Alpha
Curiosity	977	3	4.945	1.356	0.848
socialising	977	4	4.967	1.478	0.916
social approval	977	6	4.965	1.389	0.928
Relationship seeking	977	5	5.055	1.383	0.912
Pass time/ entertainment	977	7	4.999	1.242	0.927
Sexual orientation	977	3	4.911	1.366	0.904
Belongingness	977	4	4.915	1.379	0.913
Ex	977	3	5.099	1.388	0.846
Flirting/social skills	977	6	4.962	1.321	0.92
Peer pressure	977	3	4.964	1.431	0.858
Distraction	977	3	5.005	1.347	0.832
Sexual experience	977	6	4.878	1.323	0.898
Traveling	977	5	5.013	1.375	0.907
Business	977	4	4.874	1.277	0.82

Validity assesses the accuracy of measuring a concept (Heale & Twycross, 2015; Kumar, 2011). Researchers have identified three types of validity: content validity, criterion validity, and construct validity (Heale & Twycross, 2015; Drew, Hardman, & Hosp, 2008). Content validity refers to the extent to which an instrument accurately measures all aspects of the research topic (De Vaus, 2002; Heale & Twycross, 2015; Drew, Hardman, & Hosp, 2008). To enhance content validity in this study, I conducted a thorough review of the literature on motivations for using dating apps, such as Timmermans and De Caluwé (2017) and Chan (2019), before designing the survey to address the research questions. Each item of the questionnaire was discussed with an expert in quantitative research who provided advice on the wording and

clarifying any ambiguities in the sentences. Feedback from participants during pilot studies was collected and used to make modifications based on their comments. Additionally, I shared the initial version of the questionnaires with several friends and invited them to explain the content of each item to ensure that their understanding matched the intended meaning. By following these steps, I aimed to enhance the content validity of the questionnaire and ensure that it effectively measures the motivations for using dating apps.

4.3.5. Interview Guide and Schedule

Based on the analysis of quantitative results, I designed the framework or guide for semi-structured interviews. In an explanatory sequential design, qualitative research is designed to explain or expand upon the results of quantitative analysis (Creswell & Clark, 2017). In this study, qualitative methods could further elucidate and provide explanations for how cultural factors, such as patriarchy, filial piety, and social stratification, influence the use of dating apps in China.

According to Seale et al. (2003), the interview guide is employed to standardize the interviews and ensure that every participant answers similar questions. The interview guide consists of three parts. Firstly, I explained the research purpose and addressed issues of confidentiality, beginning with simple questions. Asking simple questions is a useful approach to breaking the ice and establishing rapport (Reinharz & Davidman, 1992). Secondly, I asked

questions regarding their experiences with dating apps, including interactions with other users, motivations for app usage, communication styles, criteria for seeking or rejecting partners, and so on. Thirdly, I inquired about their opinions on class-matching and labour distribution within families, with a particular focus on some surprising findings in the relationship between social class and the use of dating apps from the quantitative phase.

I was aware of the potential bias in interviews that could arise from the way questions are framed (Gray, 2004). In order to mitigate this bias, I made a conscious effort to avoid leading participants towards specific answers. For instance, instead of asking "Do you think that using dating apps is a bad habit?", I opted for a more open-ended question such as "How do you feel about using dating apps?" when seeking their opinions on app usage. Throughout the interviews, I probed further and asked additional questions in cases where participants provided short or ambiguous responses, aiming to obtain a deeper understanding of their viewpoints.

Furthermore, I recognized that one challenge in obtaining high-quality data through one-on-one interviews is the potential for participants to withhold information or provide socially desirable responses (Creswell et al., 2007). To address this concern, I maintained a neutral and patient attitude, attentively listening to their perspectives without judgment. Additionally, I emphasized the importance of confidentiality and anonymity when discussing sensitive

topics, ensuring participants felt comfortable sharing their thoughts without fear of repercussions.

My self-disclosure to the participants helped address power relations in the interview. I was fully aware of the influence of my position as a researcher on their responses (Berger, 2015), and I attempted to minimize my influence on their answers. The researcher's position is often considered more privileged than that of the participant since participants are required to answer questions and share personal information while interviewers disclose less (Skeggs, 1995). To alleviate the power dynamics, one approach is to disclose information about myself to foster a more equal conversation. The principle of "no intimacy without reciprocity" (Oakley, 2013, p.49) was an important guideline during the interviews to establish rapport and encourage participants to share their own experiences. Berger (2015) also noted that interviewees tend to open up more to interviewers with whom they feel a sense of resonance.

During the interviews, I demonstrated genuine interest in whatever the participants discussed and gave them my full attention while they were talking. Furthermore, I made an effort to answer most of the participants' questions and took the initiative to disclose personal information in response to sensitive questions, demonstrating that I was in a similar position to them. This approach encouraged the participants to feel more comfortable and willing to share their stories after my self-disclosure.

Although observation can be time-consuming (Collin, 2011), it allows researchers to discover aspects that may have been inadvertently missed and that participants may not feel comfortable discussing openly during interviews (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). Therefore, observation is often used as a supplementary method for data collection (Collin, 2011). In face-to-face interviews, non-verbal information such as participants' facial expressions and body language cannot be captured by a voice recorder. Thus, careful observation and taking field notes provide valuable additional data. For example, I noticed that some participants would look around and lower their voices when discussing topics related to sexual behaviour, suggesting a persisting stigma associated with sex.

The interviews were conducted in both online and offline settings to accommodate the convenience of the participants. Creating a comfortable environment is important for participants to feel at ease and willingly disclose information (boyd, 2015). A private setting encourages participants to share more intimate stories (Kember & Zylinska, 2012), while a quiet place helps minimize distractions during interviews (Creswell et al., 2007). Therefore, the offline one-on-one interviews took place in quiet and private locations such as meeting rooms, staff kitchens (when empty), quiet seating areas in cafes, or participants' offices. To facilitate the conversation and create a relaxed atmosphere, I provided beverages and snacks, adjusted seating arrangements and lighting conditions, and made the space comfortable for intimate

conversations. However, for personal safety reasons, I declined requests to conduct interviews at participants' homes.

Online interviews offer easier management of privacy and safety concerns. Participants may feel safer and more comfortable sharing intimate details in their own familiar surroundings (Madge & O'Connor, 2002) when conducting interviews online. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, several interviews were conducted online through voice or video chats when the interviewees were not located in Ningbo. However, online interviews can be prone to distractions from the participants' offline surroundings. For example, a few participants were momentarily distracted by their cats during the interviews. Furthermore, connectivity issues that arise during virtual interactions can impede the fluidity of conversations and adversely affect participants' overall experience. To illustrate, during one interview, the connection was disrupted thrice owing to inadequate internet reception at the participant's location, resulting in feelings of frustration and resignation. Interestingly, despite the sensitivity of the topic, participants tended to be more candid and offer more detailed responses during offline interviews compared to online interviews. Overall, the discrepancy in data collection methods—both online and offline—has minimal implications on the quality of responses.

4.3.6. Sampling and Recruiting Interviewees

Qualitative sampling focuses more on whether the sample meets the research purpose and standards rather than the representativeness of the sample in selecting the population (Johnson & Christensen, 2012; Ary et al., 2010). Due to the particularity of the samples, a combination of various purposive sampling and snowballing sampling techniques was employed to collect data. Purposive sampling is a method that groups participants based on specific criteria relevant to the research questions (Mack, 2005).

In this study, the research specifically targets Chinese users of dating apps. Therefore, the participants must be dating app users residing in mainland China and must be at least 18 years old, which is the minimum user age requirement. Popular dating apps in China include, but are not limited to, *Tantan, Momo, Tinder, Soul, Bumble,* and *People Nearby* on *WeChat*. To reduce potential bias, individuals employed by dating app companies and experts in dating app research were excluded from participation. Additionally, male individuals who approached me with sexual motives or showed a lack of seriousness towards participating in the research were also excluded, considering my personal safety.

To approach potential participants, several methods were employed in addition to the "call for expression of interest" on the survey. Since there were no participants who left their contact information through the survey, I

proactively took the initiative to swipe and match with users on various dating apps like *Tantan, Momo,* and *Soul* to find participants for the interviews. After the profiles are matched, I initiated the interaction by extending a customary salutation, such as '*ni hao'* (hello) or '*ni hao ma'* (how are you doing), followed by providing a succinct introduction to the research topic. Subsequently, I inquired about their willingness to participate in the interviews. Additionally, I reached out to my acquaintances and requested their assistance in introducing me to their network of friends who were users, or alternatively, sharing the pertinent information with their own social circles. Utilizing a snowballing technique, I also asked the respondents to invite their friends from dating apps to participate. As a gesture of appreciation for their time, a small gift was provided as compensation.

To further increase the number of responses, the researcher also advertised recruitment on various social platforms such as *QQ* groups, *WeChat* groups, and other communication tools. Additionally, the researcher actively participated in various social events to promote the recruitment process. Furthermore, participants themselves introduced some of their friends who met the necessary requirements for participation in the study.

To ensure accuracy in capturing the interview content and observing participants' responses and nonverbal communication, a voice recorder was used. This allowed me to concentrate fully on the interview process without being interrupted by note-taking. The recordings were saved securely on my

laptop and remained accessible only to me, ensuring the confidentiality of the participants' information.

The interviews were conducted between June 30, 2021, and March 11, 2022. A total of 25 users were interviewed, with each interview lasting between 40 and 150 minutes. Prior to the interviews, demographic information from the participants was collected and recorded (refer to Table 4.3.6).

TABLE 4.3.6. INFORMATION OF INTERVIEWEES

Information of interviewees								
No.	Name	Gender	Age	Relationship status	Education level	Occupation	Residence city	App
1	Cicy	Female	32	Divorced	Bachelor	White collar	Ningbo - N1	People Nearby(WeChat)
2	Dennis	Male	26	Single	High school	Hair salon clerk	Ningbo - N1	Tantan, Soul, People Nearby(WeChat)
3	Duke	Male	26	Single	Bachelor	White collar	Yueyang – 3T	Tantan, Soul, Momo
4	Eden	Male	22	In relationship	Bachelor	Student	Fuzhou -T2	Tantan, Soul, Momo
5	Edward	Male	27	In relationship	PhD student	Student	Ningbo - N1	Tantan, Soul, Momo
6	Gu	Female	20	Single	Bachelor	Student	Ningbo - N1	Tantan, Soul, Jimu
7	Harry	Male	27	Single	Bachelor	Freelance	Ningbo - N1	Tantan, Soul
8	Hellen	Female	34	Single	PhD	University professor	Wuhan - N1	okcupid，People Nearby(WeChat)，Tantan, Soul, Momo，
9	Jack	Male	19	In relationship	Undergraduate student	Student	Beijing – O1	Blued, Aloha, Soul
10	Jane	Female	22	Single	Bachelor	Student	Ningbo - N1	Soul, Tinder
11	Jerry	Male	24	Single	Master student	Student	Beijing – O1	Blued, Aloha, Soul
12	Joe	Male	32	Single	Bachelor	White collar	Yinchuan - T3	Tantan
13	Jone	Male	23	Single	Bachelor	Student	Ningbo - N1	Tantan, Soul, Gonglushangdian
14	Leon	Male	26	In relationship	PhD student	Student	Ningbo - N1	People Nearby(WeChat)，Tantan, Soul
15	Lily	Female	26	In relationship	Master	White collar	Xiamen - T2	Tantan, Soul
16	Lucy	Female	27	In relationship	PhD student	Student	Ningbo - N1	People Nearby(WeChat)
17	May	Female	27	Single	Bachelor	White collar	Hangzhou - N1	Tantan, Soul
18	Mike	Male	26	In relationship	PhD student	Student	Ningbo - N1	Tantan
19	Nancy	Female	23	In relationship	Bachelor	White collar	Shanghai – O1	Soul, Tinder
20	Nat	Male	18	Single	Undergraduate student	Student	Weihai - T3	Blued, Aloha
21	Rita	Female	22	In relationship	Bachelor	Student	Ningbo - N1	Soul, Tinder
22	Sheena	Female	19	In relationship	Bachelor	Student	Ningbo - N1	Tantan
23	Simon	Male	34	Married	PhD student	Student	Ningbo - N1	Tantan，Shijijiayuan
24	Tim	Male	21	In relationship	Bachelor	Student	Tianjin - N1	Tantan
25	Tom	Male	30	In relationship	Bachelor	Entrepreneur	Ningbo - N1	Tantan, Soul, Momo

Table 4.3.6 presents the demographic profile of the participants, encompassing variables such as gender, age, relationship status, educational

attainment, occupation, and city of residence. To safeguard the privacy of participants, pseudonyms were assigned either according to their preferences or devised by the researchers. The 'Residence city' column denotes the current place of residence, categorized into old tier 1 cities ('O1'), new tier 1 cities ('N1'), tier 2 cities ('T2'), tier 3 cities ('T3'), tier 4 cities ('T4'), and tier 5 cities ('T5') in accordance with the *Urban Commercial Charm Ranking List* (2023).

The majority of interviewees are male, possess educational credentials, maintain relationships, are students, and reside in developed urban areas. However, attracting a larger pool of participants posed challenges due to the social stigma surrounding dating apps in China. Users often deny their utilization of such platforms to uphold their reputation. Additionally, approaching married individuals apprehensive about being viewed as morally questionable for engaging with dating apps proved even more arduous. Consequently, to compensate for these limitations, online observation of *Tantan* and *Soul*, two prominent Chinese dating apps, was incorporated to gather supplementary data.

4.3.7. Online Observation

As an additional method of data collection, the ongoing online observation of *Soul* and *Tantan* users' activities was conducted between May 5, 2021, and May 15, 2023. Each browsing session lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes.

The primary objective of this project is to explore the correlation between the use of dating apps and conventional perspectives on dating and marriage. Thus, the online observation primarily focused on discussions pertaining to gender, sexuality, family, and socio-economic attributes, including income, education, occupation, *hukou* (household registration), and housing.

On a daily basis, I logged into the apps to observe the latest posts and community discussions. To ensure comprehensive documentation, I captured screenshots of fervent debates related to gender and class, as well as took detailed notes during the observation process. Additionally, I documented users' profiles that contained content concerning sex, family, and class. Subsequently, all notes and discussion contents were meticulously organized in *MS Word* format and thoroughly familiarized through repeated readings.

4.3.8. Qualitative Data Analysis

My research adopts a data-oriented inductive approach as proposed by Nowell et al. (2017). To ensure confidentiality and maintain the original meanings conveyed by the interviewees, I personally transcribed all the interviews. Although time-consuming, this process allowed me to review the interviews repeatedly, immersing myself in the data and facilitating the emergence of key findings (Patton, 2005). Additionally, I integrated the observation of participants' nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions and gestures, to enrich the depth and complexity of the data. Each interview

yielded transcriptions ranging from 18,000 to 40,000 words. To enhance the efficiency of handling qualitative data (Nowell et al., 2017), I inputted all the data into *Nvivo* software, which facilitated clearer categorization and comparison of nodes.

Thematic analysis was employed to address the research questions and analyse the textual data derived from interviews and online observations. Thematic analysis is a widely recognized technique in qualitative research that systematically identifies, organizes, and provides insights into meaningful thematic patterns across qualitative datasets (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). It enables researchers to uncover and understand shared meanings and experiences within the datasets (Braun & Clarke, 2012). In this study, thematic analysis will provide insights into the cultural influences shaping the use of dating apps in China. Braun and Clarke (2006) proposed a comprehensive six-step guide for conducting thematic analysis, which has been widely applied in media studies. This method involves familiarizing myself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing potential themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Maguire and Delahunt (2017) recognized this guide as one of the most influential methods in qualitative research. In this study, the six phases outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) are followed, and *Nvivo* software is utilized to analyse the triangulated data obtained from interviews, users' online discussions, and users' profiles.

During the preliminary stage of conducting thematic analysis, a meticulous reading of the transcripts was undertaken to ensure familiarity with the data. To guide this process, Lochmiller (2021) suggests that researchers should consider the following inquiries at this juncture (p. 2035):

- What is happening?
- What is the participating saying?
- What key points or ideas are they expressing?
- What points do they appear to agree or disagree about?
- What perspectives are (dis)similar?
- What experiences do they hold in common?
- What experiences are being described?

Following Lochmiller's approach, I implemented a reading strategy where I analysed three sections of the transcripts at a time. Subsequently, I allowed for a two-hour break to reflect on the variations and commonalities among the transcripts, capturing initial thoughts and insights for further analysis.

In the second step of thematic analysis, commonly known as the first cycle coding (Saldaña, 2015), I initiated the initial round of coding. Keeping the research questions in mind, I carefully read through the data once again and identified segments that were relevant to the research topic. Following Gray's

approach (2004), I coded each interview immediately after conducting it and continuously updated the coding as new data emerged.

As the coding process progressed, more and more codes were generated. In the third step of thematic analysis, I started connecting these codes and generating potential themes. Themes represent the key patterns and shared features of the data that are relevant to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During this stage, I examined the data to identify similarities and patterns, combining related codes into overarching themes. Additionally, I began considering potential connections between these themes. Given the extensive amount of data, I initially identified seven potential themes during the first round of searching for themes. These potential themes served as a starting point for further analysis and exploration of the data. They acted as organizing categories for systematically examining and interpreting the data in relation to the research questions.

In the fourth step of thematic analysis, I reviewed the identified themes within the context of the entire dataset to ensure that they accurately reflected the original data and align with the research questions. During this process, I carefully examined each theme and its associated codes, making sure they contributed to the overall analysis. Any codes or themes that did not fit the overarching analysis or align with the research questions were deleted. It is important to note that the purpose of data analysis is to construct a coherent

and meaningful narrative rather than presenting every single detail (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Moving on to the fifth step of thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's approach (2012), I defined and refined the names of specific themes. Each theme was made singularly focused, distinct yet interconnected with other themes, and directly linked to the research questions. During this stage, I began writing and illustrating the analytical structure by using extracts from the data to support and analyse each theme. The thematic analysis combined both descriptive and interpretative methods, aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of the data. Throughout this stage, I revisited my research questions to ensure that the generated themes effectively addressed them. An example of themes and sub-themes can be found in Table 4.3.8.

TABLE 4.3.8. EXAMPLES OF THEMES AND SUB-THEMES

Research questions	Themes	Categories
RQ 4. How do dating apps challenge traditional dating and marriage cultures in China?	Challenges (to traditional dating and marriage cultures)	Anti-traditional Labour Distribution Seeking Independent Marriage Females' Proactive Seeking Casual Sex Seeking Less Children-oriented Marriage

In the sixth step of thematic analysis, representative extract examples were employed to present a vivid narrative of the findings, as documented in Chapter 6, Chapter 7, Chapter 8, and Chapter 9.

4.3.9. Quality of Qualitative Data

The quality of data holds significant importance within the qualitative phase (Neuman, 2003). Despite the inherent challenges associated with quantifying reliability and validity in qualitative data (King & Horrocks, 2010; Richards, 2009), four criteria—namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability—can be utilized to assess the trustworthiness of qualitative data. These criteria are juxtaposed against the established norms of reliability and validity commonly applied to quantitative data, as outlined in Table 4.3.9 (Trochim & Donnelly, 2007; Shenton, 2004; Ary et al., 2010; Richards, 2009). This section explicates the measures implemented to enhance the research quality, encompassing the assurance of credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability of data.

TABLE 4.3.9. QUALITATIVE DATA QUALITY

Qualitative Research Quality Criteria	Quantitative Research Quality Criteria	Objective of Criteria
Credibility	Internal Validity	Truth Value
Transferability	External Validity	Generalisation
Dependability	Reliability	Consistency
Conformability	Objectivity	Neutrality

As indicated in Table 4.3.9, the credibility of qualitative data shares similarities with the internal validity of quantitative data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Trochim & Donnelly, 2007; Shenton, 2004; Ary et al., 2010; Richards, 2009). To enhance the credibility of qualitative data, it is beneficial to engage in participant checking, as suggested by Bryman and Teevan (2005). Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommended that researchers verify the data categorizations, interpretations, and conclusions by seeking feedback from participants. An effective approach for attaining a precise comprehension of participants' viewpoints involves sharing the interview transcripts with them and soliciting their feedback, as advocated by Lincoln and Guba (1985). This method serves as a means to foster an accurate interpretation of the data, thereby enhancing the validity of the research findings. In my research, I ensured credibility by promptly sharing interview notes with participants and validating their viewpoints on-site. Subsequently, I shared voice recordings and transcripts, incorporating their feedback to refine the data. Triangulation, as advocated by Yin (2006) and Bryman and Teevan (2005), can also bolster the credibility of qualitative data. In my research, I employed data integration from diverse sources to verify credibility.

Qualitative research, by its nature, aims to provide in-depth insights into specific phenomena (Neuman, 2003) using a small-scale sample (Davies, 2007). To enhance the reliability and transferability of such data, researchers propose additional methods. Creswell (1998) highlighted the importance of providing detailed descriptions that allow readers to evaluate the applicability

of the study's findings to other contexts, thereby increasing transferability. In this study, participants from various social backgrounds and relationship statuses were included, and comprehensive participant profiles were provided to support transferability.

The dependability of qualitative data is akin to the reliability of quantitative data, as established by Trochim and Donnelly (2007), Shenton (2004), Ary et al. (2010), and Richards (2009). It pertains to the potential for replicating research results (Merriam, 2002). To enhance the dependability of qualitative research, maintaining detailed records and descriptions of the data collection and analysis process proves to be effective (Kumar, 2011; Bryman & Teevan, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thus, I provide comprehensive documentation of each step involved in collecting and analysing qualitative data.

Conformability aligns with objectivity, which involves visualizing problems without subjective influences such as feelings, attitudes, and beliefs (Trochim & Donnelly, 2007; Ary et al., 2010; Richards, 2009). It emphasizes that researchers should set aside their own perspectives and focus on the participants' interpretations of specific issues (Shenton, 2004). As a researcher, I acknowledge the potential impact of my personal perspective on data interpretation (Cousin, 2010). To mitigate this influence, I endeavoured to empathetically imagine the participants' circumstances, placing myself in their shoes by considering factors such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, and educational backgrounds. Employing triangulation through diverse data

collection methods serves to enhance confirmability and minimize researchers' biases (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004; Merriam, 2002). I combined different data collection methods, including interviews and online observations, to improve the conformability of qualitative data.

4.3.10. Translation of Data

Considering that the research participants are Chinese users of dating apps, but the instruments were originally designed in English and the results are presented in English, it is important to undertake accurate translations between the two languages. It is crucial to address any concerns regarding conceptual meanings in different contexts, as highlighted by Iarossi (2006). The researcher, a Chinese woman with a master's degree from an English-based university, an IELTS score of 7, and experience in translating official documents, is qualified to fulfil the role of translator in this research. Initially, the English versions of the questionnaires and interview guide were translated into Chinese. A PhD student majoring in English provided assistance in revising the translations. Subsequently, a Chinese professor with over 20 years of experience working on English-based campuses was consulted to improve the wording and techniques for asking questions.

All data were originally in Chinese, and they have been organized and analysed in their original language to preserve their intended meanings. The final interpretation of the data was carefully translated into English.

4.4. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations, such as equity, respect, and avoiding harm, are vital in research (Drotner et al., 2003; Gray, 2004). Research ethics ensures appropriate participant engagement (Gray, 2004). Ethical issues were identified and addressed throughout the research process. Approval was sought and obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Nottingham Ningbo, China (see Appendix 1). The principles of informed consent, non-harm, and confidentiality/anonymity are widely recognized and followed by researchers, despite variations in data collection methods (Gray, 2004; Wiles, 2013). This section elucidates how ethical issues were managed.

4.4.1. Informed Consent

As noted by Gray (2004), researchers should obtain "informed consent" (p. 59), ensuring participants have sufficient knowledge to protect their rights. Providing comprehensive information is crucial for participants to understand the implications of their involvement (Wiles, 2013). According to Gray (2004, p. 59), researchers must inform participants about the following aspects to obtain their consent:

- The aims of the research.
- Who will be undertaking it?
- Who is being asked to participate?

- What kind of information is being sought?
- How much of the participant's time is required?
- That participation is voluntary.
- That responding to all questions is voluntary.
- Who will have access to the data once it is collected?
- How anonymity of respondents will be preserved?

In this research, I initially revealed my identity as a PhD candidate from the University of Nottingham Ningbo China and provided my email address for potential participant contact. In the survey design, I prominently displayed this information on the questionnaire's first page, ensuring that participants were aware of their involvement and explicitly agreed to participate by clicking the 'next page' button (refer to Appendix 3). In the interview phase, I meticulously informed and obtained fully informed consent from potential participants regarding the recruitment stage. Prior to the interviews, offline participants were required to sign a formal consent form (refer to Appendix 2), while online participants were provided with an electronic version of the consent form. Additionally, some online interviewees expressed preference for giving oral consent, which was duly recorded. Participants were also explicitly informed about the recording of the interview and their consent for voice recording was obtained before the recording.

4.4.2. Avoiding Harm

Avoiding harm to participants is a pivotal ethical concern in research (Gray, 2004; Markham & Buchanan, 2012). Wiles (2013) highlights the potential risks in social research that can impact participants' emotional well-being. Given the sensitive nature of discussing sexual practices in this study, I prioritized participants' emotional comfort during interviews. Apart from meticulously crafting questions, I ensured to ascertain beforehand that potential participants would not be harmed during the discussions. I provided reassurances of strict confidentiality regarding interview content and emphasized their right to withdraw from the research project at any time without repercussions, including skipping any uncomfortable questions. Participants were empowered to refuse specific questions or terminate the interviews (Gray, 2004). Additionally, I attentively observed participants' facial expressions throughout the discussion. If signs of distress or fatigue were detected, I promptly suggested taking breaks or discontinuing the interviews. Furthermore, I offered refreshments to alleviate tension and redirect negative emotions. Thankfully, no participants encountered any discomfort during the interviews. As noted by Wiles (2013), interviews provide participants with an opportunity to express their opinions and be listened to, resulting in some feeling more at ease after sharing stories they would not disclose on other occasions. Some participants expressed their satisfaction in having someone to discuss their experiences with and receive emotional support.

4.4.3. Confidentiality and Anonymity

Confidentiality refers to safeguarding private information from unauthorized replication without the owners' consent (Wiles, 2013). In order to preserve participants' privacy, stringent measures were implemented. All data was securely stored on a password-protected laptop, with the use of a USB disk for necessary transfers, minimizing online transmission risks. The original data remains strictly confidential and will not be shared with any third party. Additionally, data anonymization was conducted through pseudonym allocation. Throughout the interview process, participants refrained from disclosing any personally identifiable information, such as names, birthdates, addresses, or phone numbers. They were even given the option to utilize nicknames when signing consent forms, ensuring utmost anonymity.

4.5. Conclusion

This chapter details the use of an explanatory sequential design in mixed-method research, incorporating surveys, interviews, and online observations to explore the relationships between dating app usage and class and gender perspectives. It illustrates the difficulties encountered in approaching participants due to the sensitive nature of the topic, highlighting how online observation can alleviate some of these limitations. It provides a thorough account of the data collection and analysis process, elucidating the rationale behind each step. Additionally, the chapter emphasizes securing ethical

approval prior to participant recruitment and ensuring informed consent, with participants being fully informed about the study's purpose and given an opportunity to seek clarification.

The next chapter will examine the impact of dating apps on gender inequality in China.

Chapter Five: Gender Inequality and Seeking Sex on Dating Apps

5.1. Introduction

Increasingly, dating apps have become a convenient tool for users to seek 'hook-ups,' which are defined as sexual encounters occurring between strangers or new acquaintances (Paul et al., 2000). However, hooking up through dating apps shows an extremely high gender difference. As outlined in Chapter Two, many studies have found that male users are more likely than their female counterparts to use dating apps for hooking up or casual sex (Gatter & Hodkinson, 2016; Sumter et al., 2017; Griffin et al., 2018; Sumter & Vandenbosch, 2019). Although dating apps offer women a secure platform to openly communicate their sexual desires and engage in conversations, they concurrently shed light on the pervasive societal norm of suppressing female sexuality. This phenomenon reflects the adherence to traditional sexual scripts as proposed by Simon and Gagnon (1986), which have become deeply ingrained in social consciousness. Moreover, the findings of this study indicate that women exhibit a proclivity for distancing themselves from individuals who express a high degree of sexual activity. This observation lends credence to the principles espoused by Female Control Theory, as proposed by Baumeister and Twenge (2002).

The data for this chapter was primarily collected from 25 one-on-one semi-structured interviews with users of Chinese dating apps. This data was further supported and supplemented by 977 surveys completed by dating app users. Additionally, daily observations were made on the interactions of users on *Tantan* and *Soul*, which are the most popular dating apps in China.

This chapter aims to demonstrate that dating apps do not generally challenge or break down existing gender inequality in China. In fact, they can reinforce patriarchal constructions of sex and relationships within society. The chapter will indicate how users' engagement with these apps reflects and perpetuates conditions of inequality and double standards. First, it will outline how both men and women are uncomfortable talking about sex in China due to the continuing wider social stigma surrounding this topic. Women would experience a considerably higher degree of societal pressure when openly expressing their sexual desires. The chapter will illustrate how this negativity is transferred to the apps, associated with face-saving, resulting in a denigration of the technology that targets female users, who experience both animosity from others and internal feelings of guilt. It will further demonstrate how this negativity is specifically connected to the potential of dating apps to challenge patriarchal control over female sexuality.

The argument posits that despite women having the opportunity to utilize this economically accessible innovation for autonomous and discreet pursuit of casual sexual encounters, such behaviour and desires are deemed socially

acceptable solely when linked to male users and masculine traits within the Chinese societal framework. Within the societal context, it is evident that men accrue social status through their sexual activity, while sexually active females face a decline in their social standing. This prevailing dynamic generates a collective pressure that compels individuals to engage with dating apps as a means of conforming to and navigating these gendered expectations. Drawing upon the principles of Sexual Scripting Theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1986), which elucidates how societal norms and expectations for sexuality impact individuals' behaviours, it becomes apparent that double sexual standards exert a substantial influence on users' perceptions of traditional gender roles. As a result, these standards significantly shape their motivations to pursue sexual encounters within the realm of dating apps.

Subsequently, the chapter will elucidate how female users, specifically, adapt their strategies in the pursuit of a partner to reconcile their sexual desires with the broader social expectations that necessitate maintaining sociocultural acceptability. It will also address how the 'loss' experienced by women who engage in sex and use dating apps leads to a need for economic recompense, whereby wealth becomes a key means for men to attract women, and women are harshly judged based on their appearance.

5.2. The Stigma of Sex in China

As thoroughly discussed and expounded upon in Chapter Two, the pervasive issue of insufficient sex education contributes to a state of mystification surrounding the multifaceted concept of sex. In recent years, people in China have experienced a significant increase in sexual agency and freedom, leading to a rise in premarital and extramarital sexual activities (Zhou, Jin, & Wang, 2021). However, it is important to note that the increase in sexual activity does not necessarily correspond to a greater willingness to discuss sex or a shift towards more positive social attitudes (Steinfeld, 2015). Although there has been a growing acceptance of sexual activity among young people, who engage in it at an earlier age (Pan, 2018), many still perceive sex primarily as an activity confined to serious relationships (Guo et al., 2012). Chinese society, broadly speaking, continues to hold a conservative and negative view towards sex and related topics. M. Liu (2012) underscores that discussions about sex, particularly concerning Chinese women, are often deemed inappropriate. Topics such as foreplay and sexual intercourse remain taboo. This sentiment is echoed by Sheena (19, female), who described sex as an 'unspeakable' topic.

According to Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) (Katz, Blumer, & Gurevitch, 1974), audiences select and engage with media to satisfy personal needs. Data from both surveys and interviews reveal that seeking sexual encounters ranks among the primary reasons for using dating apps. Despite being a fundamental human need, sex has long been repressed due to the prevailing

stigma in broader Chinese society. Consequently, the pursuit of sex on dating apps can be seen as both a means of addressing physical sexual needs and compensating for the repressed sexual desires experienced in everyday life. As Rita (21, female, *Tinder, Tantan, Momo* user) articulates, dating apps provide a rare opportunity to discuss sexual topics openly, a privilege otherwise restricted in her daily interactions: “Tinder allows me to talk about sex safely. Nobody would judge me.”

5.2.1. Continuing the Stigma of Sex on Dating Apps

Amidst this context, dating apps increase communication opportunities and chances to find sexual partners while reducing embarrassment and maintaining distance in case of rejection (Tavares et al., 2020). Notwithstanding the potential offered by dating apps, they fail to eradicate the prevailing stigma surrounding sex and the technology itself. Tshomo, Sherab, and Howard (2020) emphasize the significance of knowledge, tradition, beliefs, and family values in shaping individuals' decisions and behaviours regarding sexual conduct. These stigmas persist due to the influence exerted by educational institutions, parental guidance, and peer communication, thus shaping attitudes and behaviours within the realm of dating apps.

In this study, users clearly indicated that seeking sex is a prevalent motivation for using dating apps, aligning with findings from previous research (e.g.,

Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017). Most interviewees viewed dating apps as a convenient platform for pursuing sexual encounters. According to the survey, the Location Matching feature, which enables users to connect with others in their vicinity and enhance their sexual experiences, ranks among the most favored features. In accordance with Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), the gratifications obtained (GO) from seeking sex on dating apps further reinforce their motivation (Ishii, Rife, & Kagawa, 2017; Leung & Zhang, 2016). Several interviewees, particularly males, noted that the satisfaction derived from sexual encounters through these platforms is a significant factor in their continued use of dating apps, especially given the pervasive social stigma surrounding sex in China.

However, both male and female participants demonstrated significant anxiety and discomfort when discussing sex in public. Rather than eliminating the stigma associated with sex, dating apps seem to reflect and perpetuate these negative attitudes, inhibiting open discussion and enjoyment of sexual topics. At the beginning of the research interviews, many interviewees struggled with using explicit language related to sex. They felt uncomfortable broaching the subject, despite being aware of the topic beforehand. Any mention of sexually related words often elicited laughter as a means to alleviate their discomfort, even within the confines of a private conversation in a secluded space. Some users would discreetly glance around to ensure they were not attracting attention before continuing the discussion, and they would lower their voices when using specific phrases. Certain participants would omit these phrases

altogether, pausing for a few seconds with a smile, waiting for me to assist them in speaking before proceeding with their stories. To avoid drawing attention in public, some participants employed euphemisms such as 'that,' colloquial nicknames like "*benleida*" (home run), or even switched to English terms.

Discussions pertaining to sexuality are often considered taboo, resulting in a scarcity of direct conversations on this topic, even within dating app platforms. In the public discussion sections of dating apps like *Tantan*, users consciously avoid explicit sexual terminology and instead opt for more implicit language. For instance, some individuals use the word 'that' as a euphemism for sex, expressing their desires with statements such as "what they want is 'that'" (Shasha, female, posted on *Tantan*). These implicit and colloquial expressions of sex and sexuality have also been observed by Chen (2019), who noted that some participants find it more comfortable to use the Chinese term "*buchun*" (impure) as a substitute for the word 'sexual'.

In addition to the discomfort surrounding discussions about sex, these users also demonstrate predominantly negative attitudes toward sex. For example, Sheena (19, female) firmly believes that fulfilling sexual desires is the last thing a respectable individual should prioritize. She argues that engaging in activities like socializing with friends, participating in extreme sports, travelling, and reading are more meaningful and positive ways to satisfy one's inner desires.

The stigma surrounding sex in China has a significant impact on attitudes towards dating apps, which are often perceived as platforms solely for seeking sexual encounters. This differs from research conducted in the U.S., which indicates that dating apps have become an accepted means of meeting potential partners in the digital age (Dowlat & Donaldson, 2017). In the Chinese context, however, dating apps continue to carry a heavy social stigma due to their association with casual sex and "hook-ups," as portrayed in Chinese mass media (Chan, 2019; T. Liu, 2016). The societal perception of dating apps as primarily used for finding sexual partners has also led to them being seen as unreliable for pursuing serious relationships (Chan, 2019).

Due to the stigma attached to sexual behaviour in society, users of dating apps often feel the need to differentiate between their search for casual sex and that of serious relationships. This belief is reinforced by the notion that dating apps are geared only towards users seeking casual sex and are not conducive to finding long-term relationships. On *Tantan,* some users even discourage others from seeking serious relationships through dating apps, asserting that these platforms are exclusively meant for casual sexual encounters:

> *There are only sex-seekers on Tantan. They just come here to play. […] You might meet the wrong people if you devote your sincere love to anyone on dating apps (Hangyan, male, posted on Tantan #Seeking a relationship).*

Such social stigma also made conducting interviews for this research very difficult as people, especially those with higher social statuses such as government employees, were reluctant to disclose their use of dating apps and feared potential damage to their reputation.

Participants in this study expressed reservations about being associated with dating apps due to the negative perceptions surrounding them. They often positioned engagement with dating apps as undesirable behaviour that conflicted with their social background. Participants acknowledged using dating apps to express and fulfil their sexual desires but also criticized seeking sexual encounters through these platforms, revealing significant cognitive dissonance. For instance, Tom harboured feelings of shame regarding his usage of dating apps, considering it a source of diminished social status (*lian*) and morally objectionable due to its deviation from traditional social norms (Liang & Walker, 2011). Consequently, he concealed his app usage from friends and family to uphold his social desirability. Despite condemning dating app users, he found himself unable to quit using these platforms because they offered an efficient means to satisfy his sexual needs:

I do feel it is not moral, I mean, they (dating apps) are created to satisfy humans' desires, or, say, animals' desires. It is just a sex tool. I never expect to marry any girls from there. […] I know it is evil. But I did need it. I often clear my login data and delete it after use, I think nobody will know my use, otherwise, my face will be lost (Tom, 30, male).

Similarly, Jone emphasized his respectable family background and good education, striving to distance himself from any association with seeking sexual encounters through dating apps. According to his narrative, engaging in casual sex on these platforms was seen as behaviour typical of less-educated individuals and would result in a loss of face for his educated social group. In a collective society like this, where an individual's personal image is closely tied to their community, an individual's loss of face can also reflect negatively on the reputation of the entire group (Jacobs, Gao, & Herbig, 1995; Ho, 1976). Jone felt compelled to avoid such face loss by ceasing to use dating apps:

I care about how people would judge me. […] You know, I am from a decent family, my parents give me a strict education (Jone, 23, male).

5.2.1. A Worse Situation for Female Users

For women, being associated with dating apps can lead to significant social harm, as they often experience a loss of status when linked to matters of sexuality. In patriarchal societies like China, women are frequently subjected to "slut-shaming" (Peng, 2021). A woman's sexual reputation is closely intertwined with her moral character and greatly influences her social standing (Zheng et al., 2011). Consequently, due to the perception that dating apps are primarily used for seeking sexual encounters, female app users are more likely to be labelled using derogatory terms such as "promiscuous" or "bad." Likewise, according to Christensen (2021), women who use mobile

dating apps to seek romantic connections encounter the risk of being stigmatized as "too thirsty" if they actively pursue relationships or labelled as "Tindersluts" if they engage in casual hook-up culture.

5.3. Double Sexual Standards

While dating apps can offer users seemingly equal chances to satisfy their sexual desires, this study shows that both male and female users continue to adhere to traditional gender roles and hold very different sexual standards for men and women. Adhering to the established sexual norms that assign men the role of initiating dates and sexual encounters, while women are viewed as the ones who have the power to decide if and when a couple will engage in sexual activity (Dworkin & O'Sullivan, 2005; O'Sullivan & Byers, 1992; Kettrey, 2018), this study finds that male users demonstrate a higher degree of proactive behaviour when seeking sexual encounters. They would take the initiative to send messages and invite their partners to have sex, while female users tend to passively reply or accept their sex invitations. In addition, male users manifest a tendency to perceive themselves as the primary providers, conforming to previously established societal expectations that women seek wealthy men as potential husbands (CCTV Finance, 2017; Hu, 2014), and consequently, they are inclined to display their affluence on their dating profiles.

One reason behind such different roles and standards is the centrality of Confucianism to contemporary Chinese education. As a significantly patriarchal ideology, Confucianism advocates that women should act as followers of men and this construction remains a key reason behind the lower social status of Chinese women (Mak, 2013).

As a result, while males may be motivated to seek casual sexual encounters through dating apps and benefit from such usage, they still harbour apprehension about relinquishing control over their female partners' sexuality, in line with the principles of Male Control Theory (McIntosh, 1978). These attitudes are evident in the ways in which these apps are used, as evidenced by comments made by users that illustrate persistent expectations for women to suppress their sexual desires and cater to male needs. One male user, for example, expresses a preference for women who restrain their sexual urges, associating this with better behaviour and honesty:

We would prefer guai (well-behaved) girls, they should be less open to sex, and be liang Jia fu nv (honest women) (Dennis, 26, male).

In this study, the notion of "*guai girls*" emerges as a pejorative term used to describe women who display submissive behaviour towards those in positions of power, which underscores men's desire for dominance in relationships and control over their partners. Similarly, "*liang jia fu nv*" refers to traditional, virtuous women who suppress sexual desires and remain chaste until

marriage. These constructions are visibly ingrained in users' social environment and daily interactions, shaping perceptions of gender roles and behaviours (Wiederman, 2005). the persisting influence of gender scripts, as delineated by Eagly and Wood (2016), and Prentice and Carranza (2002), results in divergent evaluations of the same behaviour based on the performer's gender. This is exemplified in society's acceptance of men having multiple sexual partners while women who engage in similar behaviour are often stigmatized and morally condemned. For instance, one participant, Gu (20, female), recounted a situation where her male friend's sexual behaviour is seen as normative and socially acceptable, despite engaging in promiscuous behaviour. However, his characterization of his female friend's similar behaviour is morally wrong.

Furthermore, the limited sexual information available online is also biased against women. Shi, Lin, Zhang, and Su (2022) found that online forums often portray boys as offenders and girls as victims in discussions related to sex. This perpetuates a sexually vulnerable image of females and reinforces gender stereotypes. Some users attribute these beliefs to their parents, who continue to exert significant control over their children's behaviour, even in adulthood, including their sexuality. Parents tend to impose stricter regulations on their daughters compared to their sons, thereby affirming the Sexual Scripting Theory that different expectations for men and women are learned and reinforced in specific contexts (Simon & Gagnon, 1986).

Furthermore, in contexts where sex-related topics remain culturally taboo, gender-specific sexual education further reinforces sexual scripts (Fisher, 1986; Best & Williams, 2001). As exemplified by female participants in this study, mothers often caution their daughters against engaging in sex if marriage is not immediately forthcoming and continue to stress the importance of virginity before marriage:

> *My mom would not say it too directly, she felt awkward. But she still hinted that I should be more cautious, to do 'that'… She did not talk to my brother (Sheena, 19, female).*

Sheena's experiences bolster the Female Control Theory (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002), suggesting that mothers aim to safeguard their daughters by suppressing their sexuality. This is influenced by their recollection of how the female peer group punished girls who displayed excessive sexual behaviour, leading them to instil sexual restraint in their daughters to improve their social status within the group (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002).

Female users, therefore, experience a high level of cognitive dissonance while using dating apps to seek sex. Although they are dissatisfied with the prevailing norms and constructs surrounding romantic relationships, societal pressures often compel them to compromise and conform. For example, Sheena (19, female) acknowledges the inequality between males and females in seeking sexual relationships and attempts to challenge these norms by using

dating apps. However, she still holds traditional views on gender roles, despite acquiring new knowledge about gender equality and expressing a desire for sexual experiences. Sheena attributes her perspectives on relationships and gender to the influence of her family, from whom she learned that actively pursuing love and sexual relationships contradicts societal expectations and diminishes women's value in society:

I was told for many years (by my mom) that boys can seek after girls, but girls can't pursue their loves proactively, to protect their 'value', or to be not that cheap […] Female-related things, including menstruation, are shamed and unspeakable (Sheena, 19, female).

5.3.1. Animosity Towards Female Users on the Apps

The patriarchal nature of Chinese society discourages women from acting as independent individuals seeking sexual gratification, as such actions could challenge and ultimately dismantle patriarchal privilege and control (Travis & White, 2000). Consequently, due to the potential loss of social status associated with engaging in sex within a patriarchal context, women are more inclined to pursue long-term relationships (Bryant & Sheldon, 2017; Orosz et al., 2018). In contrast, it is socially acceptable for male users to seek casual sex (Gatter & Hodkinson, 2016; Sumter et al., 2017; Griffin et al., 2018; Sumter & Vandenbosch, 2019; 2018; Chan, 2019).

As previously mentioned, seeking sex on dating apps is considered morally unacceptable within the broader context (Peng, 2021), with female users being primarily targeted for criticism. Dating apps serve as a means for challenging these gender norms by providing female users with an opportunity to break traditional rules and actively seek sex and relationships independently. This technology strongly opposes the traditional patriarchal perspectives ingrained within families and society at large. Due to societal expectations for women to anticipate and control men's behaviour regarding sexual conduct, instances of unwanted sexual behaviour are often attributed to women as their own responsibility (Tolman, 2002). Consequently, compared to male users, female users are less likely to be socially accepted when using dating apps, particularly for sexual purposes.

The utilization of dating apps by female users in China often gives rise to a range of emotional responses, including feelings of guilt and societal pressure. Women frequently find themselves subjected to intrusive questioning about their sexual experiences and face criticism for engaging in consensual relationships with multiple partners. These experiences contribute to a diminishing of women's confidence in seeking sexual fulfilment and inhibiting their ability to fully enjoy their sexual lives.

For instance, Gu (20, female) voiced her experience of guilt when confronted with probing inquiries such as "How many boyfriends have you experienced?" and "Have you slept with them?" on dating apps. Such interrogations not only

intrude upon one's personal boundaries but also reinforce societal expectations regarding women's sexual behaviour. It is noteworthy that while female users possess the agency to block, report, or delete offensive individuals to mitigate instances of harassment and ensure their personal safety (Pruchniewska, 2020), the mere presence of these invasive questions acts as a deterrent to their independent pursuit of sexual encounters. Consequently, instead of dismantling gender constructions, the continual surveillance of their "sexual reputation" on dating apps intensifies anxiety and reinforces sexual scripts, which constrains women's autonomy in shaping their own sexual experiences.

I would rule out such low-quality men, but I think I will be more sensitive about my sexual reputation because that is what most people want (Gu, 20, female).

Users like Sheena (19, female) perceive dating apps as something "cheap" and "dirty," topics that cannot be openly discussed. As a result, she consciously restrains herself and adopts a passive or subordinate demeanour when engaging with these platforms. This behaviour aligns with Sexual Scripting Theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1986), suggesting that prevailing societal norms and expectations shape women's attitudes and behaviours in the realm of online dating.

The present study reveals that women who pursue relationships and sexual encounters on dating apps frequently face negative responses from male

users, a finding that contradicts Hobbs et al.'s (2017) documentation of certain female users defying traditional gender norms by proactively seeking casual sex. It shows that men frequently reject and criticize proactive female users, subsequently refusing to enter or continue serious relationships with them. Male users commonly condemn female users as being too promiscuous, associating the use of dating apps with being sexually open to strangers – a position that conflicts with the moral standards expected of a "good girl" or a suitable partner. This observation reaffirms the notion of men's desire for controlling their partners' sexual experiences (Hyde & DeLamater, 1997). Both Eden and Simon critique female users who actively seek sexual encounters on dating apps:

I am not saying all female users are 'that kind of person', however, there is potential. And they are more likely to be seduced by men on dating apps (Eden, 22, male)

I think every man of my age would agree that girls on dating apps are not decent (zhengjing). Whose good girl could use Momo or Tantan to make serious friends? (Simon, 34, male).

Simon's description of female users of dating apps as "not decent" and his reference to "good girls" indicates how a woman's 'value' is associated with their level of sexual activity and how dating apps can lower this 'value'. For many male users, there was also a concern over the loss of 'face (*mianzi*)',

when approaching and engaging with women on dating apps. Zhao's research (2010) shows that Chinese people would feel face-losing if they fail to find a spouse. As dating apps have been historically viewed as unreliable and stigmatized users as socially incompetent, immature, and self-centered (Dowlat & Donaldson, 2017), seeking serious relationships on these platforms may indicate an inability to secure partners through conventional means. Consequently, approaching women on dating apps for more substantial relationships may lead to face loss. In order to maintain their face, male users, particularly those who possess wealth and education and are confident in finding romantic partners through means other than dating apps, exhibit a sense of superiority towards women utilizing these platforms and reject the concept of seeking relationships through dating apps:

Why do I search for partners on dating apps if I am able to find a more reliable partner in offline settings? I would prefer stay single forever than have serious relationships with females on dating apps (Mike, 28, male).

Concerns over the loss of "face" due to a decrease in patriarchally-induced control also deter male users from seeking long-term relationships on dating apps. According to several male respondents, dating apps make it very easy for users to pursue casual sex and tempt them to develop a "hook-up culture" and cheat on their partners because it is "convenient and easy" to do so (Simon, 34, male). While many male participants actively seek casual sex on dating apps, they also fear that their girlfriends or wives may engage in the

same behaviour, as it challenges traditional relationship norms. In ancient China, the honour culture of masculinity was closely tied to female chastity (Hinsch, 2011). Confucian culture also emphasizes females as followers of males, exerting control over their sexuality through male partners. Therefore, if a man's partner engages in casual sex with others, he would lose face.

The pressures of patriarchally induced "face" push men towards choosing partners who can be controlled in terms of their behaviour and sexual activity, a position that is potentially threatened by dating apps. Men alter their preferences from long-term to short-term relationships out of fear of being "betrayed" by sexually active women, suggesting a desire to control their partner's sexuality (Coontz & Henderson, 1986).

Single male users may be hesitant to establish serious relationships with female partners met through dating apps, reflecting their concerns about losing control over their partners' sexuality. Such users often experience dissonance when using these platforms, as they feel that they cannot engage in deep or meaningful conversations with strangers. As such, Harry expressed his conflicting emotions regarding the use of dating apps:

> *On the one hand, I was very lonely and wanted to hang out with girls from dating apps, but on the other hand, I felt those who could be called out so easily were very unreliable. They may be too casual (Harry, 27, male).*

Some male users derive enjoyment from the benefits of engaging in casual sexual encounters with women they meet on dating apps. However, they simultaneously hold negative perceptions of these women, displaying significant sexual double standards. Within patriarchal culture, sexual desires are often viewed as a privilege afforded exclusively to men, contributing to the suppression of women's sexuality (McIntosh, 1978). These male users would end communication after sexual encounters due to concerns about losing their reputation if the women were involved in casual sexual encounters with other male users:

I deleted them as soon as we had sex and refused their friend requests to avoid further troubles in the future. […] You see, they are too casual, so they are likely to cheat on their partners (Tom, 28, male).

In the realm of marriage-seeking, male users frequently exhibit a pronounced inclination towards individuals who do not engage with dating apps. Research suggests that paternity uncertainty drives men to suppress their wives' sexuality, with concerns about property transmission and the legitimacy of heirs being major factors (Wood & Eagly, 2002; Coontz & Henderson, 1986). Specifically, Coontz and Henderson (1986) note that men may view their wives' sexual availability to other men as a threat to the legitimacy of their offspring. The potential utilization of dating apps for sexual purposes often leads male participants to express a preference for non-users. Many categorically declare their reluctance to enter into marital relationships with

individuals who actively engage with these platforms. Leon (26, male) even expressed his intention to investigate the dating app usage status of potential partners as a criterion of utmost importance before progressing further in the relationship.

It would be shameful to be cuckolded. I think the best way to avoid that situation is to screen out dating app users. It would be best if my girlfriend had never heard of it otherwise, she would be seduced (Duke, 26, male).

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that a limited number of users voiced apprehension regarding men employing dating apps as a means to pursue casual sexual encounters. Interestingly, none of the female participants expressed a willingness to reject dating app users as potential spouses. This observation is consistent with the literature showing that conventional norms provide men with greater sexual autonomy, leading to increased opportunities for sexual satisfaction, safety, and well-being compared to women (Amaro & Raj, 2000; Logan, Cole & Leukefeld, 2002).

5.3.2. Controlling Female Partners' Use of Dating Apps

The tolerance level towards partners using dating apps varied between men and women. This difference can be attributed to the fear of losing face (Hinsch, 2011) and control over their partner's sexuality (Wood & Eagly, 2002), which often led male users to hold strict opinions regarding their female

partner's use of dating apps. Interestingly, this was the case despite many of these men being current or previous users themselves.

For instance, during the interviews, both Edward (27, male) and Eden (22, male) described how they were caught using dating apps but were forgiven by their girlfriends. However, they both expressed that forgiving their female partners for similar actions would be extremely challenging. Eden (22, male) specifically emphasized that he could never forgive his partner if she used dating apps. While Eden acknowledged that using dating apps does not necessarily indicate a desire for sex or infidelity, he explained that it would make him feel a loss of control and a significant blow to his reputation:

She is reserved and reliable and such good images of her would be broken if she used dating apps. It (hook-up) could happen if she used and lied… Potentially, I would be humiliated by her use (Eden (22, male).

5.4. Self-suppression in Female Users

Such double standards were not only acknowledged and perpetuated by male users but also expressed by women. This self-imposed suppression of female sexuality can potentially enhance women's bargaining power within a patriarchal society (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002). Female users frequently internalized and operationalized these beliefs through behaviours such as concealing or discontinuing their use of dating apps, distancing themselves

from other female users, adopting a passive stance in online interactions with men, and seeking compensation in return for sexual encounters.

In addition to concealing their use from friends, many female users reported discontinuing dating apps to conform to societal expectations of being a "good" girl. For example, Sheena (19, female) regarded her use of dating apps as "not good" and a "bad example of females." She emphasized that she had stopped using dating apps to return to a state of being "normal," yet she still experienced guilt and regret for engaging in such activities. Sheena described her actions as a "dark history," reflecting the moral pressure imposed on women to suppress their desires and remain passive.

This study offers empirical evidence regarding the phenomenon of women self-regulating and monitoring the outward manifestation of sexuality among other female users. It is observed that certain female users engage in moral condemnation of their peers who utilize dating apps, and form judgments about their character, thereby suggesting the suppression of female sexuality within the context of dating app usage (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002). Sheena, for instance, attributed her classmates' unpleasant behaviour to her use of dating apps:

When I heard that she was a Tantan user, my impression of her got worse… I may explain her promiscuous behaviour from this (using dating apps). […] Then, I would intentionally stay away from her (Sheena, 18, female).

Sheena held highly critical views towards female users who engaged in frequent changes of partners and openly displayed promiscuous relationships. Sheena further extended these views to various aspects of a woman's life, expressing her refusal to form close friendships or collaborate with women who used dating apps and had multiple partners. In her perspective, engaging in such behaviour rendered a woman "unreliable or untrustworthy." The prevalence of negative opinions among female users suggests a societal phenomenon wherein women exercise control over the sexuality of other women in patriarchal societies (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002).

5.4.1. Staying Passive

Due to the influence of traditional heterosexual norms, which portray men as the initiators and women as the guardians of sexual boundaries, men tend to receive positive encouragement while women are advised to exercise restraint when it comes to casual sexual encounters (Morgan, Thorne, & Zurbriggen, 2010; Sanchez, Fetterolf, & Rudman, 2012). While male users acknowledged that women have an equal opportunity to swipe and 'like' potential partners on these apps, many expressed a dislike for being actively pursued by women. Male users tended to associate female proactivity with a perceived lower "value." This aligns with Sheena's (19, female) earlier concern that women would be judged as "cheap" if they initiated contact with males.

Despite the fact that dating apps provide equal chances for both men and women to start a conversation by swiping to match, the discouragement of female proactivity on dating apps suppresses women's desires to initiate contact and relationships. This reaffirms the sexual script that portrays men as the possessors of desired objects and women as the desired objects (Simon & Gagnon, 1986), which is reinforced on dating apps through men taking proactive roles in initiating sexual encounters while women assume reactive "gatekeeper" roles by accepting or rejecting advances (Cate & Lloyd, 1988). A prevailing belief among participants is that the initiation of conversation following a match on dating apps should be exclusively carried out by male users. This responsibility is frequently viewed as an obligation specific to men, with participants stating that "men should be more proactive and responsible" (Cicy, 32, female).

In China, dating app technology reflects this social expectation. Unlike popular American dating apps like *Bumble*, where women are encouraged to be the initiators of conversations, preventing women from unwanted messages (Sobieraj & Humphreys, 2021; Albury et al., 2019), popular Chinese dating apps such as *Tantan, Momo*, and *Soul* do not include such features. It seems that the design of Chinese dating apps deliberately encourages female users to remain passive and wait for messages from men. Many female participants mentioned that they received numerous messages from male partners before considering taking the initiative to reply.

For many women, using dating apps does not represent a significant change to the form and conventions of their relationships. Under these circumstances, female users are disinclined to challenge established interaction and relationship norms due to a perceived absence of immediate benefits. This conformity aligns with the notion of gratification (Katz, Blumer, & Gurevitch, 1974), wherein individuals seek to fulfil their needs and derive value from specific behaviours contingent on their perceived costs and rewards. Lucy (27, female), for example, claimed that she preferred to be passive and wait for men to initiate because it was convenient to adhere to expected behaviours. For many females like Lucy, the only difference between pursuing relationships on dating apps and offline dating is the increased number of choices and the ability to communicate with multiple suitors simultaneously.

Some women were aware that dating apps could provide increased opportunities and were seen as a form of emancipation. However, notably, these users did not believe that dating apps could challenge the unequal position of women in relationships in China. Sheena (19, female) was particularly pessimistic about the potential of dating apps to help women "fight back" against the patriarchal construction of relationships, as wider social contexts still heavily favoured women's passivity. While she was dissatisfied with the status of women in intimate relationships, she also doubted that dating apps could significantly challenge this:

I don't see any females' equal rights facilitated by dating apps. […] They are still pursued by men. Dating apps are another space dominated by men (Sheena, 19, female).

Drawing from the Uses and Gratifications theory (Katz, Blumer, & Gurevitch, 1974), the reluctance of Chinese women to challenge their passive position through dating technology usage can be explained by the perceived costs and rewards of non-conformance, which are strongly influenced by significant social disadvantages and potential punishments related to breaking down traditional relationship constructions. Conforming to traditional gender roles has been seen as a way for women to achieve success in relationships and maintain influence within a patriarchal system. As previously mentioned, it has been observed that men exhibit a tendency to avoid proactive women, even in the context of dating apps.

On the other hand, women may face repercussions for displaying excessive accessibility, which contradicts prevailing gender norms (Christensen, 2021). Consequently, this nonconformity can result in the devaluation of women's self-worth, as suggested by the Female Control Theory proposed by Baumeister and Twenge (2002). Many female users expressed concerns about losing their "value" by being too proactive. The convergence of Uses and Gratifications theory and Female Control theory reveals that female users conform to social scripts and codes of behaviour on dating apps to maintain their "value". This conformity involves the denial of sexual desires and the

adoption of passivity and chastity, fulfilling women's needs for acceptance, validation, and gratification while exerting agency in patriarchal structures.

Moreover, the apps themselves show evidence of a collective effort by women to encourage other female users to suppress their sexual desires and engage in passive behaviour. Interviews revealed that female users on *Tantan* sought "stability" and the certainty associated with passive behaviour, and they encouraged other women to hide any past relationships as part of embracing such behaviour.

You should not confess your affection, because it would make your love cheap. The relationship will be more stable if the woman takes a passive position (May, 27, female).

On *Tantan*, many female users claimed that being reserved and passive was a way to protect their dignity as women. The presented evidence serves to validate the perspectives put forth by Baumeister and Twenge (2002), who argue that the suppression of female sexuality is primarily carried out through informal means, such as the dissemination of rumors, social perception, and maternal influence. Female users tended to magnify the negative effects of failure when a woman initiates a relationship and described female passivity using positive terms such as "self-disciplined" and "persistent." For example:

You should be self-disciplined and wait, otherwise, he won't cherish you. […] I would rather die than lose my self-esteem (Cherish, female, posted on Tantan # Will you confess love?).

5.4.2. Denying Sex Motives

Denying sex as a motive also appeared to be deployed as part of the strategy to adopt passivity and chaste behaviour as a means to attract male partners on the apps. While participants of both genders seemed to believe that men and women have a similar level of sexual desire (which could potentially be satisfied through dating apps), only male participants explicitly stated that seeking sex was their primary motive for using dating apps. In the realm of sexual scripts, traditional femininity is often linked to passivity and chaste behaviour, which some male partners find desirable. Consequently, female users may embrace these behaviours to adhere to established sexual scripts and meet societal expectations of femininity, with the belief that doing so will increase their likelihood of attracting male partners (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). For example:

It is ridiculous to chat with strangers and have sex with them. I can't imagine it. And I don't think my close female friends will do that (Sheena, 19, female).

In contrast, most male users reported that they would agree to have sex with any woman from dating apps, even if they did not like the woman. The gender

disparity in sexual behaviour points to men's inclination towards boosting their self-esteem through sexual encounters with new female partners (Baumeister & Tice, 2002), while women's selection criteria pose a challenge that men must surpass to obtain sexual consent. This tendency aligns with the competitive and achievement-oriented nature of conventional male gender roles, as men must meet a certain standard of desirability to persuade women to take the risk of engaging in sexual activity (Wiederman, 2005).

In order to uphold traditional gender scripts, passive behaviour and chastity have evolved into a preliminary step for women in the context of sexual communication. For instance, Tom (30, male), an experienced user seeking sex on the apps, stated that many female users seeking sex tended to begin with an "innocent" motive, such as making friends, to earn others' respect. However, they eventually accept sexual invitations, even though many of them are married or in relationships.

They can't say that they are looking for casual sex. That's abnormal. I had encountered no girls claiming that she is seeking sex. However, they eventually slept with me [A winner's smile] (Tom, 30, male).

Tom's account highlights the greater moral burdens faced by female users, which leads them to deny their sexual motives. As Tom pointed out, such users are often perceived as "abnormal." Additionally, suppressing sexual desires initially and then participating in sexual behaviour can also align with

patriarchal ideals of masculinity and male sexual prowess. Tom expressed satisfaction with his partners' transition from rejection to engagement in sexual activities, interpreting it as a validation of his worthiness in winning their favour. Tom's reported sense of satisfaction following the successful persuasion of a woman to engage in sexual activity aligns with Sexual Scripts, which posits that males derive pleasure from overcoming women's apprehension regarding the potential consequences of engaging in sexual behaviour (Wiederman, 2005). The desire to persuade women in this manner is rooted in culturally constructed scripts surrounding male dominance in sexual interactions.

5.4.3. Seeking Recompense for Sex

Along with adopting a passive role, female users on dating apps also aimed to uphold traditional relationship dynamics by seeking some form of compensation from male partners in exchange for engaging in sexual activities. Due to the significant social burden associated with sexual activity for women and the limited opportunities within patriarchal systems, female users tended to perceive sex as fulfilling other needs such as financial support, love, and emotional care. Several studies have confirmed that women use dating apps for reasons beyond purely sexual ones, such as seeking relationships and love (Bryant & Sheldon, 2017; Orosz et al., 2018). These studies also indicate that women often prioritize partners with higher income and education levels (Ward, 2017; Neyt, Vandenbulcke, & Baert, 2019).

However, the Chinese cultural context places even greater emphasis on the loss of social "value" associated with engaging in sexual activities, leading Chinese women to seek economic compensation from their male partners to a greater extent than in Euro-American contexts. This behaviour may be viewed as morally questionable in some instances. Within the wider framework of patriarchy in China, there is a prevalent belief among dating app users that men desire sex as a resource possessed by women (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002). Female users are expected to exchange sex with men either for economic gains or in the pursuit of a long-term relationship. For example, Cicy (32, female) attributed women's willingness to have sex to men's economic success and their potential to share their wealth.

What do girls want from men? If they are not rich and not willing to buy bags, why do the girls sleep with them? Impossible! (Cicy, 32, female)

Cicy's perspective is echoed by several female participants who perceive engaging in sexual activity as a form of loss that should be offset through economic compensation. Drawing on Female Control Theory (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002), some female participants express an expectation for their partners to demonstrate commitment through the act of gift-giving before engaging in sexual activities. This expectation aligns with traditional gender roles that emphasize men's role as providers and underscores women's desire to assert their entitlement to respect within patriarchal frameworks. Furthermore, offering financial support can serve as a means of validating

women's perceived sexual worth and consolidating their authority over sexual interactions. These behaviours exemplify the strategic control of sexual access by women, as postulated by Female Control Theory, wherein women leverage their perceived sexual desirability to wield power in their relationships with men.

I am not saying how much money I want from a man, but if he pays nothing to sleep with me, I'll feel worthless, and I am not valued. At least I need to feel some sincerity from his gifts and make sure that he deserves it (my sex) (May, 28, female).

This viewpoint is prevalent among many female users. While they deny engaging in explicit transactions of sex for money, they do emphasize the notion that since men "benefit" from sexual activity, women should receive something as compensation for their perceived loss. For a significant number of interviewees, this compensation was associated with men paying for hotel bills and small gifts.

The belief that sex represents a form of loss for women, coupled with traditional gender roles and expectations, also leads to higher expectations regarding men's economic contributions to the family and/or their relationships. Male scripts are highlighted in negotiations regarding sexual activity, with men's willingness to support the family and shoulder expenses being highly desirable (Eagly & Wood, 2016). On the *Tantan Topic* discussing

the payment of rent during cohabitation, most users express the opinion that men should bear the entire cost of rent as economic compensation for their girlfriends engaging in sexual activity. From their perspective, women perceive a sense of deprivation in sexual encounters. Hence, men regard paying rent as a means to exhibit reverence and gratitude for their girlfriends' sexual involvement, while concurrently establishing their own accountability as conscientious individuals. Some women expressed frustration or anger towards men who are reluctant to fulfil this financial responsibility.

You can't have your cake and eat it, too. Males should contribute (their money) while taking females' advantages (in having sex). […] If a man wants to split the house rent with me, I will not sleep with him (Baby, female, posted on Tantan #Should a man share the rent with his cohabiting girlfriend?).

Such comments indicate how users regard women as 'victims' in relationships due to their loss of social 'value', they seek males' economic support to mitigate this loss. However, such a position also denied females' active agency in seeking sex, ultimately reinforcing wider patriarchal constructions of relationships.

Likewise, such 'payment' could be emotional as well as economic. Some female participants seemed to be economically independent and could afford anything they wanted. Instead of expecting their partners to pay their bills, they expected a significant amount of emotional investment in the

relationship in exchange for sex. In line with previous research indicating women's inclination towards utilizing dating apps with more seriousness in their pursuit of relationships and love (Bryant & Sheldon, 2017; Orosz et al., 2018), Tom (30-year-old male) expressed the belief that women prioritize love over sexual relationships, attributing greater value to the former:

Hook-up is harder than having serious relationships, you should overcome more barriers, know more about the girl, and offer more emotional comfort to gain her love before talking about sex (Tom, 30, male).

Although several female participants expressed interest in casual sex, they found it difficult to engage in this without a relationship. In order to mitigate potential risks that may arise from engaging in sexual activity, women require motives beyond physical pleasure to facilitate their participation (Wiederman, 2005), thereby construing their sexual behaviour within the context of meaningful relationships (Sedikides, Oliver, & Campbell, 1994). Helen, Gu and Rita all possessed significant knowledge about and belief in gender equality. They experienced less cognitive dissonance for using dating apps and showed more confidence in having causal sex than other female participants. However, all of them still understood that having sex represented a loss in social value for them and so expressed caution in their sexual behaviour, wanting this to be part of a wider commitment:

I am open to sex […] but I couldn't bear any physical contact if we didn't have any feelings for each other (Hellen, 34, female)

If sex is a physical need for you, what I need is chatting with me. It is an emotional need. To what extent you should satisfy my mental need, then I would fulfil your physical need? You must know me well, right? (Gu, 21, female).

I don't think hook-up is a big thing, but basically, you should make me feel happy. I mean, having sex should be confined in a relationship, otherwise, I don't know why I have sex with you (Rita, 21, female).

Their experience with casual sex on dating apps was ultimately rather limited. According to their reports, Rita had only experienced it once. Although Gu was the most seasoned user of dating apps, having used them for over 10 years, her emotional and physical needs prevented her from engaging in hook-ups.

The notion that women's sex should be traded for men's resources and emotional attention (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002) also shapes women's understanding of hook-ups more broadly. Women felt deceived or cheated if they engaged in sexual activity with men without receiving any form of economic or emotional compensation. If their partners solely sought sex, the arrangement was interpreted as a lie or a scam. Instances reported by news outlets, such as "A Woman's Accusation against a Teacher from Lanzhou

Jiaotong University" (The Paper, 2020) and "A 19-year-old Girl's Experience of Being Scammed" (NetEase News, 2022), have highlighted situations in which women were enticed into sexual encounters under the pretence of a romantic relationship or marriage, only to be abandoned by the men immediately thereafter, exposing the encounter as solely a casual or short-term engagement. Many female participants conveyed apprehension regarding potential deception and engaging in sexual activities with individuals who made promises of marriage to them. For example, Helen (34, female) mentioned encountering partners who pretended to be interested in a long-term relationship to persuade her into having casual sex.

5.5. Reinforcement of Traditional Gender Roles

Along with clear roles for men and women in dating and hooking up, users on dating apps also demonstrate a strong belief in traditional gender divisions of labour and family roles. Drawing on Sexual Scripting Theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1986), it can be argued that dating app users reinforce traditional gender divisions in both intimate and familial domains (Eagly & Wood, 2016; Eagly, Wood & Diekman, 2000; Prentice & Carranza, 2002). In public discussions about romantic relationships, users emphasize that individuals should conform to socially prescribed gender roles, considering any deviation from these roles as morally wrong. They use controlling phrases to underscore the importance of these gender roles, such as "we women should," "as a man, you must," or "otherwise you don't deserve to be a man/woman."

As mentioned earlier, users expect men to pay for dates and gifts for their partners, and they view men as less attractive if they are not generous, reinforcing the traditional male gender scripts (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). This expectation extends to the home, where men's role as breadwinners is highly valued among most users of dating apps. For instance, many active users express the belief that men should be responsible for earning money while women should manage household affairs. In a poll titled "# Should men hand in their income to their wife?" on *Tantan*, over 185 thousand users participated, with a majority endorsing the idea that men should give their income to their wives, who would then allocate household expenses. Users tend to morally judge men who cannot or refuse to adhere to this expectation.

These views also extend to situations when meeting and dating people from dating apps, where men are expected to bear the economic burden in exchange for the provision of sex by women (Baumeister & Tice, 2000). Unlike the practice of splitting bills with friends in Euro-American contexts, men are expected to actively cover expenses when out with women in China. Many participants mentioned that men pay for various expenses related to dating, including hotels, restaurants, movies, taxis, and more. It is considered inappropriate for women to pay, and even suggesting that women should reimburse expenses if they are not interested or if the relationship ends is frowned upon.

For example, a female user named Lulu, published a post on *Soul*, expressing her dissatisfaction when a *Soul* partner asked her to split the bill for their first dinner after they broke up. She insulted the man, stating that "such a mean man must stay lonely for his whole life." She explained that the amount of money involved was not significant (less than 100 yuan), and she had intended to split the bill before the meal. However, the man rushed to pay the entire bill in an attempt to impress her with his generosity before she had a chance to suggest sharing the cost.

This case sparked numerous online discussions as the man, despite his reluctance, insisted on paying for the date in an attempt to continue the relationship. Interestingly, male users seemed to accept this convention, and the financial burden of dating and gift-giving did not deter them from using dating apps. The story of the man's attempt to reclaim the money after the relationship ended resulted in many male users condemning him for pretending to be generous. They praised the woman for not entering into a long-term relationship with such a “niggardly” man.

Fortunately, you did not become his girlfriend, otherwise, you would suffer more loss because he is such a changeable and niggardly man (‘Inner peace’, male, posted on Soul).

In line with the gendered division of labour (Eagly, Wood & Diekman, 2000), the prevailing belief among many *Soul* users reflects a common perception

that it is natural for women to display frugality while men are expected to demonstrate generosity. This adherence to the sexual script highlights the social acceptability of stinginess in women compared to men.

These divergent attitudes towards frugality reflect broader societal beliefs concerning financial responsibility and power dynamics within relationships. Men are often expected to shoulder the financial burdens and demonstrate their ability to provide for their partners, while women may face pressure to conform to passive roles in terms of financial decision-making. Consequently, male stinginess may be deemed a failure to fulfil these expectations, leading to heightened criticism and negative evaluations. Notably, these users exhibit a propensity to levy more severe criticism towards men who exhibit stingy behaviour when compared to their female counterparts.

It surprised me that some men are even more niggardly than women…Such men must be very selfish and can never accomplish any achievements (Anna, female, posted on Soul).

5.5.1. Be Rich and Educated

Existing research suggests that women in both China and Euro-American countries have a preference for seeking male partners with higher incomes and education (Ward, 2017; Neyt, Vandenbulcke, & Baert, 2019). In China, however, women generally earn lower salaries compared to men, making the

search for a wealthier partner particularly important as a means of economic security and future aspiration. The economic conditions of a potential partner hold such significance for women that male users on dating apps go to great lengths to showcase and even exaggerate their wealth in order to attract partners. Consequently, these apps have adapted their technology to facilitate such displays. Women, more so than men, utilize online searches to mitigate uncertainty and potential risks in their romantic interactions on mobile dating apps, aligning with the perception of women as being at risk in this context (Markowitz et al., 2018).

Unlike dating apps in other contexts, such as *Tinder,* which are linked to social media platforms like *Facebook* (allowing users to gather information about potential partners from their social media profiles), dating apps in China offer independent features like *Albums, Square,* and *Moment* that enable users to share aspects of their daily lives. This provides users with a deeper understanding of others before initiating contact.

In order to attract potential partners, male users often post pictures that are brimming with conspicuous symbols of wealth. It is common for male users to feature pictures of cars, which are seen as a symbol of affluence, on their dating profiles. For instance, a male user named "love you, I will support (*yang*) you" shared eight pictures of himself driving a car and drinking milk tea, accompanied by the following caption (Figure 5.5.1.1):

[…] I will take you to eat, drink, and have fun. I will satisfy your material needs, and I can take care of you ("love you, I will support (yang) you", posted on Tantan).

Figure 5.5.1.1. Example of Presenting Wealth

This post garnered significant attention with numerous likes and comments, revealing the users' intrigue and appreciation for the ostentatious exhibition of affluence exhibited by males. Albury et al.'s (2019) study demonstrates the preference of most women utilizing dating apps to connect with heterosexual men for linking or sharing social media profiles to validate identity and access character references. Despite Chinese dating apps operating independently to ensure user privacy, the research underscores women's acute interest in utilizing online cues to gauge potential partners' economic status. For instance, Lucy considered verifying users' identities through their *Moment* as a necessary step before adding them from the *People Nearby* feature on

WeChat. She would delete those she perceived as poor or lacking economic potential.

I will quickly check their profiles, including economic conditions, and educational levels based on their expressions and the pictures they post on Moment to decide if I would accept their friend request. (Lucy, 27, female).

Moreover, in line with Baumeister and Tice's (2000) concept of exchanging wealth for sex, the research revealed that several male participants attributed their limited sexual encounters with online partners to their unfavourable economic situations. For example, Joe expressed disappointment in his attempts to engage in sexual encounters with women on dating apps. He believed that projecting an image of wealth would increase his chances of attracting women's attention.

You should be rich, or at least you should look like a rich man, for example, you need to show your BMW keys or Cartier watches on your dating profiles… A man like me, without good looks or money, should not expect hook-ups (Joe, 34, male).

Joe's expression of dissatisfaction underscores the crucial significance of male users' economic status in attracting attention on dating apps. This phenomenon often leads to male users inflating their wealth and financial stability in order to attract partners, a behaviour that has become

commonplace among female users. Interestingly, several respondents who offered feedback regarding Figure 5.5.1.1 cast doubt upon the authenticity of the user's claims and the legitimacy of his or her financial capabilities. This finding is particularly noteworthy, as it suggests that many users are aware of the prevalence of fraudulent representations on dating platforms.

Moreover, multiple female interviewees expressed frustration with male users who utilize misleading images or photographs of luxuries that do not belong to them in order to feign affluence. These participants emphasized that there were comparatively few genuinely prosperous men on dating apps. Gu, a 20-year-old female, asserted her ability to discern when male users were being disingenuous about their socioeconomic backgrounds based on the information presented in their profiles.

> *If they are showing cars, I usually look at the car model and see what kind of car it is. I can tell what kind of cars are from the car rental shops, and what kind of cars he could afford himself. […] If they are showing the steering wheels, their actual financial condition is not optimistic (Gu, 20, female).*

In China, hypergamy serves as a significant strategy for women to transcend class boundaries and ensure social stability and security (Yu, 2016). This often involves exchanging sexuality for increased social status (Wang, 2012; Xie, 2020). Based on this idea, women who have attained higher education, independent careers, and economic autonomy, known as *xiaozi* (Xin, 2013),

tend to expect men with even greater economic capabilities. However, there is a persistent imbalance between the number of "qualified" men and the larger population of women with high standards and expectations. This indicates a consistently smaller pool of men meeting women's criteria. The desire to find a wealthy and dependable man who can provide economic security reflects not only the gender wage gap in China, leading women to rely on men for financial support but also their desire for material possessions beyond their own economic means. According to McKinsey (2019), the younger demographic has emerged as the prevailing consumer group for luxury goods within the Chinese market. However, the purchasers of luxury goods are not limited to the wealthy but also include average white-collar workers who may spend their entire monthly salary on a single item (Serwer, 2008).

Beyond the quality associated with luxury products, the conspicuous consumption of such goods helps individuals maintain their social status (Liao & Wang, 2009; Liu & Xing, 2015). As explained by Lucy (27, female), she feels embarrassed to use non-branded bags. Luxury goods not only satisfy consumers' aspirations for upward mobility rooted in Confucianism (Thorniley, 2010), but also serve as a way for women to identify potential partners with good economic conditions (Chen, Wang, & Ordabayeva, 2022). In this study, many female participants expressed a strong desire for men with a good economic status. For example, Lucy mentioned her concern that her consumption of luxury goods may not be accepted by those from poorer economic backgrounds. Similarly, Gu (20, female), despite receiving financial

support from her parents, expects her partners to have an even higher economic capacity to afford her living expenses.

How could he afford my living expenses? My tuition fees to study abroad seems much higher than his annual income. (Gu, 20, female).

5.5.2. Females' Beauty

Mirroring males' economic achievements, females' appearance on dating apps is considered critically important in China. In this study, male participants claimed that an attractive appearance is the sole reason for meeting women from these apps. Comments such as "beautiful" and other adjectives describing appearance are frequently made by male users on various dating apps. Furthermore, several male participants mentioned sharing beautiful photos of female users with their roommates and close friends and engaging in discussions about these women's appearances. Within the framework of sexual scripts (Simon & Gagnon, 1986), discussing sex in a crude manner, objectifying women, and asserting dominance are typically linked to masculine identities (Montemurro et al., 2015; Roberts et al., 2020).

Similar to the lack of resistance towards other stereotypically feminine behaviours such as passivity and chastity, female users generally do not see any benefits in resisting this gaze and the corresponding assessment of their appearance. Instead, women seek to enhance their appearance by applying

heavy makeup and using beautification effects to meet these demands. The ideal image of an internet celebrity shapes the expectations of women to possess features such as "big eyes, double eyelids, a high-bridged nose, a sharp chin, and a slender waist" in order to appear conventionally beautiful (Tang, 2021).

Considering the impossible task of naturally emulating such features, most women's photos on dating apps are enhanced through the use of makeup and beautification software, such as *Beauty Camera*. Similar to how female users comprehend the inclination of men to exhibit affluence, even if it is potentially inauthentic, male users also demonstrate an awareness of image retouching. Some male users appreciate females' use of makeup and beautification apps, believing it shows respect and good manners toward potential partners. For example, Jone (23, male) stated that users should be responsible to the viewers who expect to see beautiful pictures and have a comfortable chatting experience on dating apps.

You must do something to enhance your picture, it is not about your appearance, but your attitude. If you do not care about your image, why do they care about your inner world? (Jone, 23, male).

Jone's attitude toward photo enhancement is supported by Jack (19, male), who views selecting dating profiles and chatting with potential partners as

similar to reading resumes and conducting interviews to select the best applicants.

You see, I can receive thousands of dating profiles every day, how could you be so special to pique my interest? You need to present properly, with some tools, if you can't enhance your real appearance instantly (Jack, 19, male).

From this perspective, dating apps can be seen as exacerbating the pressures imposed by patriarchal standards of appearance on women. In light of the Female Control Theory (Baumeister & Tice, 2000) rooted in social exchange theory, which examines human behaviour in terms of costs and rewards, women may believe that by presenting themselves as physically attractive and desirable, they can increase their bargaining power and potential rewards in the dating market. By adhering to these standards, they aim to enhance their overall position in the dating market.

Interestingly, there is limited discussion surrounding men's appearance on these platforms. Although some female users mentioned finding men with muscles more attractive, they placed less emphasis on physical appearance. Instead, many female users expressed disdain for individuals with well-developed muscles but lacking in education or intellectual pursuits.

To be honest, I like strong men, but I have no feelings for fitness coaches. You know, they have the muscles I like, but their brains are quite empty and boring,

and I can't stand talking to them. […] They are less educated. I might sacrifice good looks for smart brains (Hellen, 34, female).

The lack of emphasis on men's physical appearance on dating apps might be explained by traditional gender scripting, where men are expected to take on active, dominant, and goal-oriented roles in sexual interactions, while women are relegated to passive and submissive roles (Gagnon, 1990). Physical appearance may not be seen as a central trait for men, as they are expected to impress and dominate through other means, such as wealth, status, and confidence.

5.6. Conclusion

This chapter highlights that while dating apps provide females with more freedom and privacy in seeking sexual relationships, their actions are still influenced by traditional gender roles. The focus on sex and relationship-seeking in dating apps reflects and perpetuates patriarchal values related to gender and sex. In Chinese society, sex is heavily stigmatized and considered something exclusively initiated by males. Despite having similar levels of sexual desire, females are encouraged to suppress their desires and adopt a passive role that serves the patriarchal notion of relationships. Women face harsher criticism than men for using dating apps and are less likely to be forgiven or accepted by their partners. These double standards persist even within the realm of dating apps, where male users' wealth and female users' appearance

are given disproportionate importance. The imbalanced sex ratio on these apps further intensifies competition among male users, leading them to exaggerate their economic capacity to attract partners and potentially suffer financial losses due to societal expectations of generosity. Conforming to social norms may be seen as a safer option for some women, providing a sense of familiarity and avoiding potential risks or judgment. By adhering to traditional relationship constructs, they may believe they are more likely to attract potential partners who align with societal expectations and seek long-term committed relationships.

The next chapter will expand upon these findings to argue that the use of dating apps in China not only perpetuates gender inequality and double standards but also reinforces distinctions in tastes and habitus based on users' social positions.

Chapter Six: Class-Shaped Use of Dating Apps

6.1. Introduction

Building upon Chapter Six, this chapter will further extend such analysis to argue that the use of dating apps in China not only reflects and perpetuates gender inequality and double standards but also further distinguishes tastes and habitus between users from different social positions. Drawing upon Bourdieu's theory of class (1984), Chapter Seven demonstrates how class inequality is reflected and perpetuated in dating apps in China. Using class categories based upon self-reported class attributes such as income, education, occupation, *hukou*, and housing, the chapter explores how middle-class and lower-class users in China engage with dating apps, connecting such habitus and taste with social position.

The chapter initiates by emphasizing the potential of dating apps to facilitate social class mobility by promoting interactions among users hailing from varying socio-economic strata. Notably, women stand to gain greater benefits, as they are more inclined to employ matrimonial alliances as a means of upward social mobility. It then demonstrates how dating apps have become associated with 'lowbrow' culture due to strong connotations of lower-classness. These connotations include the perception of the apps as short-term hook-up tools, their cheap price, the notion of them being 'timewasting,'

and their association with older users. The chapter goes on to indicate how middle-class participants who wish to use this 'lowbrow' technology employ various tactics to maintain their class position. These tactics include concealing their app usage, learning to identify the social class of potential matches, and forming a hierarchy of more and less desirable apps.

Furthermore, the chapter addresses the differences in app engagement and motivations between users from different social classes. It demonstrates that, contrary to societal expectations, lower-class users of both sexes are more likely to seek long-term relationships and marriage on the apps compared to their middle-class counterparts. The chapter also emphasizes how these differing motivations lead to more rigid judgment criteria among lower-class users. They make different judgments regarding a potential partner's age difference, sexual history, education, and income. As a result, the chapter concludes that instead of breaking down social barriers, these apps perpetuate social divisions in contemporary China by maintaining distance between users from different class backgrounds.

6.2. Utilizing Dating Apps for Class Mobility

As evident in the comprehensive analysis presented in Chapter Two, dating apps play a significant role in empowering women by offering increased avenues for marital mobility, particularly for those seeking socio-economic stability. The pervasive class structure in contemporary China (Li, 2002; Li,

2011; Yue & Yin, 2020; Li & Zhu, 2017) and the widening socio-economic disparities, as gauged by the Gini Index (Textor, 2020), contribute to the strong inclination among individuals, predominantly women, to pursue partners who can elevate or stabilize their social standing. In sharp contrast to conventional methods, where interactions predominantly occur within homogeneous social circles, dating apps offer users a unique opportunity to forge connections with potential partners from diverse backgrounds (Haywood, 2018; Illouz, 2013). Notably, research indicates that female users of dating apps commonly prioritize individuals with higher levels of income and education (Ward, 2017; Neyt, Vandenbulcke, & Baert, 2019).

6.3. The Association of Dating Apps with 'Lowbrow' Culture

However, as illustrated in Chapter Six, the use of dating apps in China is commonly interpreted as a promiscuous, cheap, untrustworthy, and time-intensive approach to pursuing romantic relationships. While various digital applications are specifically developed to encourage communication among strangers and are generally viewed as either constructive or impartial phenomena (e.g., *WeChat* and *Weibo*), dating apps have been subjected to substantial censure and are often regarded as indicative of unsophisticated preferences.

6.3.1. Class Connotations of Motives

One reason dating apps are often associated with 'lowbrow' culture is their facilitation of casual hook-ups. Within this study, several participants from middle-class backgrounds expressed their belief that popular dating apps were predominantly associated with lower-quality leisure activities and were more suited for individuals from lower social classes rather than themselves. Considering the prevailing social stigma towards casual sexual encounters in China, this association further reinforces the unfavourable perception of dating apps, as examined in Chapter Six.

The association with seeking sex attaches dating apps to connotations of social class, specifically a strong association with the lower classes. Compared to short-term relationships or casual sex, seeking long-term relationships was looked upon more favourably and considered to be a high-class and socially superior activity. This construction is in part due to the association of class hierarchy with the ‘need hierarchy’, a scale that places the pursuit of sexual need at the base level of human physiological needs (Maslow, 1954). Gratton (1980) found that the lower class are associated with the fulfilment of biological needs, while the working class tends to look for belongingness and the middle class for self-fulfilment. The association of dating apps with the fulfilment of sexual (biological) needs, therefore, means that this technology becomes attached to the social lower-classes and coded as ‘lowbrow’.

Although the participants in this study did not necessarily have the explicit goal of finding long-term relationships through dating apps, they consistently perceived individuals seeking such relationships as socially superior and more desirable, often associating this preference with a middle-class status. Additionally, many participants held the belief that those seeking long-term relationships were more likely to exhibit seriousness and sincerity in their romantic connections. Conversely, individuals who expressed motivations related to sexual encounters or business-related interests, such as promoting and selling products or engaging in prostitution, were deemed the least desirable and were commonly portrayed as lacking refinement. Most participants held unfavourable attitudes towards individuals of this nature, perceiving them as bothersome and undesirable, while also associating them with lower social status. Numerous users reported and blocked individuals engaged in the promotion of business activities, asserting that dating apps should strictly be reserved for the purpose of seeking relationships, whether casual or long-term. Some of the middle-class users would report or block sellers who posted many advertisements:

Posting advertisements is annoying. It is against the app policy. […] If I am not happy while browsing the apps, I would report them (Mike, 26, male, middle-class).

The middle-class individuals in this study generally regarded business promotion on dating apps as ineffective and inefficient, expressing concerns

about establishing trust with potential clients. Many participants indicated a preference for purchasing products from their *WeChat* friends, as they trusted these connections due to their existing relationships. Similar apprehensions were voiced regarding sex workers who utilized dating apps. Despite the fact that some middle-class men in the study were seeking casual sexual encounters on these platforms, they exhibited a strong aversion to engaging with sex workers specifically within the context of dating apps:

One of my male friends who used dating apps for sex told me I should never buy sex from dating apps because he felt that there are scams on dating apps. You know, it is hard to control. You can't tell whether your partner is a male or a female (Mike, 26, male, middle-class).

Participants in this study articulated their perception that dating apps are predominantly utilized by males to pursue casual sexual encounters and hook-ups. According to the survey, *Tantan* was found to be one of the most popular dating apps in China. However, the interviewees regarded *Tantan* as the least favoured dating app because it is primarily known for facilitating casual hook-ups, indicating a significant cognitive dissonance in using *Tantan.* For example, Edward (27, male, middle-class) expressed that *Tantan*'s reputation declined as it attracted a growing number of older individuals who were seeking sexual relationships.

Many people use Tantan for sex, so the app is gradually changed into a hook-up app. Although I used it, I felt ashamed (Edward, 27, male, middle-class).

Certainly, many female participants in this study complained that most of the potential partners they had encountered on the apps were seeking sex. Gu (20, female, middle-class) also disliked *Tantan* due to the objectification that she associated with the hook-up culture on the app:

Tantan helps men judge women based on their appearance. I hate people approaching me just because of my beautiful profile photos. All they want is just instant sex and nobody cares about my mind (Gu, 20, female, middle-class).

In contrast, apps such as *Soul* and *Tinder* have been widely regarded as superior platforms due to their association with the goal of building lasting relationships. *Soul* even endeavoured to disassociate itself from the purportedly lower-class connotations of motivations and gained popularity among young adults with its slogan, 'Seeking Soulmate'. Many female participants reported that they considered *Soul* to be much more reliable than *Tantan* because it places less emphasis on users' appearance. Compared to apps like *Tantan*, which require users to upload personal photos, *Soul* allows users to approach others without them. This feature, according to female participants, encourages users to prioritize their partners' personal qualities and thus facilitates the establishment of long-term relationships.

My first impression of the partner is not his appearance, but his personality, hobbies, or lifestyle presented on Soul Square. Although his looks are also important, I believe his 'soul' is more important for long-term or serious relationships. Likewise, I expect he appreciates my soul rather than my appearance (Lily, 26, female, middle-class).

6.3.2. Class Connotations of Economic Means

The association of dating apps with a lower-class lifestyle and lowbrow culture was also an economically based judgment. Many middle-class participants claimed that dating apps belong to the lifestyle of the lower class due to the low using costs, reflecting how different social classes seek to distinguish themselves through different consumption patterns (Bourdieu, 1978). Certainly, the basic features of dating apps are free and extremely affordable, with even the premium subscription fees of apps such as *Tantan, Momo*, and *Soul* being very cheap. Such costings position mainstream dating apps as cheap products that attract lower-class consumers who supposedly cannot afford other means through which to meet potential partners. Indeed, the use

of the apps is much cheaper than that offered by matchmaking websites such as *Zhenai*[2] and than engaging in offline dating events in public places.

The connotations of cheapness and hook ups mean that dating apps become associated with 'lowbrow' tastes, a description associated with the lower class's supposedly socially undesirable lifestyle. Many female middle-class participants believed that most male users on the apps were poor. For example, reflecting the persistent social expectation in China that men should be the primary earner in a relationship (as explored in Chapter Six), Gu (20, female, middle-class), a 10-year user, commented that dating apps fit poor men's economic conditions and so can satisfy their dating needs when other means cannot:

I had never encountered a rich guy on dating apps. Rich men already got lots of female resources, so they are not motivated to use dating apps for relationships. […] I think most male users are just bored, poor, and they are unable to coax girls around them (Gu, 20, female, middle-class).

[2] The monthly VIP premium fees for *Tantan, Momo*, and *Soul* are approximately 12 yuan (1.73 US dollars), 3 yuan (0.43 US dollars), and 30 yuan (4.3 US dollars) respectively. However, the monthly VIP premium fee for *Zhenai* is 259 yuan (37.23 US dollars).

6.3.3. Class Connotations of 'Time'

The construction of dating apps as 'time-consuming' also influenced the construction of the apps as lower class and lowbrow. Dating apps generally require users to spend more time getting to know each other and chatting before meeting, often due to the anonymity on the apps caused by the lack of pre-existing social information. Middle-class people considered their time to be considerably more valuable than that of the lower class, and so were less keen to invest such time in seeking partners on dating apps. They considered those who chose to do this to be lower-class. Sheena (19, female, middle-class) and Leon (26, male, middle-class) claimed that those from upper-class backgrounds would be more interested in participating in activities associated with 'highbrow' tastes, such as extreme sports, travelling, and reading, rather than using dating apps. Middle-class men in this study were particularly prone to view dating apps as a time-wasting behaviour. For example, Jone (23, male, middle-class) and Leon (26, male, middle-class) believed that middle-class men would prefer to use the money to seek women rather than spend time chatting with them:

Those with higher social positions may be more straightforward. If they want a relationship, they won't spend much time exploring your hobbies because they are busier, and their time is more precious (Jone, 23, male, middle-class).

I don't think a decent man from middle-class background would look for a girlfriend on any dating apps, including me (Leon, 26, male, middle-class).

These views are shared by middle-class women, such as Sheena (19, female, middle-class):

Lower-class people may believe that their time is cheaper than middle-class users', so they would prefer to spend time using dating apps rather than paying for other channels to seek partners (Sheena, 19, female, middle-class).

6.3.4. Class Connotations of Age

Age was also an important criterion for users when selecting both partners and dating apps and was heavily entwined with notions of class. For middle-class users, the age of the primary users became an important characteristic for shaping attitudes towards dating apps. While users can use makeup and beautification tools to enhance their appearance, their age was associated with generational lifestyles and a particular social class.

In general, younger users are more likely to exhibit middle-class tastes compared to older users, as they have experienced greater economic prosperity. Bourdieu (1984) argues that social class is not only determined by an individual's relationship with the means of production, but also by their habitus and taste in consumed products. The term "habitus" refers to a system

of enduring, adaptable dispositions that incorporate past experiences and manifest specific perspectives and behaviours similar to those living in comparable contexts (Bourdieu, 1971). Taste represents a collection of distinct preferences and lifestyles among individuals within a social group, which serves as a means to define their lifestyle and classify their corresponding social position (Bourdieu, 1984).

Younger and older generations tend to possess different habitus and tastes due to their distinct historical periods of living. For instance, individuals who lived through the Communist Consolidation Era (1950–1965) and the Great Cultural Revolution Era (1966–1976) experienced widespread famine and political upheaval, leading them to prioritize material needs (Erickson, 2009), resembling a lower-class lifestyle. Conversely, those born after the Economic Reform Era (1977–1985) and the Social Transition Era (1986–present), following the implementation of the Reform and Opening-Up Policy (1978), the Nine-Year Compulsory Education Policy (1986), and the One-Child Policy (1980-2016), enjoyed an economic boom that allowed them to pursue other needs, such as love and self-fulfilment (Erickson, 2009; Kwok, 2012), akin to the middle class in Euro-American societies (Xin, 2013). Consequently, the age of potential partners can serve as an indicator of social class. According to Bourdieu's notion of habitus (1984), such economically prosperous life experiences tend to develop middlebrow or upper-brow tastes, setting them apart from the lower-class position. Additionally, due to their greater adaptability to advanced technologies and exposure to individualistic cultures

from Euro-American contexts, younger generations exhibit modernized values (Sun & Wang, 2010), which are also associated with the middle class (Xin, 2013). Therefore, participants believe that matching with partners of a similar age or younger would be more appealing to them, particularly for young middle-class users.

According to participants, *Momo* and *People Nearby* on *WeChat* were the most undesirable and lowbrow apps, because most users of these apps were older (over 40 years old). For instance, Gu (21, female, middle-class) provided a comment regarding an encounter with an individual she referred to as an "old uncle" on the *Momo*. She expressed her perception of him being financially tight-fisted and having limited knowledge about movies and music.

He had never been to a theatre! How could we have any common topic? (Gu, 21, female, middle-class).

Likewise, Jone (23, male, middle class) expressed his discontent with *Momo* and described the female users he encountered as 'old aunts', a derogatory term that indicated old female users are old-fashioned and unattractive. Contrary to the younger generation, who enjoyed economic prosperity similar to the middle class and pursues the fulfilment of higher-level needs, the majority of the older generation in China faced economic hardships and were deprived of educational opportunities. Consequently, they are less inclined to develop a middle-class taste, instead, they often exhibit dispositions aligned

with the lower class, irrespective of their current social positions. Jone and Gu's descriptions of *Momo* users both suggest that the young middle class shaped their use of dating apps to develop and demonstrate their social superiority:

> *I particularly hate Momo, because I feel that all women that I encountered on Momo, are lao ayi (old aunt)[3]. I have no shared topic with them (Jone, 23, male, middle class).*

In contrast, many participants believed that niche apps like *Wodao* and *Gonglu Shangdian* are highbrow apps because the users are younger (less than 20). For example, Jone (23, male, middle-class) proactively revealed his use of *Wodao*, a recently launched dating app with many young users. He shared that the app's association with youth enabled him to overcome the general social stigma associated with using the apps in China. Jone did not feel shame when using this app because the users of *Wodao* are "post 00" (born after 2000). Such analysis indicates how and why dating apps are constructed as lowbrow in China.

[3] Old aunt, disrespectful name for a middle-aged lady.

6.3.5. Recognising Class Signifiers on Dating Apps and Preserving Class Boundaries

Given these strong connotations, middle-class users must exert effort to address their cognitive dissonance and alleviate their concerns regarding using dating apps. Indeed, data from this study suggests that middle-class users are highly sensitive to the bad reputation of popular dating apps. Indeed, while all kinds of dating apps are used by different social groups, this study suggests that middle-class people are the social group with the most discerning taste. Indeed, the Chinese middle class commonly experiences insecurity regarding their social position and identity, as they face a higher risk of downward mobility (Chen & Li, 2023). Due to this fear, middle-class individuals are more inclined to exhibit a distinctive taste and preserve their reputation by opting for "superior" dating apps in order to differentiate themselves.

Due to the negative connotations associated with lower class, a significant number of middle-class individuals in this study displayed a pronounced reluctance to engage with dating apps, even when these platforms proved advantageous and resulted in positive experiences. This cognitive dissonance served as a mechanism to uphold their middle-class identity, with many users exerting considerable effort to distance themselves from these apps. Some middle-class female users like Lucy (27, female, middle-class) actually quit using dating apps to maintain their own reputation, even though they understood that using the apps could be in their interest:

I quit dating apps because I worried, they (middle-class friends) might judge me by my use of dating apps. Given the bad reputation of dating apps in China, it would be difficult to justify my use (Lucy, 27, female, middle-class).

Such users tended to criticize other dating app users, constructing other users as socially inferior and engaging in lowbrow tastes. Sheena (19, female, middle-class) claimed that most men on dating apps were not appealing due to their economic and social background:

They are not timian[4]. They are not well educated. I don't think I should respect and learn things from them (Sheena, 19, female, middle-class).

Such users were also less willing to admit their use and tried to distance themselves from this technology in an effort to reinforce social class distinctions, an action that seemed particularly significant among middle-class women. Undoubtedly, among the four groups analysed in this study, namely middle-class men, middle-class women, lower-class men, and lower-class women (categorized based on their education, income, occupation, *hukou*, and housing status), middle-class women displayed the highest sensitivity towards their potential partners' social class status and exhibited the most

[4] The behaviour or appearance fits the image of a decent identity.

strategic approach when selecting partners. While these applications have the potential to mitigate class divisions and offer lower-class men opportunities to engage with women from diverse social backgrounds that they might not encounter in offline settings, middle-class women actively endeavour to impede such interactions. Lucy (27, female, middle-class) stated that she abstained from forging significant relationships with individuals from dating apps due to apprehensions concerning their socio-economic backgrounds.

Middle-class men also worried about being judged as having "lowbrow taste" if they used the apps to seek partners. For example, Leon (26, male, middle-class) expressed that he would never use dating apps to seek relationships because people around him might look down on him and consider him incapable of getting an offline girlfriend.

Given the importance of reinforcing class boundaries to middle-class users, a lot of dating apps include the means to detect a potential partner's class status, and middle-class women were adept at recognising such signs. Compared to Euro-American-oriented dating apps like *Tinder* and *Bumble*, Chinese dating apps provide more avenues for users to assess potential partners' social status before matching. For instance, while *Tinder* allows users to send messages only after mutual interest is established, *WeChat's People Nearby* feature enables users to communicate and view other users' *Moments,* providing assurance that potential partners come from higher social classes. As Bourdieu argued, class is defined both by economic production and

habitus (1984). Along with education and wealth, users on dating apps in China pay close attention to evidence of class-based signifiers in their potential matches, including the style of conversation and apparel, both elements that are shaped by class background. For example, *People Nearby* of *WeChat* enables users to communicate and check another user's *Moments* to make sure that the potential date's lifestyle could include signifiers of a higher social class. Lucy (27, female, middle-class) stated that she would evaluate a prospective partner's *Moments* before adding them from *People Nearby*. If she discovered that they belonged to the lower classes, she would remove the contact.

Likewise, *Tantan* profiles provide a lot more information about potential partners. Gu (20, female, middle-class) was very adept at guessing a potential partners' economic capacity from their *Tantan* profiles. Many middle-class female participants, such as Nancy (23, female, middle-class) and Jane (22, female, middle-class), noticed that male users sought to increase their chance at getting matches by including symbols of their middle-class affluent lifestyle. This included highlighting their education on their profiles (particularly if they received a degree from a top university) and including symbols of wealth such as cars.

Middle-class women demonstrated evident vigilance in evaluating prospective partners while closely associating it with social class. Sheena (19, female, middle-class) expressed dissatisfaction with her experiences on dating apps,

asserting that she had never come across "high-quality" men and often found her matches to resemble common street toughs. Nevertheless, these users were also cautious about solely relying on appearances, recognizing the potential for deception. According to Gu's (20, female, middle-class) observations, individuals who present themselves in formal attire and with intricate hairstyles on dating apps are often barbers or employees of nightclubs, seeking potential customers. Conversely, those who display wealth through suits and golden watches are more likely to be service providers.

6.4. Discrimination Chains of Dating Apps and ‘App Hierarchy’

As a strategy for reconciling the cognitive dissonance between the desire to distance oneself from “lowbrow” apps while still using them, many middle-class users developed a concept of app hierarchy. To assert their social standing while engaging with technology, these users sought to distance themselves from associations with low cultural tastes by opting for more expensive apps that they believed signified their economic capacity. Participants were driven by the desire to uphold their reputation through the selection of apps that they perceived as "superior." This hierarchical distinction was a means for them to differentiate themselves from lower-class users and maintain their elevated social status. Moreover, this allowed them to continue using apps that they associated with “highbrow” notions of culture.

Furthermore, some participants experience a sense of pride by associating themselves with exclusive niche dating apps. This feeling of pride can overshadow the general shame and embarrassment commonly associated with using these apps in China. In fact, such users actively recommend these niche apps to their friends in order to maintain and perpetuate the sense of exclusivity.

The social stratification within dating apps was largely disconnected from the actual functionality of the apps themselves. In fact, the imposition of higher fees served as a form of "gatekeeping," effectively excluding lower-class users while simultaneously attracting middle-class users. As a result, this reinforced class segregation in the realm of online dating. Middle-class participants demonstrated a tendency to utilize high-end and specialized dating apps in order to differentiate themselves from 'lowbrow' preferences. On the other hand, some individuals aimed to establish their social status by exploring novel and less popular dating apps.

Middle-class participants constructed this social position of users through connotations associated with age, wealth, education, and motives. For participants in this study, specific apps became associated with users of different classes through the supposed educational level and income of their users. Apps associated with old, poor or less educated users seeking sex or business were considered ‘lowbrow’ (and vice versa). For instance, a significant number of participants perceive *Momo* and *Tantan* as being of

inferior quality due to their belief that the majority of users are uneducated, older, and financially disadvantaged, with a primary interest in casual sexual encounters. On the other hand, *Wodao* and *Tinder* are regarded as superior options as their user base consists of young and educated individuals.

Moreover, Chinese people often regard Euro-American culture as superior (Shen & Wang, 2015) due to its association with modern and elitist lifestyles (Cao, 2023). As a result, there has been a prevalent belief among Chinese people that their lives are modern and privileged. Therefore, some participants considered dating apps popular in Euro-American contexts superior to Chinese popular dating apps.

Tinder in particular was very much constructed as of a higher social status due to its international origins and association with international users. Since users of *Tinder* need to log in via VPN (Virtual Private Network), the app automatically screens out those who cannot afford VPN access and enables more users with experience in foreign cultures, such as international students, and cross-nation businessmen, both of whom would be constructed as well educated and wealthy. Although *Tinder* and *Tantan* share many similarities in terms of features, participants regarded *Tinder* as superior due to its association with Euro-American experiences and higher pricing, which confers a sense of exclusivity.

In particular, *Tinder* was preferred by middle-class women, who expected to encounter more educated partners, specifically those who had been overseas, when using this app. Jane (22, female, middle-class) felt that the encounters on *Tinder* were of 'higher quality':

> *Tinder is a relatively niche dating app because it is from abroad and I feel that most users have experience studying abroad. They were well educated. You know, they can speak English and afford overseas education. Tinder users are of higher quality (Jane, 22, female, middle-class).*

This association with 'users of higher quality' was also preserved by the mechanics of the app. Several female participants reported that the experience of using *Tinder* was much better than using *Tantan* because *Tinder* does not allow sending pictures in private chat. This prevented men from sending illicit images to women, yet then also gave the impression that the international, wealthy and better-educated users associated with the app were more polite and respectful. However, this impression might be misleading, as some female participants also expressed dissatisfaction with the behaviour of individuals with higher educational levels on other apps. For instance, Nancy (23, female, middle-class) recounted her encounter with a well-educated man who exhibited offensive and rude behaviour while chatting on *Tantan.*

He is a student at Fudan University, and that's why I added him and expected him to be polite to me. We did enjoy some moments until he forced me to see his …penis… (Nancy, 23, female, middle-class).

6.5. Varied Motivations Across Social Classes

Based on the varying perspectives within different social classes, this study has further revealed that individuals belonging to diverse socioeconomic backgrounds exhibit distinct patterns of interaction and utilize dating apps for different motives. Multiple studies have already identified gendered attitudes toward long-term and short-term relationships (i.e., Chan, 2019; Sumter & Vandenbosch, 2019). As discussed in Chapter Six, this study also affirmed the perspective that men are more likely to seek casual sex on dating apps while women tend to seek longer-term relationships. Yet this study also expands upon such gender-based research to highlight how in China, class and social position also impact upon participants' desires and activities when engaging with dating apps.

In particular, it is noteworthy that while the pursuit of a lasting and committed relationship was traditionally associated with individuals belonging to better social class, empirical evidence suggests that middle-class users, regardless of gender, exhibit a greater inclination towards utilizing dating apps for casual encounters and sexual exploration, as opposed to their lower-class counterparts. Indeed, many participants from middle-class backgrounds

explicitly stated that their primary motivation for using dating apps was not to establish committed relationships. Instead, they described their engagement as casual in nature, driven by feelings of boredom, curiosity, excitement, and a desire to expand their social networks.

6.5.1. Motivations for Middle-Class Users

Middle-class men exhibit a higher inclination towards engaging in casual sexual encounters through dating apps compared to their lower-class counterparts. This tendency can primarily be attributed to economic factors and their relatively higher likelihood of success in such endeavours. The satisfaction derived from previous successful interactions with partners further amplifies their expected gratifications, thereby providing motivation for these middle-class male individuals to persist in such pursuits (Katz, Blumer, & Gurevitch, 1974).

Their success can be attributed to the relatively more desirable traits exhibited by male middle-class users, as evident in their online presentation and communication. These traits hold significant appeal for female users, a considerable number of whom desire and anticipate their male partners to possess wealth and high levels of education (Ward, 2017; Neyt, Vandenbulcke, & Baert, 2019). For instance, both Lucy (27, female, middle-class) and May (27, female, lower-class) have explicitly expressed their preference for partners from the middle-class segment. Tom (30, male, middle-class), an

experienced male middle-class seeker on dating apps, told me that he was confident in seeking sex on dating apps and could have one-night stands with different girls from dating apps every week.

In contrast, individuals belonging to the lower socioeconomic class expressed a higher incidence of perceived failure and lower expectations when seeking sexual encounters through dating apps, consequently leading to their limited utilization of such platforms for this purpose. Notably, several male participants from the lower socioeconomic background, exemplified by Joe (32, male, lower-class) and Duke (26, male, lower-class), voiced their dissatisfaction, highlighting the inherent disadvantage their class status poses in engaging in casual sexual relationships with women on dating apps. Joe even altered his initial objective of pursuing sexual encounters to pursuing meaningful relationships. He believed that the pursuit of relationships might prove to be less challenging than seeking sexual encounters through dating apps. Similarly, Eden (22 years old, male, lower-class) abandoned his aspirations of finding casual sexual partners on dating apps. This decision was influenced by his perception that women on dating apps were uninterested in engaging in casual sexual activities with him due to his limited financial resources.

The absence of a prevalent "hook-up" culture among these individuals may explain why lower-class users in this study demonstrated a more indifferent attitude towards dating apps. Many participants from lower-class backgrounds

viewed dating apps as supplementary to other traditional dating methods. While they also expressed dissatisfaction with the effectiveness and reliability of dating apps in finding suitable partners, none of them associated their use of these apps with their social class status.

Time and money, at least you must use one thing to exchange a relationship. If you can't afford offline channels, dating apps are very convenient and cheap to expand your dating pool (Joe, 32, male, low-class).

The relatively better economic conditions of middle-class users also made seeking sex much easier. While the use of dating apps is initially free, dating itself eventually costs money when meeting with the match. This holds especially true for males who are traditionally expected to bear the majority of expenses during dating encounters. These expenditures are often incurred in exchange for engaging in sexual activities with females, as discussed in Chapter Six. Such expenses may encompass various aspects, including but not limited to dining, transportation, lodging, beverages, refreshments, cinema tickets, and more. Furthermore, Cicy (32, female, lower-class) and Tom (30, male, middle-class) indicated that some men may provide financial compensation to their partners for engaging in sexual activities.

However, lower-class men displayed less inclination to pay these expenses for individuals they encountered on dating apps. Based on Tom's observations, a casual sexual encounter on a date could cost approximately 500 yuan,

surpassing the rates of low-end prostitution. Consequently, this deters individuals from lower-income backgrounds from resorting to dating apps for sexual purposes. Tom believed that lower-class demographics, such as factory and construction workers, would favour engaging with offline sex workers rather than seeking sexual encounters through dating apps.

Comments from women seeking sex on dating apps also suggest that class significantly impacted upon female users' attitudes towards and intentions when using dating apps. Similar to their male counterparts, middle-class women exhibited a higher propensity compared to lower-class women in actively seeking sexual encounters through dating apps. Middle-class women already possessed a substantial amount of economic, social, and cultural capital, enabling them to perceive dating apps as a recreational pursuit. Furthermore, due to their enhanced financial resources, these women were relatively less susceptible to societal norms and pressures, thereby exhibiting a decreased inclination to suppress their own sexual desires. The experiences of some male participants in this study further substantiated the aforementioned theory. Tom (30, male, middle-class) expressed that middle-class women demonstrated a greater inclination towards engaging in casual sexual encounters, whereas lower-class women tended to seek committed relationships or discuss their dissatisfying marriages with unfamiliar individuals online.

Middle-class women also demonstrated a much more open-minded attitude to sex than lower-class women. In this study, several female middle-class participants expressed no qualms about having a one-night stand if they felt good with their partners. For example, Rita (22, female, middle-class) told me she had casual sex with partners on dating apps. These women also showed a more tolerant attitude toward other women who seek sex on dating apps.

I think seeking sex on dating apps is just very normal. Everyone has the right to enjoy sex. You can't judge her just because she is female. […] I got several friends who had sex with boys on dating apps, I think it is cool (Hellen, 34, female, middle-class).

The favourable attitudes towards sexuality evident among middle-class women imply that Female Control Theory has certain limitations. These attitudes are influenced by two key factors: the socioeconomic status of women and their reliance on male resources.

6.5.2. Motivations for the Lower-class Users

Overall, the lower class demonstrated a more serious approach towards utilizing dating apps, as opposed to the casual encounters pursued by the middle class. This serious attitude stemmed from their recognition of the potential of this technology to enhance their access to economic stability, both in terms of relationships and business prospects. Specifically, lower-class

women exhibited a strong inclination towards seeking meaningful connections rather than mere sexual encounters, viewing dating apps as a possible avenue for improving their financial circumstances.

Under patriarchy, women may choose to repress their own sexual desires and regulate female sexuality in general as a strategy to enhance their bargaining power when acquiring resources from men (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002). Lower-class women in China face greater economic insecurity, which increases their likelihood of suppressing their own sexual desires in exchange for resources. In fact, female participants from the lower-class background in this study exhibited a significant reluctance to engage in sexual encounters with strangers and strongly criticized women who engaged in casual sex. For instance, Cicy (32, female, lower-class) found the idea of having sex with strangers absurd and emphasized that she would never engage in casual sex through dating apps.

I think those women who had sex with strangers are of low self-esteem. She does not cherish her body so no man would love her (Cicy, 32, female, lower-class).

Cicy's negative view toward having casual sex is very typical in the female lower-class group who generally believed that women should suppress their sexual desire in order to seek security through a long-term relationship.

Similar to women from lower-class backgrounds, lower-class men exhibit a higher likelihood compared to their middle-class counterparts of seeking relationships through dating apps and accepting potential partners found on such platforms. The majority of middle-class male participants were already engaged in committed relationships, while a significant proportion of lower-class male users remained single due to the inherent difficulties they faced in establishing offline connections. Dating apps provide a means to conceal undesirable circumstances and enhance one's online persona at minimal expense, thereby increasing the chances of finding a compatible match for individuals from lower class. Several lower-class male participants expressed scepticism about finding a spouse on dating apps due to concerns about promiscuity and infidelity among female users. However, they remained open to the possibility of marrying someone they met through these platforms. For instance, Dennis (26, male, lower-class) believed that dating apps offered a convenient method for finding companionship, citing his own experience of dating a woman he met on such an app. Conversely, middle-class men encountered fewer obstacles when seeking relationships in offline settings, resulting in less motivation to utilize dating apps for this purpose.

In the Chinese context, dating apps also serve as a means of business promotion. The study found that many participants encountered business promoters on these apps. The key types of businesses identified in this study are similar to Chan's findings (Chan, 2018b): promotion of shops, promotion of alcohol, sex work, and sale of sex-related products.

The data suggests that this phenomenon is primarily associated with lower class users, as all participants involved in business promotion on dating apps came from this socioeconomic group.

Such data highlights how dating apps in China operate as a means to increase economic opportunities for lower class users, not only through seeking economically secure long-term relationships but also through increasing business revenue. Certainly, the lower class are more motivated to improve their economic conditions than middle-class users; UGT suggests that such users would then actively continue to use this media to meet their needs after some success (Katz, Blumer, & Gurevitch, 1974).

Dating apps also offer a relatively equal and controllable space for the lower class to increase their income. The techniques of promotion are also very simple, dealing mostly with photos and personal contact, and do not require much expertise, all of which can be handled and designed by those with low economic, social and cultural capital. For example, Dennis (26, male, lower-class) is a clerk in a barber shop, and he would get a commission if he could have more clients visiting the shop. He felt that it was convenient to use dating apps to expand his client pool:

I just put the photos of the hairstyles on the profiles, saying something like "it is a new style". Surely, I would put the name of my shop. […] I am not sure if it

works, but it costs little effort to advertise my shop (Dennis, 26, male, lower-class).

6.6. Variations in Partner Preferences Across Social Classes

Given such serious motivations and the desire to seek relationships rather than casual sex, the lower class tended to use specific criteria when evaluating potential partners on dating apps. Consequently, the two social classes exhibited contrasting attitudes towards the prior sexual experiences of their potential partners, with lower-class men in particular expressing significant concern about this characteristic on the apps. While middle-class users evaluated dating apps based on their connections to what they perceived as "lowbrow" tastes of the lower classes, they were less picky when it came to the individuals they encountered on the apps. Despite expressing disdain for those who were not exclusively seeking long-term relationships, the middle class displayed a greater openness to various types of relationships, including friendships, friends with benefits (friends with whom they could have sex), and sexual partners. Their criteria for selecting partners were ultimately more lenient and flexible. This sharply contrasted with lower-class users, who approached partner selection with a greater level of seriousness and strictness compared to their middle-class counterparts.

6.6.1. Past Sexual Experiences

Among the four groups examined in this study, lower-class men were found to be the most concerned about their potential partners' previous sexual experiences. Many male participants from the lower-class expressed a dislike for partners who had engaged in numerous sexual encounters before. These attitudes can be attributed to traditional patriarchal norms regarding female chastity, which often stem from concerns of being deceived or betrayed, ultimately leading to social shame and a perceived loss of masculinity.

If she had lots of sexual experiences, I feel she is more likely to cheat on me. I felt insecure in having a romantic relationship with her (Harry, 27, male, lower-class).

On *Tantan*, male users from lower-class backgrounds frequently exhibit strong disapproval towards sexually active women. Rita, a 22-year-old woman from a middle-class background, recounted her encounter with a male taxi driver on the app, where she was subjected to questioning about her past sexual experiences.

He kept asking me about my sexual experience. "How many boyfriends did you have?" "Did you have sex with them?" "Why did you sleep with them?" (Rita, 22, female, middle-class).

Rita's personal experience sheds light on the phenomenon where men from lower social classes exhibit excessive concern regarding their partners' sexual history. Such view aligns with Male Control Theory that underscores the control over the potential wives' sexuality. This particular perspective often leads to a lack of compatibility between middle-class women, who generally possess more liberal attitudes towards sexuality than their lower-class counterparts, and lower-class men. Rita, herself, was profoundly offended by her encounter with this issue.

How ridiculous! We just matched for 10 minutes! He was so rude. I reported and deleted him immediately (Rita, 22, female, middle-class).

Compared to lower-class men, other groups exhibited reduced interest in their partners' sexual history. Middle-class men and women, benefiting from advanced sex education and economic freedom, felt more secure and harboured fewer judgments towards sexuality. As stated by Jerry (24, male, middle-class), "Who doesn't have some old love?"

Conversely, for lower-class women, who often depend on their prospective partners economically, acquiring knowledge about their partners' past sexual experiences would not contribute to maximizing their interests within the relationship.

6.6.2. Age Gap

Apart from sexual experiences, one of the criteria that showed the most divergent preferences between middle-class and lower-class users was the concern about a potential age gap. Lower-class users were much stricter with their requirements around their potential partners' age than their middle-class counterparts, and they tended to prefer relationships in which males are older than females. According to Chunling Li, a Chinese socialist, the "older wife and younger husband" pattern of marriage is increasing in China in recent years, a phenomenon associated with the improvement of female status in relationships (Lu, 2017). However, data from this study examining how users engage with dating apps suggests that the "older wife and younger husband" pattern is less applicable to lower-class Chinese individuals who face more economic and social constraints.

Compared to female middle-class users, female lower-class users display higher satisfaction with their current division of labour and a stronger inclination towards traditional gender roles. This can be attributed to their upbringing in families where limited resources are mainly allocated to male children, while girls are socialized to take on household responsibilities (Shen, 2016; Jin, 2011; Tang, Ma, & Jin, 2009). As a consequence, female children may be deprived of their inheritance rights and are typically expected to earn money to financially support their brothers' education and weddings (Shen, 2016). This can potentially restrict the development opportunities for females,

further reinforcing the perception of women as subordinates. Lower-class men often develop tendencies to dominate relationships in family and may be less inclined to compromise their position or exhibit equal respect towards women.

Female lower-class participants, who generally used the apps to seek long-term relationships for economic stability, claimed that they would reject dating app users who were younger than themselves, believing that younger partners were less serious and reliable. These women tended to expect to be financially subordinate in a relationship, and seeking an older partner was connected to this positioning. They sought older partners as they expected older men would be more affluent and so more able to support a wife and family financially. For example, Cicy (34, female, lower-class) highlighted the financial burden that a family would pose on young men and stressed the importance of the male partner being the primary breadwinner in a relationship. Such preferences can be attributed to the socioeconomic circumstances of lower-class women, who often face challenges in earning sufficient income independently. Consequently, they tend to view marriage as a significant avenue for achieving economic security and upward social mobility. This observation aligns with Female Control Theory proposed by Baumeister and Twenge (2002). This theory posits that women frequently suppress their own sexuality in order to negotiate advantageous conditions or outcomes.

Furthermore, an additional factor contributing to this phenomenon is that females from lower socio-economic backgrounds often assume a more passive role within relationships, exhibiting reduced confidence in assuming leadership positions. This suggests that lower-class females tend to endorse patriarchal views when selecting partners on dating apps. For example, May (27, lower-class) stated her inclination towards accepting partners who are 3 to 5 years older than her, believing that an older man would be more capable of providing for her needs:

He would take care of you and treat you like his daughter if he is older than you. If you are older than him, you should play the role of his mother and take care of him. I chose the former (May, 27, female, lower-class).

May's perspective is shared by a number of women from the lower class who believe that women should occupy a subordinate position. They express a preference for admiring older men, who are assumed to possess more experience and act as guides in daily activities.

Similarly, a significant number of lower-class male participants expressed a desire and expectation to have younger partners. Apart from concerns about the potential loss of physical attractiveness and difficulties with childbirth, lower-class males held more traditional and conservative views. They considered a relationship with an older woman to be unconventional and believed it could subject them to negative social pressure. For instance, Joe

(32, male, lower-class) expressed a preference for dating younger women, noting that the girlfriends of his friends tended to be younger than themselves.

[…] It is weird and challenging to have a girlfriend older than me. My family would not accept it… (Joe, 32, male, lower-class).

In addition to societal expectations and influence from familial and peer networks, lower-class men also expressed a sense of apprehension or lack of confidence in establishing harmonious relationships with older partners. Aligned with lower-class women's desire to be guided by older men, lower-class men hold expectations of exerting dominance in their relationships, reflecting the association with traditional masculinity norms in China. Hence, lower-class men exhibit a greater concern regarding the potential loss of control over their older partners, perceiving that an older woman's experience in various aspects may pose a challenge to their desired level of dominance.

I am a man. You know, I need her to listen to me when it comes to significant matters. I may feel hesitant about being in a relationship with an older woman, as she could potentially possess more knowledge and experience than me (Dennis, 26, male, lower-class).

Even when seeking purely sexual encounters, many lower-class male users expressed a preference related to age. For example, Harry (27, male, lower-

class) believed that engaging in sexual relations with an older woman would diminish his sense of power and masculinity:

Having sex with an older woman, even if it is just once, would make me feel as if I am being used and taken advantage of by my older partner. This would not make me happy (Harry, 27, male, lower-class).

Harry's opinion implies that lower-class men attach importance to maintaining power over women through gender inequality. This mindset may stem from the fact that these men might face limitations in terms of power and social influence due to their lack of economic affluence. The passive voice in Harry's statement reveals his perception of feeling disempowered in a relationship with an older partner. Opting for a younger partner would provide a sense of superiority and security for this lower-class man, allowing him to uphold traditional ideals of masculinity. Furthermore, it suggests that the patriarchal framework has distinct effects on various groups. In comparison to male middle-class users, male lower-class users tend to exhibit their belief in gender superiority more openly. As a result, this can elicit feelings of disgust from female middle-class users who are more attuned to gender-related matters.

In comparison to lower-class users, their middle-class counterparts exhibited less concern for traditional norms within their relationships. Some female middle-class participants partly agreed with their lower-class counterparts in preferring an older partner, yet many were open to dating younger partners.

They enabled both older and younger partners to search for and add them, maximizing the chance of meeting a desirable partner. These participants seemed more concerned about being equally respected by a younger partner, with some believing that the age gap could create very different concerns in relationships.

Middle-class women were indeed less satisfied with their current situation and exhibited a heightened awareness of the inherent inequality in relationships with older partners, who often exerted control over female behaviour. Middle-class women displayed a higher sensitivity than their lower-class counterparts towards gender issues and demonstrated a more critical attitude towards traditional gender roles. Unlike female participants from lower-class backgrounds who tend to position themselves as subordinate, middle-class women aspire to achieve equal status in relationships and actively explore connections with partners from different age groups.

An older boyfriend may offer maturity and tolerance, but he may also demand obedience and admiration. On the other hand, with younger partners, you may enjoy being admired by them, but may experience a lack of security (Gu, 20, female, middle-class).

In contrast to their lower-class counterparts, middle-class families have the financial means to provide education for both male and female children and male middle class users are more likely to recognize the potential of females in

academic and career accomplishments. Therefore, middle-class men hold a more neutral stance towards dating women older than themselves. These findings offer evidence that dispositions and habitus are shaped within specific environments (Bourdieu, 1984).

These men adopted an inclusive approach, allowing both older and younger female users to actively search and match with them, effectively maximizing their opportunities to meet potential partners who align with their desires and preferences. For example, Tom (30, male, middle-class) has engaged in relationships with women of various age groups. As a result, he has reached the conclusion that there exists no substantial disparity between individuals slightly older or younger than himself. Tom posits that embracing a more flexible age range would yield greater advantages for users:

If you set overly strict age limitations, you may miss out on many mature candidates who are comfortable engaging in casual sexual relationships with you (Tom, 30, male, middle-class).

Compared to lower-class male users, middle-class male users were less concerned about adhering to traditional norms in their relationships. Several middle-class men held a clear aversion towards the societal expectation of assuming a caregiver role for their partners. In fact, some male middle-class participants possess a greater appreciation for older women and actively prefer to date them. These individuals argued that women who were more

mature in age demonstrated greater consideration and a more relaxed demeanour. For instance, Jone (23, male, middle-class) provided a comparative analysis of his personal experiences in dating both younger and older women:

> *My current girlfriend is two years older than me, but it is fine. She is more patient and tolerant than my ex-girlfriend who is younger than me. You know, it is tiresome to please a wilful little girl. (Jone, 23, male, middle-class).*

This is in part because their more affluent status allows them to live in a more inclusive environment associated with a *xiaozi* lifestyle, which is often associated with signifiers of the Euro-American middle-class tastes, consisting of attending pop concerts and shows, as well as engaging with Euro-American pop culture, music and movies (Xin, 2013). Such a lifestyle opened these men up to different models and diverse types of relationships, including the "older women and younger men" pattern. Some male participants from middle-class backgrounds, with Euro-American educational experiences, shared that their perspectives on relationships evolved towards a more open-minded stance after engaging with individuals involved in diverse relationship dynamics, such as non-heterosexual relationships or consensual non-monogamy. Consequently, they found dating older girlfriends to be socially acceptable within this expanded framework of relationship possibilities. As Edward states:

Oh, I find our Chinese people are just too conservative. It is the 21st century now! Gays and lesbians are all around the world, it is normal for a man to date an older girl! (Edward, 27, male, middle-class).

An additional factor contributing to the acceptance of older girlfriends among middle-class men is their increased tendency to develop a sense of respect towards women. In affluent families, middle-class women are provided ample opportunities to pursue a quality education and achieve academic and career success. As a result, they garner admiration from their male counterparts, who highly regard their achievements. In a context where men find themselves in competition with women possessing similar attributes, middle-class males develop an understanding of the value of females based not only on their physical attractiveness but also on their compatible achievements. Indeed, the observation that middle-class men, who are accustomed to respecting women in their lives, feel more at ease in relationships with older girlfriends further supports the notion that dispositions and habitus are cultivated over the long term in specific environments, as posited by Pierre Bourdieu in his work (Bourdieu, 1984). These long-term socialization processes shape individuals' attitudes and behaviours towards gender dynamics and relationships.

Also, unlike their lower-class counterparts who may prioritize having young wives to fulfil traditional expectations of bearing children, middle-class men are less concerned about the challenges of conceiving at older ages. This is due to their ability to afford medical assistance, such as fertility treatments or

surrogate pregnancies, which can address potential difficulties in childbirth. For instance, Mike (28, male, middle-class) mentioned the possibility of surrogate pregnancy as a solution, while Dennis could not accept that his wife was too old to conceive naturally.

6.6.3. Seeking Partners with Better Education

In this study, male users generally displayed less interest in the income of their potential mates compared to female users. However, many lower-class male participants using the apps to seek a spouse also considered their potential partners' educational level as an important investment for the future. For example, Harry (27, male, lower-class) expressed his inclination to inquire about the educational levels of potential partners. He mentioned that he would reject those who had not received at least a college education, asserting that having a partner with intelligence and education was crucial for ensuring their future children's intellectual abilities. In contrast, it was found that most male middle-class users placed less importance on their partners' educational levels. This difference in attitude can be attributed to their desire for casual sexual relationships rather than seeking a potential long-term commitment.

Consistent with previous studies (Ward, 2017; Neyt, Vandenbulcke, & Baert, 2019), this study suggests that both female middle-class and lower-class users prefer to seek out men with a higher income and education. However, data

from this study indicates that they prefer these traits for very different reasons. Middle-class women show more interest in the process of communication, while, in keeping with their more serious desire to attain a long-term relationship and even a spouse, lower-class women tend to focus on the potential outcomes of interactions. Similar to some lower-class men, the female lower-class participants believed that a person's educational level reflects their intelligence level and would affect their children's intelligence. May (27, female, lower-class) expressed these concerns:

He must hold at least a bachelor's degree otherwise he can't teach our children. […] I don't want to waste my time on such a hopeless man. (May, 27, female, lower-class).

Middle-class women's preference for better education was related less to child-bearing benefits and more to how an equal partnership could result in a better communication experience. Their concerns focused more on whether the partner was knowledgeable and delivered a good interaction experience on dating apps. Indeed, several female middle-class participants believed that an educated partner could be more polite and respectful to women and so provide more enjoyable company. For example, Rita (22, female, middle class) wanted partners with good education and artistic tastes so that she could learn something from them.

I don't expect to marry anybody on dating apps. I am just enjoying talking to them now, I want to gain new knowledge and experience. Chatting with smart and educated men would light up my soul. (Rita, 22, female, middle class).

Similar to many other female middle-class users, Rita (22 years old, female, middle-class) asserted that individuals with higher levels of education tend to exhibit more courteous behaviour towards women. They make conscious efforts to be attentive listeners and demonstrate respect towards their partners, making communication with them a much more enjoyable experience. Rather than directly propositioning female users for sexual encounters, educated individuals often exhibit greater patience and respect, and invest emotional efforts to win their favour. As an example, Tom (30, male, middle-class) tends to show more empathy towards his partners during the communication process and takes a more indirect approach in his pursuit of sexual intimacy.

I won't ask them for sex shortly after matching them, that is annoying and impolite and unnatural for things to go. […] I will pick an appropriate occasion to propose a sex invitation (Tom, 27, male, middle-class).

In contrast, individuals with little education often tend to employ a more direct and explicit approach when broaching the topic of sex, which is generally regarded as offensive. For instance, Duke (26, male, lower-class) is considered rude for inquiring about sexual matters without employing

subtlety or euphemisms. For example, he would ask: “Hey, how about having sex with me for one night?”

Middle-class women expressed a clear dislike towards this approach. Rita, in particular, conveyed her aversion to engaging in conversations with less educated users, as she tended to associate them with the use of such overt expressions:

> *I feel those with lower education are more likely to be rude and self-centred. They tend to express what they want and care less about my feelings. I feel I am not respected. (Rita, 22, female, middle-class).*

6.6.4. Seeking Partners with Better Income

Middle-class women who, in contrast to lower-class women, enjoy relative economic independence, therefore cared less about their partners’ economic capability when using dating apps. Given their economic stability, middle-class users tended to worry less about the future. Most female middle-class participants showed a willingness to split the dating bills to earn an equal position in romantic relationships. For example, Lily (26, female, middle class) mentioned that she would secretly pay for meals to save her partner's face while maintaining an equal status in their relationship. This suggests that middle-class women prioritize seeking the respect of others over economic

benefits due to their adequate financial security, which aligns with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory (1954).

While economic conditions were also an important criterion for middle-class women when choosing partners, financial stability enabled them to choose younger and less affluent men who could give them a good dating experience. An upper level of needs would be satisfied based on the satisfaction of a lower level of needs, according to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory (1954). Middle-class women typically have their lower-level needs fulfilled, encompassing physiological needs such as food, water, and sufficient sleep, as well as security needs including access to resources and property security. Consequently, they prioritize the fulfilment of higher-level needs, like love/belonging (friendship, sexual intimacy, etc.) and esteem (self-esteem, confidence, respect from others, etc.), through the use of dating apps. Therefore, they prefer individuals who show them respect rather than offering economic benefits.

The data from this study suggests that middle-class women have lower expectations regarding economic benefits from their partners compared to lower-class women. Since they are not reliant on men for financial support, they can emphasize higher-level needs over basic ones when selecting a partner. They value emotional connection and seek partners who can help fulfill their self-actualization needs, prioritizing respect and recognition over material rewards. The survey shows that women with higher income are less

likely than those with lower income to choose partners based on their income. Instead, they are more inclined to seek partners who share similar values and can appreciate and respect them. The interview data supports this, as many middle-class women believe that a partner's income, while an important criterion for choosing a mate, is not a decisive factor. They may even reject potential partners who are wealthy but do not respect women.

So what if you are wealthy? I have a substantial income of my own; I don't depend on you. We are equals, and I need to be respected. (Hellen, 34, female, middle-class)

Moreover, the study indicates that middle-class women exhibit greater confidence in dating poor young men. For example, Hellen (34, female, middle-class) and Lily (28, female, middle-class) both mentioned that they had dated men younger than themselves and were happy to date poor younger men and give them some financial support:

I don't mind if he is younger or older than me. I don't need an old man to pay for me… Sometimes I will give him some money and buy things for him (Lily, 28, female, middle-class).

In contrast, female lower-class users who seek wealthier male partners are more inclined to the evolutionary explanation that women look for men with more material resources to bring up their offspring (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). In

an endorsement of traditional gender views, lower-class female users saw their relationship as a means of improving their living conditions, being concerned about living expenses and expecting their male partners to pay all the household bills:

Surely income is an important criterion to select a partner, otherwise, I have to share a heavy economic burden in the family. My poor family has no financial support, so I have to rely on my husband. (May, 27, female, lower-class).

6.7. The Communication Gap Among Users from Different Social Classes

While dating apps technically facilitate a channel for users from diverse backgrounds to connect and establish relationships, it remains challenging for users to overcome class boundaries and develop long-term and meaningful connections. Many middle-class users, specifically women, encountered challenges when attempting to engage in deep and meaningful communication with partners from lower-class backgrounds due to their contrasting life experiences. As an example, Rita (22, middle-middle-class) perceived a noticeable deficit in terms of shared common sense and compatible hobbies between herself and her lower-class partners. Despite being involved in a seemingly positive relationship with a lower-class individual she met through dating apps for several years, she continued to experience a sense of emotional distance from him.

I can't understand, he is unlike my classmates who grow up in a similar social background. For example, he shared his experience of skipping classes and visiting the net bars to play video games. I was really confused, and not interested at all though he was excited for his story (Rita, 22, female, middle-middle-class).

Rita articulated that she had owned personal computers ever since she started primary school because her family could afford them, which resulted in her inability to resonate with her online partner's enthusiasm for visiting internet cafes to surf the web. None of her companions derived pleasure from visiting internet cafes as they were financially capable of owning personal computers themselves. This perplexity highlights how divergent patterns of daily consumption, shaped by social class, have become a barrier in cross-class communication.

We don't have shared hobbies and life experiences though we are at the same age. I think he is stupid and childish. I feel he also can't understand my jokes. For example, one day shows him a meme, which I found very funny, but he didn't laugh. I feel a little embarrassed. (Rita, 22, female, middle-class).

Rita's experience suggests that communication patterns influenced by social class are apparent in dating apps, resulting in unsatisfactory interactions. Conversely, Lucy (27, female, middle-class) argues that men with higher income levels are more likely to share similar consumption habits with her,

thereby better understanding her preferences. This perspective again aligns with Bourdieu's concept of habitus, which suggests that individuals within the same social position tend to exhibit comparable dispositions in their everyday consumption patterns (1984).

For example, I spend over 2000 yuan on cosmetics every month and buy branded clothing, which seems normal to my friends but may be difficult to explain to those with lower incomes (Lucy, 27, female, middle-class).

The formation of distinct habitus and cultural tendencies, shaped by various class backgrounds, poses a challenge for users from different social classes to establish lasting connections (Bourdieu, 1984). In an effort to alleviate the tension arising from class differences, Jane (22, female, middle-class) consciously opted to form temporary friendships exclusively with dating app partners, aiming to preemptively avoid disappointment due to a perceived lack of shared interests or common ground:

I am upset to find that they cannot understand my feeling if we are living in different environments (Jane, 22, female, middle-class).

On the other hand, lower-class men are more inclined to establish enduring and harmonious relationships with lower-class women instead of middle-class women due to their inclination towards traditional gender norms, which are commonly embraced by lower-class women. Lower-class men often express a

preference for educated women, driven by the desire for offspring with heightened intellectual capabilities. Paradoxically, however, they encounter challenges when interacting with educated women, citing difficulties in managing their perceived traits of assertiveness.

They will argue with you if they believe they are right. That's tiresome. Sometimes they want to decide over big issues, and I feel my role as the key decision-maker is challenged (Dennis, 26, male, lower-class).

Again, in comparison to their middle-class counterparts, lower-class men exhibit a greater adherence to patriarchal values, which may potentially clash with the aspirations of middle-class women who seek gender equality within relationships. The contrasting values held by middle-class women and lower-class men serve as an impediment to the formation of enduring relationships, despite their initial connection through dating apps.

6.8. Conclusion

This chapter is the first study to compare the use of dating apps between the middle and lower classes in China. It incorporates Class theory (Bourdieu, 1984) and Hierarchy of Needs Theory (Maslow, 1954) to analyse the class-shaped and gendered use of dating apps in China. The data suggests that users' habitus and preferences significantly influence how they engage with dating apps, their motives for use, and their partner preferences.

While dating apps provide anonymity for approaching partners, the negative reputation associated with them causes concern among middle-class users regarding their social standing. As a result, they strive to differentiate themselves from the lower class by using niche and new dating apps, avoiding contact with partners perceived to have lowbrow tastes. This gives rise to an 'app hierarchy' based on factors like income, education, motivations, and age of potential users. Furthermore, the study reveals that middle-class users are more motivated to seek casual sexual encounters, whereas their lower-class counterparts are more focused on relationships and business connections. These varying motivations contribute to differences in partner preferences, such as considering past sexual experiences, age, income, and education. Lower-class users tend to have stricter criteria when selecting potential partners on dating apps. These differences hinder the establishment of long-term or close relationships with partners from different social classes, despite the opportunities provided by dating apps. Instead, class-based relationships are perpetuated and reinforced through dating app usage, as individuals feel more comfortable connecting with partners from similar backgrounds.

The next chapter will further develop these findings to contend that traditional family values, as well as the construction of marriage and relationships in Chinese society, undergo adaptation and negotiation within the digital confines of online dating apps.

Chapter Seven: Seeking Marriage Partners to Fulfil Filial Piety

7.1. Introduction

After examining preferences and hierarchies largely connected to sexual activity in Chapter Six and Chapter Seven, this chapter moves on to discuss the changing construction of marriage and relationships in Chinese society and how this is both adapted and negotiated within the online digital space offered by dating apps. The chapter first outlines the traditional constructions of dating and marriage in China, with particular emphasis upon the importance of parents and wider families within such arrangements. The chapter illustrates how dating apps in China now occupy the matchmaking role played by parents and wider families who would traditionally be heavily involved in locating a suitable partner for younger generations. This adaptation occurs through users deploying the apps to seek marriage partners in order to satisfy their parents, with the apps operating as a digital extension of continued parental involvement when selecting a partner who adheres to parents' preferences. Furthermore, this study demonstrates how dating apps have evolved into a platform where users negotiate traditional values like filial piety and customary practices such as betrothal gifts. This indicates a clash

between conventional expectations and modern relationships between men and women.

7.2. Traditional Constructions of Dating and Marriage in China

In China, marriage is seen as essential for fulfilling the familial duty of having children, a key aspect of 'filial piety.' Filial piety emphasizes collective happiness and places less emphasis on individualistic values compared to Euro-American countries. It encompasses two meanings: *xiao* and *jing* (Hu & Scott, 2016). *Xiao* entails the financial support of elderly parents (Chan & Tan, 2004), as social security systems are often inadequate. This highlights the importance of having children, particularly male children, who are expected to take on the responsibility of caring for aging parents. *Jing* involves showing respect and obedience to parents, with Confucianism advocating for children to please their parents regardless of age (Hu & Scott, 2016). Singleness carries a social stigma (Lin, 2014; Qi, 2014) as it contradicts traditional values of filial piety, and failure to marry and have children is seen as an offense to parents. Seeking marriage partners becomes an obligation influenced by cultural expectations rooted in *xiao* and *jing.*

Indeed, marriage in China has traditionally been more a union of two families than that of two independent individuals (Pan, 2005). This construction continues today, as many young adults remain economically dependent upon their families for support, particularly for their wedding expenses and for

assistance with the economic pressures and childcare after the birth of their children. Traditional patrilocality is also still prevalent in China and most married couples reside with their husbands' families after marriage. Parental approval of the union is therefore highly significant and is important to achieving family harmony (Gruijters & Ermisch, 2019). The legacy of the one-child policy (active from the years 1980 to 2015) also means that the only child is very used to having the full support and resources of their parents, so is eager to retain this and can fear losing the favour of their parents if they do not follow the advice in terms of selecting partners.

Furthermore, unlike Euro-Americans, who tend to see marriage as a private issue and respect others' marriage choices, Chinese people, especially the older generation, are more interested in asking about others' marriage status and urging young adults to get married. Compared with the guilt cultures of individualist societies, collectivist societies are shame cultures, in which if one member of a group disobeys the social rules, every member of this group would feel ashamed (Hofstede et al., 2010). In Chinese collective culture, a person's stigma could ruin a whole family as it is believed that negativity (bad luck, deviance and even death) is contagious and individuals are bound to their families (Yang & Kleinman, 2008). The stigmatized group would suffer from social distancing and rejection and would lose their social capital (Yang & Kleinman, 2008).

Historically, traditional forms of blind dating would involve meetings arranged by families and/or parents (Kennedy, 2016). Parents felt obligated to find a suitable partner for their adult children and many still do today (Zhang & Sun, 2014; Zavoretti, 2016). In major cities, some parents gather in the 'dating corner', such as Shanghai's People's Park, in the hope of finding their future in-laws (Judy, 2016). Blind dating events are still popular among single people looking for their future spouse in big cities, especially in new Tier 1 and Tier 2 cities. Studies suggest that over 60 per cent of Chinese people aged 22 to 35 have participated in blind dating (Thomala, 2019c).

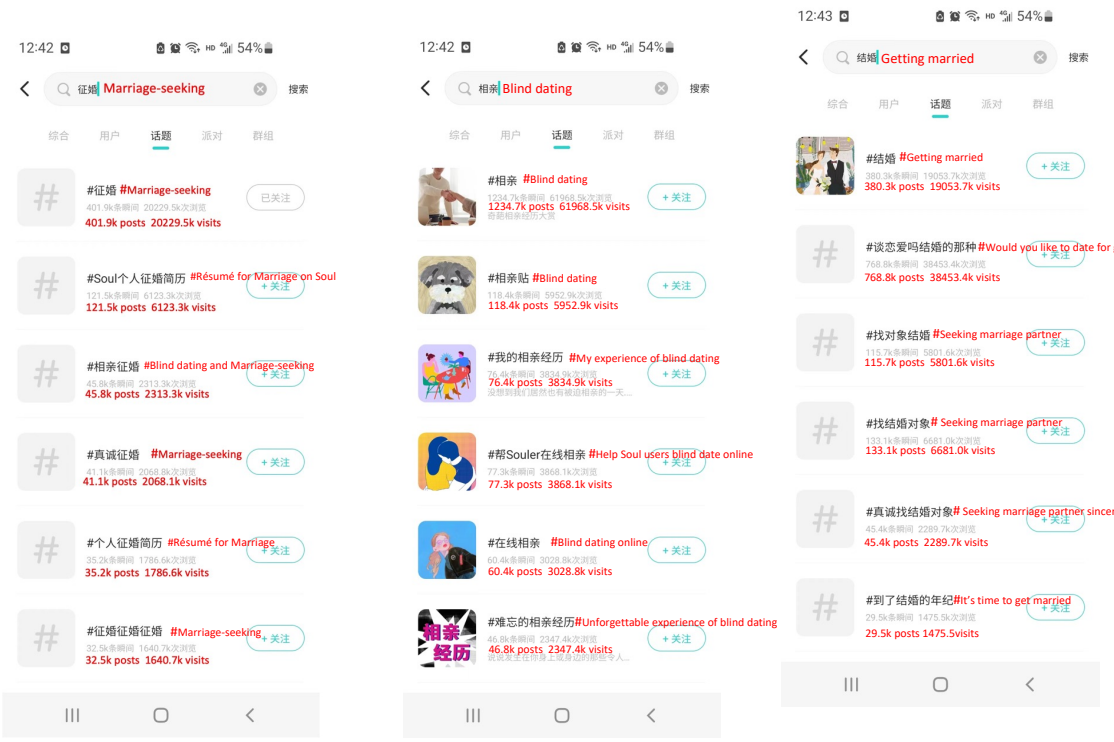
Family-motivated tactics are evidently not entirely appropriate and applicable to the contemporary context of the modern urban city, with one recent report claiming that the number of Chinese single adults reached 200 million in 2017 ("In 2017, the top 10 cities", 2017). Working overtime, frequent working trips and limited social circles are all considered to be serious barriers for Chinese adults seeking and maintaining romantic relationships (*Boss Zhipin*, 2018). For such young adults, particularly post-95 adults (those born after 1995), online dating is a much more efficient way to get a date and find a marriage partner rather than through parents ("Love Report", 2019).

7.3. Blind Dating on Dating Apps

This study revealed that dating apps are used by single individuals in China to efficiently find a spouse and fulfil their parents' expectations. Consequently,

dating apps have assimilated and evolved as a substitute for 'blind dating', a conventional practice in which families arrange marriages between two individuals (Kennedy, 2016). Blind dating on dating apps differs from previous times as the dates are now arranged by users themselves, yet there are still many similarities with this previous parent-led practice. Users posted millions of advertisements recruiting marriage partners on *Soul* and actively engaged in topics related to blind dating and marriage seeking. Figure 7.3.1 (screenshots taken on 7 March 2023) indicates how such topics are very popular among *Soul* users with the number of posts and visits increasing from 1023 on 13 November 2022 to 824926 on 7 March 2023. Under these topics, users introduce themselves, including age, height, weight, location, personality, hobbies, marriage status, families, occupation, education, income, *hukou* and assets, and also list their requirements for partners, so improving the efficiency of seeking a spouse. This manner of seeking blind dating and their requirements for potential candidates is very similar to the traditional dating events arranged by parents (Huang, 2023).

Figure 7.3.1. Example of Seeking Blind Dating on Soul



While dating apps remain stigmatized in China, they also provide a larger dating pool and can reduce the discomfort of approaching strangers. This finding contradicts Chan's (2019) observation that users of the *Momo* app strongly dislike blind dating. In Chan's study, *Momo* users expressed a strong rejection of traditional dating sites and events due to their explicit and straightforward nature, preferring *Momo* because it allows for multiple goals. The differing results may be due to the age differences among the user bases of *Momo, Tantan,* and *Soul. Momo* users are primarily born between 1970 and 1989 (Statista, 2022c), while *Tantan* users are mostly born between 1980 and 1989 (Statista, 2022b), and *Soul* users are predominantly born after the 1990s (Statista, 2022a). As the majority of *Momo* users are not currently in the age range where marriage is typically prioritized, their main interest on the

platform may not be seeking marital partners, but rather pursuing other forms of gratification.

Indeed, this study provides support for the idea that Chinese dating apps offer users various gratifications, such as engaging in conversations with strangers, making new friends, venting about current relationships, and reading about others' life stories. Nevertheless, this study suggests that while seeking personal satisfaction on dating apps, users may also experience significant pressure to find a spouse within the wider societal context. Interestingly, both *Soul* and *Tantan* users demonstrated a strong enthusiasm for pursuing marriage in order to meet these social expectations. Consequently, they tended to view blind dating arranged through dating apps in a more positive manner. For instance, a *Soul* user expressed appreciation for blind dating, as they believed it saved a lot of time ('Sea wind', male, posted on *Soul* #Seek marriage partner in Xi'an #Blind dating and seeking marriage).

7.3.1. Responding to Parental Pressure

Such findings indicate how family traditions and filial obligations remain important motivations for users seeking spouses on dating apps. While dating apps allow users to distance themselves from their families' interference in blind dating, this study reveals that users are still significantly influenced by their parents' expectations, particularly with regards to marriage and siring children. Indeed, many users indicated how their use of dating apps was

because they felt forced or urged by their parents to seek marriage partners. 32-year-old Joe (male) is a typical example of a Chinese adult using dating apps to seek marriage partners because of pressure to get married. His parents and old grandmother urged him to seek a spouse and sire children every time they met. Joe expressed very contradictory feelings about his situation. While he did enjoy the personal freedom of being single, he felt guilty about not following social and family expectations to get married:

> You know, they are old [sigh], I can't indulge myself so much, that would be too selfish…That's why I try dating apps to seek a spouse (Joe, male, 32).

Joe's compromise and use of the apps for this reason highlights how the traditional virtue of filial piety still exerts a significant impact upon young adults' life choices in China. Being single is regarded as "selfish" and "indulgent", which causes young single adults to feel guilty and succumb to familial pressure to seek a partner.

Like Joe, many other users stated that they faced great pressure to seek partners, again indicating how social pressure to get married is an important motivation behind the use of dating apps in China. Many *Soul* users were pulled between seeking ideal lovers and getting married to satisfy their parents. Unlike Americans who tend to consider love as an important reason for marriage (Pew Research Centre, 2013), having a marriage based on love

seemed to be considered a luxury for most Chinese users of dating apps and was outweighed by the importance of pleasing parents and family. In the topic #seeking marriage, posts show that the desire to find marriage partners is not based upon users' own needs, but on the desire to satisfy parents:

I would be considered unfilial for not getting married, no matter how hard I work to please my parents. They want me to get married only! (Linlin, female, posted on Soul #seeking marriage).

Users generally expressed dissatisfaction with compromising and conforming to their parents' desires. However, they also internalized the sense of obligation towards their family, which resulted in them feeling guilty for not getting married and having children at the "right age." The concept of getting married at the "right age" (typically before turning 30) held significant importance within their extended family. Participants were concerned that failing to meet this expectation would lead to numerous conflicts with their parents and older relatives, who were worried about and viewed singledom among the younger generation as shameful. These users eventually chose to get married, largely due to the wider pressure from their parents to have children. This seemed especially true for female users:

I have not yet found anyone who crushed me, but I need to get married because I am over 30, an age that is considered to have children ('Crazy cat', female, posted on Soul #urging for marriage).

The stigma of being single was also part of a wider collective force on young adults, who sought to get married to protect the reputation of their whole family or community. For example, 'Leaf' (female user) even received pressure from her parents' neighbours:

My parents feel a sense losing face (lian) for my being single and refuse to go out of their apartment for fear of being asked by their neighbours: How old is your daughter? Does your daughter get married? Why doesn't she get married? ('Leaf', female, posted on Soul #urging for marriage).

Family traditions and filial obligations played a significant role in contributing to this overall pressure. Numerous individuals highlighted the pressure they faced during family reunions, where distant relatives would inquire about their marital status, urging them to get married soon. These traditional gatherings provided an opportunity for elderly relatives to gather and pose personal questions to young adults, including inquiries about their income, savings, age, and marital status. Online discussions and expressions of anxiety regarding marriage often included references to terms like "Spring Festival" and "family union":

…I don't want to be single to meet my parents and relatives at the end of the year [cry]. ('Wait one more moment', male, posted on Soul #seeking marriage partner).

I am so upset! I promised my parents I would return home with my boyfriend at the Spring Festival of 2022… They would kill me if I came back alone. SOS ('Be my sun', female, posted on Soul #urging for marriage).

7.3.2. Dating Apps as Facilitating *Shanhun*

The intensity of such familial pressure leads many young Chinese adults to seek *shanhun* (flash marriages), which involves getting married shortly after a couple's first interaction. Compared to falling in love with someone and progressing step by step, getting married without romance or love is considered more practical and efficient.

Dating apps are a particularly useful tool in facilitating *shanhun*, and there is strong evidence to suggest that these technologies are being used for this purpose. Dating apps enable fast communication between strangers and provide access to a large pool of potential partners, both of which can help users find marriage partners quickly. Users seeking *shanhun* prioritize the pragmatic functions of finding someone who can help them alleviate family pressure. They prioritize the need to please their families and adhere to filial piety. For instance, they expect their partners to fulfill the responsibilities of being qualified sons/daughters-in-law or mothers/fathers.

Certainly, *shanhun* is a hot topic on Soul, with over 240,000 posts and 12 million visits. The public sections of dating apps display advertisements that

are visible to all users, attracting those who share the same objectives. Some users even express their weariness of romantic relationships and advocate for immediately getting married as a more reliable option for couples. These users appear eager and impatient, expressing a strong desire to get married as soon as possible. They often emphasize the need to fulfill their parents' expectations. Instead of viewing marriage as a romantic relationship, many users state that they want to obtain a marriage certificate quickly or find someone to spend the Spring Festival with in order to appease and satisfy their parents and relatives.

Perhaps due to the value placed on having sons and the imbalanced sex ratio in China, male users show a greater eagerness to pursue *shanhun*. The number of posts on this topic by male users significantly exceeds those by female users. These male users are generally younger and seem to face greater pressure than females to get married. They do not have strict criteria for a partner other than the requirement to meet their family's expectations (in contrast to females who have higher expectations for their partners, as discussed in Chapter Six). For instance:

I am hoping to find someone to marry, the sooner the better. […] I don't have many requirements for you if you are female, alive, and filial and you can come with me to my home at the end of the year ('well-dressed tiger', male, posted on Soul #urging for Marriage).

Further highlighting the pressures from families and the pragmatic function of dating apps in this context, some male users even posted that they want to rent a girlfriend to please their parents on their birthdays. Some users suggested acting as each other's partners at their family reunions to release the pressure of meeting their relatives.

7.4. Parental Involvement in Selecting a Partner on Dating Apps

While dating apps can enable users to seek any partner they like, the need to please parents and avoid breaking parental constraints remains paramount and strongly influences the use of the apps in China. Traditional class-bound orientation and parent-led marriages are still widely adopted when selecting partners in China, and the potential independence offered by dating apps does not displace this. Unlike Americans who tend to consider love as an important reason for marriage (Pew Research Centre, 2013), most Chinese people tend to prioritize their parents' expectations over their marriage decision. This study highlights how dating app users' preferences for potential partners are still largely based on their parents' expectations, so conforming to and reaffirming *Jing* culture which expects people to show respect for and obedience to their parents (Hu & Scott, 2016). The need to please parents was very evident in the data collected for this study. For example, a female user expressed her fear of upsetting her parents in choosing partners and potentially losing their support:

My parents promised to raise my children if I could follow their wishes, so I must make sure my parents are satisfied (with my boyfriend) otherwise they might not be happy to help me… ("meeting you", female, posted on Soul).

Likewise, in a poll on Tantan over 189 thousand users voted that they would split up if their parents rejected their partners (Tantan #Would you maintain your romantic relationship if your parents object to it?) and around half of Tantan users who voted indicated that they would need to obtain their parents' approval to get married (Tantan #Do you need to obtain parents' approval to get married?).

Parental approval was also particularly important when choosing a future spouse. Many participants in this study claimed that a happy marriage could not occur without their parent's approval, believing that their parents' advice when choosing a spouse was valuable and correct. Female users seemed particularly keen to follow their parents' advice when using dating apps to find a spouse, though several male interviewees also shared this view. Leon (male, 26) stated that he would never fall in love with a girl his family disliked, explaining that his criteria for a desired partner were very much in line with that of his parents.

It is impossible for me to love and marry a girl that is against my parents' wishes. I wish my parents to be happy with my marriage. Also, my expectation

for my partner is developed in the family education, which means there would be no conflicts in our expectations for my partner (Leon, male, 26).

Similar to traditional blind dating, where parents would pre-screen potential candidates, users of dating apps choose marriage partners based on their parents' requirements. This trend is evident in both online discussions and interviews conducted for this study. Several users explained that they are motivated to improve the quality of their descendants specifically to please their parents. Like traditional dating events, parents' expectations are frequently shown in users' posts seeking blind dating or marriage partners, with sentences such as "my mom told me to seek…", "my father said he preferred…", and "my father would reject…" This study identified three aspects that are frequently mentioned in the requirements associated with parents' expectations: height, residence and *hukou* (household registration), and adherence to filial piety.

7.4.1. Height

While good looks seem appealing to all users, parents' desires place more emphasis on the height of the potential sons/daughters-in-law. Users often mention that they are seeking female partners over 160 centimetres in height and male partners over 175 centimetres in height in their dating app profiles. Some users expressed that they did not care about their partners' height, but they would prefer tall girls because of their parents' preferences.

[…]I hope you have a height of over 160 cm. My families are all tall, and my dad hopes I can find someone relatively taller so that you don't have any pressure (Yuhangzhao, male, posted on Soul #urging for Marriage).

7.4.2. Residence and *Hukou*

The distance between the potential couple's family is another consideration evident on dating apps and again is heavily related to parental desires and expectations. Chinese users indicate that the distance of their potential partners' family residence place and/or birthplace is an important factor when seeking and choosing candidates. In addition to Yin's (2010) observation that parents hope their daughters can marry nearby to take care of them in their old age, the study identifies numerous reasons why Chinese individuals are more inclined to marry locally. These reasons include potential cultural conflicts and misunderstandings, as well as variations in customs and rituals practiced in different regions, particularly those associated with family events and traditions such as weddings and betrothal gifts. Language is also considered, with some users not interested in partners who cannot speak the local dialect of their parents:

I would say "no" to girls who are not from Putian city because my parents can speak Putian dialects only. I don't expect you to have communication problems (Shangdemingzhi, male, posted on Soul #seeking blind dating).

On the other hand, engaging in a cross-region marriage eliminates the possibility of receiving support from the wife's own family, leading to immense pressure and a sense of isolation within her husband's extended family. In China, it is customary for newlywed couples to live with the husband's family, which typically includes his parents and unmarried siblings. The wife is expected to navigate the intricate dynamics and relationships within her husband's family. To maintain stronger ties with their original families and fulfil their parents' future needs, female individuals often express a preference for a specific location, emphasizing the importance of prioritizing their parents' expectations and requirements in their search for a partner. As one female user stated:

I accept friend requests from Chongqing province only because my father does not allow me to marry someone far away from my parents' place (Quyin, female, posted Soul).

Likewise, a female interviewee, an only child from Zhejiang province also mentioned that their parents won't let her marry outside of Zhejiang to stay connected with her after her marriage.

They said they would prefer to buy me an apartment around my hometown so they can visit me easily. So, I set the distance (on Tantan) strictly to avoid contacting people outside of my residence province. (Jane, 22, female).

In addition to geographical distance, parental preferences also play a role in shaping an individual's inclination towards seeking a partner with a higher social status, such as someone with a Shanghai *hukou*. Candidates from well-developed cities like Shanghai and Beijing are perceived as more desirable by potential partners on dating apps, enjoying a distinct advantage. Moreover, these users express that their preference for a partner with a local *hukou* stems from the desire to gain parental approval:

I expect my partner to be a local Shanghainese, otherwise, my parents would not approve (of our relationship). Or you must be extraordinarily outstanding and remarkable to compensate for the weakness. My parents would be very picky with the migrants (waidiren) (Lingxiu, male, Shanghai, posted on Soul #seeking Shanghainese blind dates).

Some users even create topics such as #Local 310 Shanghainese, which has accumulated 27 thousand posts and received over 1 million visits. The term "310" refers to the first three digits of the Shanghai ID card, indicating that the individual was born in Shanghai and is known as an old Shanghainese. This numerical designation serves to differentiate the old Shanghainese from the new Shanghainese, who are migrants that have obtained Shanghai *hukou*. According to Shanghai's household policy, the parents of 310 Shanghainese must also be Shanghainese, implying that these individuals have inherited resources from the previous generation, making them socially superior to their migrant counterparts. In order to preserve their resources and maintain their

social status, they tend to prefer marrying other 310 Shanghainese. This preference is further reinforced when using dating apps to seek potential spouses, as 310 Shanghainese often specify that they are exclusively seeking partners who are also 310 Shanghainese:

I can't accept friend requests from non-310 Shanghainese, though I don't discriminate against you of your birthplace (Liulian, female, posted on Soul #Local 310 Shanghainese).

7.4.3. Filial Piety

Reflecting the importance placed upon parental wellbeing, both male and female users consider filial piety as an important personal trait in terms of a qualified partner. In advertisements for marriage partners, users frequently mention that they require this quality in their partners. The presentation of filial piety on a user's profile can therefore attract potential partners. For example, a male *Tantan* user called 'a second-hand man' posted short videos about washing his old mother's feet every day to demonstrate his filial piety. While some users suspect that he was performing to attract attention, his posts also received hundreds of likes and many positive comments.

Given the prevailing trend of married women living with their husbands' families, the importance of finding a partner with strong filial piety is particularly emphasized in men's preferences. This desire primarily aims to

minimize potential conflicts between the wives and their in-laws. A poll conducted by a female user named "Listen to the sea" reveals that 75% of male users on *Soul* voted in favour of marrying a woman who is filial and thrifty rather than one who is beautiful. For example:

I am the only son in my family, my parents experienced great hardship to bring me up and they invested a lot in my education. I expect you to be filial and submissive to my parents… (Chengshi, male, posted on Soul)

My requirements for a wife are rather simple: be filial to my parents and take good care of the children ('A good man', male, posted on Soul).

In response to the call of filial piety and to gain more favour on dating apps, some female users would portray themselves as individuals who value filial piety in their posts seeking marriage partners. For instance, Zhihua (female *Soul* user) emphasized her filial nature in her post.

My monthly income is 3300 yuan, and I transferred 1000 yuan to my mom and buy her gifts for 300 yuan… (Zhihua, female, posted on Soul #Seeking marriage partner).

This post received 115 comments, all of which were positive and seemingly from male users. These comments highlight how the portrayal of a dutiful and filial woman aligns with the desires and expectations of male users for a wife.

Most male participants expressed their wishes to know and marry her in the comments.

It is hard to encounter such a filial and considerate girl now! I am sure you would be a good wife and mother if we got married. Please let us register for marriage… ('Refuse', male, commenting on Zhihua's post on Soul).

7.5. Negotiating the Wider Context of Traditional Duties and Customs

Such analysis indicates how dating apps largely adhere to and function to uphold wider traditional structures of marriage and relationships in contemporary China. However, evidence from this project also suggests that the apps have become a site upon which users can debate and discuss this traditional system of matchmaking and its social pressures as well as the wider cultural changes taking place in China today. In particular, dating apps offer an open and anonymous platform to discuss marriage-related topics for users who have become concerned about their own personal happiness and believe this should be accommodated. Such users deploy the apps as a platform to re-examine the function of traditional customs within modern relationships. The apps, therefore, provide a virtual space for both male and female users to critique and register their dissatisfaction with the wider social constructions that imbue relationships and marriage in China.

7.5.1. Females' Rejection of the Traditional Role of Daughter-in-law

The digital space as a site of negotiation and critique is particularly evident in female attitudes towards filial piety. Indeed, it suggests that there is a significant difference in attitudes between men and women towards such traditional customs and relationships. As women were more likely to suffer, considering they had to live with and adjust to a new family and handle the conflicts that arise between their parents-in-law and themselves, female users seemed considerably inclined to decline potential partners whose parents were excessively involved in their marriage. For instance, many female users strongly criticized the previously quoted post in which the user sought a filial and submissive woman, asserting that a woman has her own will and should reject the parents-in-law's unreasonable requests.

You should take good care of your parents because they brought you up, but your wife has no duty to do the same thing. You can never ask her to follow your parents just because you want her to be filial, that's unfair and unrealistic ('Flying fish', female, commenting Chengshi's post on Soul).

In contrast to males' preference for obedient daughters-in-law who fulfil their duties towards their parents, females express strong disapproval towards *yuxiao* (foolish filial piety, or unquestioning obedience to parents) and *mabaonan* (mommy's boy, a man who continues to heed his mother's advice even after marriage). Instead, they strive for an independent life away from

their parents. Numerous married women users have shared their unhappy encounters with their in-laws when their husbands prioritized supporting their own parents. These women caution other young women against marrying into such families:

You must know more about his family before marrying him. The troublesome parents-in-law could be an unpredictable bomb that ruins your marriage at any time…Stay away mommy's boy to save your life! (Ruyili, female, posted on Soul #the conflict between the wife and her mother-in-law).

Some female users also claimed that they would never reside with their parents-in-law to reduce their interference, though such views incur criticism from male users, claiming that these females are unfilial and selfish:

Everyone will get old and rely on their adult children, how do you feel if they refuse to stay with you when you are too old to follow their pace? (Lihao, male, posted on Soul).

7.5.2. Males' Rejection of Traditional Marriage Custom

Betrothal gift, or bride price, has become a highly debated topic on Chinese dating apps, attracting millions of visits and discussions on *Soul*. In accordance with local Chinese traditions, betrothal gifts refer to the monetary and material offerings presented by the groom's family to the bride's family when

they intend to marry. The quantity and purpose of these gifts may vary depending on regional customs and the expectations of the bride's parents regarding their prospective son-in-law. However, failed negotiations over betrothal gifts have been known to result in the termination of relationships.

On the apps, betrothal gifts become a vehicle through which users debate traditional and modern customs and constructions of gender. In particular, such discussions revolve around the value that men and women bring to a relationship and how this should and should not change in the contemporary context. The practice itself holds very different meanings and repercussions for men and women, and attitudes reflect this difference. Close analysis suggests that men want a 'traditional' wife who encompasses traditional forms of femininity but does not want to observe the corresponding traditional customs such as betrothal gifts. Likewise, women want a 'modern' relationship but still want their partners to observe these traditional customs.

For instance, on the *Tantan* topic #Will you *luohun* (naked marriage, marrying without any betrothal gifts or material assets), most men choose "yes" while most women choose "no". The continuing importance of this traditional practice to women can be attributed to their increased powerlessness after they enter marriage in a patriarchal context. For women, acquiring assets before entering a marriage could bring a sense of security, particularly if the couple experienced financial hardship in the future.

For men however, observing such traditional customs without the accompanying traditional forms of female subordination seems unfair. Such attitudes reflected wider male frustration at the imbalanced sex ratio in China today, a situation that makes seeking wives very competitive and results in many men being unable to afford to get married in China. As a traditional custom, male users wanted betrothal gifts to be accompanied by traditional female duties such as traditional patriarchal constructions of ideal femininity coupled with the correct family background and attitudes to their in-laws. Male users, therefore, tended to attack female users who expected expensive betrothal gifts but seemingly did not mention their own traditional qualities.

For example, an anonymous female *Soul* user expressed she expect her bridegroom to offer 100000-200000 yuan in cash, a car worth 100000-200000 yuan, and an apartment worth 500000 yuan on her post. This post got severe attacks from male users. For example:

You must be so precious to be worth so much money! Are you a virgin? Are you beautiful? Are you from a decent family? Are you educated and elegant? Are you a good daughter-in-law, a good mother, and a good wife?

(Shunnichengzhang, male, posted on Soul)

The comment received significant support, especially from male users. A total of 115 male users "liked" his comment, with some followers portraying the female poster as a sex worker by making comments like "one night for 500

yuan" or "you must work in a KTV (karaoke hall where there are sex workers)." Male users also expressed discontent with the concept of bride price, perceiving it as unjust and advocating for gender equality. They argued that men should be treated equally to women. Numerous male users contended that they make equal contributions to their families, a viewpoint widely endorsed by other men. This perspective is often utilized to negotiate the bride price.

It is unfair that you ask for the bride's price only. If I agreed to offer what you asked, would your family offer a similar amount of assets? (Feihuihui, male, posted on Soul # betrothal gifts)

However, women have highlighted that the bride price serves as a means of compensation for the interruption their careers face due to childbirth, an experience that their male counterparts do not undergo.

I am OK with offering dowry as long as you can carry babies and bear the career break for having babies and taking care of them. If I don't have to give birth to your children, my life would be as easy as yours ('Smile', female, commenting Feihuihui's post on Soul).

The term "your children" denotes the perception of women making long-lasting, unequal contributions to the family. In China, having children is seen as the fulfilment of a crucial duty of filial piety towards the husband's family

rather than the wife's family. Traditionally, sons are preferred as they can carry on the family name and fulfil filial piety (Shen, 2016; Jin, 2011; Tang, Ma, & Jin, 2009), while daughters are considered "outsiders" since they would give birth to children with different surnames. An old saying, "A married daughter is like water poured out," implies that families do not expect daughters to fulfil filial piety once they get married. Consequently, females tend to believe that giving birth primarily benefits their husbands and in-laws. However, male users refute this perspective, asserting that giving birth is a joint responsibility for both husband and wife. They argue that both families should offer financial support to the new family.

Further illustrating how dating apps serve as platforms for discussions and negotiations on marriage and filial duty, it is important to observe the intense debates surrounding the conflicts between gender roles and betrothal gifts. Interestingly, some men have proposed the concept of "*ruzhui*" (marrying into the wife's family) and have expressed agreement to have their children adopt their wives' surnames. Others proposed "*liangtouhun*" referring to a situation where both families offer financial support, and this couple has two children, with each family giving their surnames. These two methods to alleviate economic pressure are subject to controversy. Men who choose "*ruzhui*" and fail to pass on their own family name may be considered incapable and less masculine, diminishing their value in the marriage market. Though "*liangtouhun*" seems to benefit both families by preserving their surnames, conflicts arise over the desired sex of the babies, with both families wanting

male heirs. Additionally, "*liangtouhun*" forces the wife to have two children. Female users express dissatisfaction with these solutions, condemning men seeking "*ruzhui*" or "*liangtouhun*" as exploiting women's bodies to pass on their genes without any cost. Most female users insist that men should compensate for the disruption in women's careers caused by childbearing, such as through betrothal gifts. While many male users promise to take responsibility for childcare and share household chores with their wives, female users believe men will renege on their promises once they "own" the wife.

Males' words are the least reliable. Those married without the betrothal gifts did not have a happy marriage…You must ask for the bride price to earn your value, so they won't treat you as cheap as a piece of old rag once they 'own' you. (Qiananfei, female, posted on Soul # betrothal gifts)

"Own" implies that women are still treated as objects in relationships, while using the metaphor "old rag" to describe a wife further emphasizes the passive and disadvantaged position of wives in marriage. As stated by this user, the practice of giving high betrothal gifts would raise the cost of acquiring a wife, making husbands less inclined to divorce or change their wives. This user's opinion garnered hundreds of likes, with many female users expressing agreement and adding that the betrothal gifts serve to uphold the dignity of both the wife and her family of origin.

If you don't ask for the bride price, they would look down on you and won't cherish you because you are cheap or free. They would ignore your efforts for the family and show no respect to your family of origin (Tianyi, female, posted on Soul # betrothal gifts)

Another significant dispute revolves around the use of betrothal gifts. Although many male individuals agree to provide betrothal gifts in order to get married, they insist that the money should be allocated towards their new family rather than the bride's family of origin, particularly her brothers. In many regions, betrothal gifts are regarded as the bride's assets, and her parents return them to her after the wedding. However, in some cases, the bride's parents retain the betrothal gifts and spend them on their sons, which angers the grooms. The parents' strong preference for sons may label their daughters as *fudimo*, an unwelcome category of partner. *Fudimo* refers to the older sister who unconditionally aids her younger brother due to the influence of her original family. This concept is related to filial piety and suggests that women are motivated to support their parents by assisting their brothers, as the latter are tasked with carrying on the family name. In families with multiple children, parents exert the most effort to support their sons and educate their elder daughters to aid their younger brothers. Marrying a *fudimo* entails the husband assuming the responsibility of helping his brother-in-law, thereby adding to his financial and emotional burdens. Some male individuals attribute failed marriages to *fudimo*, while many male users caution against considering *fudimo* when seeking potential partners.

… I don't want fudimo. I expect you to focus on our own family rather than the family of origin… ('Zhihua', male, posted on Soul #Fudimo #Seeking marriage partner).

Indeed, some users even posted about how they don't want more sons in their families because they can't afford the houses and betrothal gifts to help their sons to get married.

7.6. Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how dating apps are pragmatically used by contemporary Chinese users as a complementary channel for traditional blind dating to fulfil the social expectations of "getting married at the right age". This supports my central argument that dating apps reflect and perpetuate filial cultures in China. However, the chapter has also outlined how users frequently use the apps to discuss wider social issues connected to family conflicts such as *fudimo*, *mabaonan*, and betrothal gifts, so highlighting how the apps offer a digital space within which to discuss and reassess the traditional values associated with marriage and relationships in China. The research shows that users continue these traditional beliefs about gender roles, with females expected to be subordinate to their husbands and devote more time and resources to their families. The apps, therefore, act as a platform for perpetuating such traditional beliefs.

Building Chapter 6 and Chapter 8, the next chapter will extend to illustrate how dating apps challenge traditional dating and marriage in China.

Chapter Eight: Challenges to Traditional Views on Dating and Marriage in China

8.1. Introduction

This chapter explores the potential of using dating apps to subvert traditional gender roles and challenge conventional views on dating and marriage. It highlights how these apps provide women with an opportunity to challenge and undermine male-dominated relationships while also fulfilling their sexual desires. Additionally, it suggests that dating apps enable users to question the concept of filial piety when it comes to forming a marriage. Furthermore, the chapter illustrates how dating apps challenge traditional perspectives on divorce by encouraging users to prioritize their own happiness instead of remaining in an unhappy marriage for the sake of children or parents.

8.2. Challenges to Traditional Gender Roles

This research examines how dating apps in China typically uphold and reinforce patriarchal ideologies surrounding relationships and sexuality. As highlighted in Chapter Six, the patriarchal nature of these apps becomes

apparent through their usage patterns and the specific conventions embedded within the technology. Only a small fraction of users demonstrated awareness of the amplified opportunities and potential for subversion provided by dating apps, and an even smaller proportion sought to employ the technology as a means of challenging broader patriarchal constructs. In fact, these behaviours appeared to be anomalies rather than prevailing patterns, exerting minimal influence on the overall state of gender inequality in China and lacking widespread occurrence within the apps. However, it is crucial to recognize that certain Chinese women do indeed leverage the opportunities provided by dating apps to subvert and challenge male-dominated relationships while fulfilling their own sexual desires.

For instance, dating apps can offer female users supplementary avenues to acquire knowledge about sexual matters and refine their flirting skills. In the context of China, where sex remains a cultural taboo and is not typically addressed in formal education, the anonymity afforded by dating apps enables both men and women to engage in discussions about sex and exchange opinions without risking damage to their personal reputations within the sexually conservative climate of the country. Indeed, certain female users have expressed that dating apps provide them with a platform to openly discuss sexual topics with strangers, without incurring any significant social consequences. One example is Sheena (19, female), who recounted how a classmate utilized dating apps to delve into sexual exploration through online flirtation. This anecdote highlights the enjoyment her friend found in the

ability to explore and engage in "new things" within a society that otherwise imposes restrictions on such behaviour for women.

Nobody knows who I am. We are safe to take about sex on Tantan. I am also curious about men, and I do want to know more about their thoughts about 'that'. Hahaha, especially when I am talking to a handsome man (Sheena, 19, female).

Additionally, dating apps empower women to take the initiative, flirt, and enhance their communication skills without relying solely on men to make initial contact. For instance, Rita (22, female) shared her experience of how using a dating app like *Soul* helped her overcome her shyness when approaching strangers. Through the anonymity provided by the app, she felt liberated from the fear of judgment or rejection, enabling her to express herself more confidently and take a proactive approach in initiating conversations.

I don't need to worry about anything on dating apps, you know, I don't care about them at all. They can't see me. I can cut the line at any time I wish. […] I am shy and inferior in real life but feel more confident and active on dating apps (Rita, 22, female).

Dating apps have also provided a platform for women to acknowledge and explore their sexual desires, instead of suppressing this aspect of their lives.

These apps offer a secret means for female users to seek casual sexual encounters. While initially, many female participants may deny that they were using dating apps specifically for casual sex, it is evident that for many, it becomes a convenient option they are glad to have available.

Many female users find the ability to objectify men, rather than passively enduring objectification themselves, to be a significantly empowering position. While some female participants, such as Sheena (19, female), voiced their dissatisfaction with being judged solely based on their appearance on dating apps, there were also other female participants who expressed enthusiasm in viewing and evaluating men's photos. Additionally, these participants found pleasure in exchanging these photos with their close female friends.

I often share the picture of handsome guys and discuss their tastes in attire with my roommates. I think Tantan can reduce my fear of men because I can also judge them on the apps (Jane, female, 22).

Some male users struggled with the empowered position women held on dating apps, expressing concerns about their perceived unequal status in relationships and the impact these apps had on female users, leading to behaviour they characterized as capricious and bossy. Mike (26, male), for instance, found it challenging to communicate with potential partners on dating apps due to his lack of experience interacting with assertive women who were not traditionally passive:

You know, some female users are so ignorant and insist that you can't disagree with them. I can't bear it (Mike, 26, male).

Moreover, these apps have empowered women by granting them greater agency in their relationships, enabling them to make autonomous decisions without being encumbered by societal moral judgments. In contrast to conventional one-on-one dating methods, dating apps facilitate the capacity for each user to engage with a multitude of partners simultaneously, extending the potential contact sphere to encompass thousands of individuals. Dating apps have provided women with a means to retain agency in their relationships and exercise autonomous decision-making, free from moral encumbrances. In contrast to conventional one-on-one dating, these apps facilitate the pursuit of connections with a multitude of potential partners simultaneously.

As previously indicated, there is a pronounced gender disparity among male and female users, with female users experiencing a substantial predominance in the number of matches they receive. For a subset of female users, the augmented online attention received from a significant number of male users played a substantial role in positively influencing their self-esteem. May (27, female) expressed that her experience with dating apps has significantly bolstered her confidence in relationships. She specifically mentioned feeling at ease when it comes to terminating unsatisfactory relationships on dating apps:

I feel a sense that I look down at the partners from a height, or I am the controller in the relationship, I don't need to follow the man, and I don't need to worry about the ending of our relationship. So, I feel free and relaxed on dating apps (May, 27, female).

In the face of a fiercely competitive dating landscape and the inherent disadvantages experienced by men within this context, a significant number of male users demonstrate a heightened inclination to question their own patriarchal beliefs. Notably, some individuals actively adopt an "anti-traditional" image as a deliberate strategy to secure the favour of women. By consciously deviating from traditional gender roles and expectations, these users seek to enhance their attractiveness and increase their chances of success in attracting potential female partners. Historically, the responsibility of cooking for the entire family has traditionally fallen upon the wife. However, it is noteworthy that on platforms such as *Tantan* and *Soul*, there exists a considerable number of male users who actively share photos of homemade dishes with the intention of showcasing their culinary skills and, consequently, appealing to women (Figure 8.2.1).

Figure 8.2.1. Example of Presenting Anti-tradition Images of Male Candidates

In their efforts to demonstrate respect and fair treatment towards women, some male users deliberately express a strong aversion to paying for sex from sex workers. This stance highlights their commitment to upholding the dignity and agency of women, prioritizing consensual and equitable relationships over commercial sex. Although dating apps provide a platform for sex workers to promote their services and attract clients, it is noteworthy that numerous male users seeking sexual encounters on these apps actively reject the concept of purchasing sex. Instead, they emphasize the importance of establishing an emotional connection, albeit potentially transient, prior to engaging in any sexual activity. By prioritizing the need for emotional intimacy, these users aim to distinguish their intentions from purely transactional encounters and seek a more meaningful experience. For instance, echoing

Hellen's sentiment in Chapter Six, Mike (26, male) expressed his discomfort with the idea of touching a stranger's body without prior communication.

Similarly, Tom (30, male) proudly asserted that he obtained the consent of his hook-up partners and ensured their satisfaction through mutual agreement for casual sexual encounters. His pride stems from prioritizing consensual experiences, thereby eschewing the notion of purchasing sex with money. While it is plausible that these male users' statements may not always reflect their true behaviours, it is crucial to recognize the significance of such public declarations in acknowledging and reinforcing female-friendly narratives and perspectives in China. By openly discussing the importance of consent, emotional connection, and respectful interactions, these users contribute to the ongoing efforts to promote healthier and more equitable relationships between men and women. Such discourse helps shape societal attitudes and constructs, paving the way for positive changes in gender dynamics and fostering a more inclusive and empathetic dating culture.

8.3. Challenges to *Xiao*: Seek DINK Partners

Another topic upon which dating apps become a site of negotiation and discussion regarding marriage and relationships is the necessity and/or desire to have children. While dating apps offer a channel through which to seek spouses and fulfil *Xiao* obligations (having babies to pass on the family names), this use was also accompanied by those expressing their unwillingness or

inability to have children. In China, marriage without children is stigmatized and rarely accepted in wider society. Dating apps become a way to bypass such social disapproval and seek a DINK (double incomes, no kids) partner. In the traditional dating events arranged by parents, such a partner would be almost impossible to find, as traditional blind dating assumes that the matched couples are going to have children, and infertility is considered a serious defect in seeking partners. One report even describes an internet celebrity who was very popular because of her good looks at the beginning, in the dating corner of Shanghai People's Park, however, she was eventually rejected because she insisted on not having children at all (Yujihuiyi, 2021).

Dating apps enable users to bypass the social shame attached to not wanting or being able to have children. Users are able to state that they do not desire or are physically incapable of having children and they are seeking people who agreed to establish a DINK family. On *Soul*, there are over 200 thousand posts and 10 million visits on #DINK topic, and hundreds of *Soul* groups based on users' location to discuss the topic and seek spouses with the same goals.

I am seeking a DINK partner because I physically have trouble delivering children. I was broken up with my ex-boyfriend for this problem, and I am feeling inferior in offline dating markets in which people are seeking partners to have children, so I expect a man who is not interested in kids (Shishi, female, posted on Soul #DINK).

In addition to seeking DINK partners, dating apps also offer a platform for DINK users to gather and establish a community without discrimination for not having babies. For example, some DINK users commented that *Soul* allows them to encounter people with similar goals which encourages them to express their real thoughts about the future to their parents.

Choosing not having kids is my right. And it is me that is responsible for the decision for the choice. The only thing is that I need to gain my parents' understanding because I am the only child in my family ('Superman', male, posted on Soul #DINK).

It is hard to find a DINK partner from my offline friends. I find Soul is so useful to gather so many people with similar family expectations. I just want to enjoy the two-person world without annoying children #DINK (Xiaoaojianghu, male, posted on Soul #DINK).

8.4. Challenges to *Jing*: Seeking a Modern Relationship with Less Parental Involvements

In addition to seeking DINK (Double Income, No Kids) marriages that challenge *xiao* culture, this study reveals that dating apps can facilitate discussions and challenges to *jing* culture. *Jing* culture involves individuals suppressing their own personal desires in order to fulfil their parents' wishes. On these apps, many users expressed their desire to reject the more oppressive aspects of

jing culture and seek partners who desire more egalitarian relationships with their extended families.

These users emphasized the importance of reducing parental involvement in modern relationships, asserting their unwillingness to allow the desires of their parents or parents-in-law to dominate their own relationships. Numerous stories shared by users on these platforms recounted break-ups and relationship difficulties caused by partners who are overly dependent on their mothers or adhere strictly to *fudimo* practices. Single users made it explicit that they would not consider dating such partners. Understanding the potential harm of *fudimo* in their own marriages, some women expressed their determination to resist parental influence and reject expectations like prioritizing assistance to their brothers, choosing instead to prioritize their own happiness.

> *My mother asked me when I would have a boyfriend. I told her that is when I stop helping my younger brother. That's enough! I don't want to trouble my boyfriend to help him like a slave ('Crazy', female, posted on* Soul #Fudimo*).*

Like 'Crazy', many other females with younger brothers wanted to show that they are not *fudimo* and indicated that they wanted to focus on their future family rather than helping their original family. Users also deliberately sought a partner through the apps whose parents' attitudes toward marriage were not so controlling. For example, some *Soul* users complained that they are called

frequently to urge them to have babies, the most important goal of filial piety. In an interview for this study, Mike (26, male) stressed how he used the apps to find a partner whose parents did not want to control his marriage in this way:

The crazy parents-in-law would keep calling you and urging you to do what they expect you to do, like "It is time to have babies", or "Why is your income so low"? So, I would make sure both her parents and my parents are rational and open-minded before marrying her (Mike, 26, male).

The apps appeared to provide a platform for married users to seek assistance in resolving family conflicts and find moral support when confronting parental interference in their relationships. While most users show respect for their parents' opinions when seeking spouses, they also tended to encourage others to escape from their parent's control. For example, when there is a conflict between the wife and her mother-in-law, most users would advise the husband to support his wife rather than his mother, which contradicts the requirement of filial piety.

If you helped your wife, your mother would be angry but eventually, learn to respect your wife. (Lingniyu, female, posted on Soul # the wife and her mother-in-law #mom's boy).

Male users also seemed to appreciate the opportunity the apps offered to learn about the pressures upon women when residing with their parents-in-law. As a means to win favour in the competitive dating market and demonstrate their modern disposition and rejection of *Jing* culture, some men claimed that they would support their wives when dealing with their wider family and also promised to live independently from their mothers. Such an attitude was highly regarded by male users who aimed to highlight their wives' equal status within the family and discourage parental interference:

…I am not mom's boy. My parents are open-minded. Don't worry about the conflict between my mother and you. I will always support you… (Liufeng, male, posted on Soul #seeking blind dating)

8.5. Challenges to Traditional Attitudes to Divorce

Dating apps also seem to provide a space in which traditional attitudes to divorce and separation can be both challenged and reassessed. Due to the significance of filial culture in China, divorced individuals are regarded as unfilial or selfish as they are constructed as having disobeyed their parents and wider family obligations and have supposedly instead prioritized their own personal happiness. Many couples therefore choose to endure an unhappy marriage rather than divorce. Indeed, Chinese adults are far less likely than Americans to get divorced, with Chinese adults displaying a significant correlation between strong filial piety and negative attitudes towards divorce

(Zheng, 2016). The old Chinese saying “One would rather tear down ten temples than ruin a marriage” emphasizes the importance of the union of couples.

Dating apps can function to relieve such pressure and remove the stigma associated with divorce, particularly for women, who suffer from such social stigma more significantly due to their increased likelihood to be economically dependent on their partner and the social value placed upon female chastity outside of marriage. Close analysis of the apps reveals how this digital space can function to equip both male and female users with the courage and confidence to end unhappy marriages. Dating apps serve as a safe platform for users to express their grievances about unhappy marriages and seek advice to improve their situation. Within these platforms, users encourage each other to prioritize individual happiness over wider collective interests and sacrifices.

In particular, dating apps offer a site for women to convene and support each other to fight against the inequality of marriage and corresponding filial piety. Evidence suggests that users deploy this platform to actively encourage others, especially women, to end their unhappy marriages, even if they have children, reflecting how young Chinese women seem to consider divorce in a more positive light than their male counterparts (Zheng, 2016). Such women use the apps to challenge the stigma of getting divorced and to cement their equal status in marriage and relationships. For example, Jingsi, a female *Soul* user, posted that she found her husband cheating but her parents persuaded

her to maintain a complete family for their young children. In response, other users overwhelmingly advised her to divorce him rather than endure the pain caused by his betrayal.

How could he cheat while you are tolerating him for kids? Life is too short; how could you spend the rest of your life with such a disgusting man? (Taozhiyaoyao, female, commenting Jingsi's post on Soul).

Moreover, active users who engage in responding to such posts are motivated by the desire to assist victims of unhappy marriages, with a majority of them being wives. In addition, certain responses offer legal guidance on how to optimize their benefits during divorce proceedings and attain economic autonomy, which is a crucial aspect. For example:

Collect evidence of your husband's affairs and sue for divorce to achieve the preference in division of property. My sister! (Huayu, female, commenting Jingsi's post on Soul).

I advise you to send your children to your parents-in-law and seek a job to make yourself busy and economically independent. If you are proven to be economically capable, you are likely to earn child custody… (Xiaoyaoyao, female, commenting on Jingsi's post on Soul).

Some men would also strive to exhibit pro-gender equality by demonstrating their respect for divorced women as a means to garner favour and attract the interest of women:

To my dear wife, no matter how many times you divorced and devoted your youth to those who did not cherish you, I will treat you as if you married for the first time. ('Peaceful and far-reaching', male, posted on Tantan).

Dating apps can also provide a more optimistic portrayal of post-divorce life for individuals trapped in unhappy marriages. Although many divorced users struggle with adjusting to their new lives, grappling with loneliness and the challenges of single-handedly raising a child, there are some users who highlight the positive aspects to inspire others to seek personal liberation.

…the divorced life is tiresome. I admitted that. However, I never regret it because I won't expect his help and get disappointed anymore. I feel more somehow relaxed because I can control everything by myself. […] I won't be kidnapped by the moral burden to become a daughter-in-law… (Keke, female, posted on Soul #the divorced life #the divorced post-90s with children).

Finally, dating apps also provide divorced users with a chance to seek more partners, a practice that is much more difficult in off-line wider society. Divorced users experience less discrimination when seeking partners on dating apps, with very few users interpreting divorce as evidence of individual

weakness and/or bad character. Indeed, divorced users are a significantly large group on dating apps, with over 8.4 million visits to #Divorce on *Soul*, an amount in-keeping with the increasing rate of divorcees in China in recent years. Many users, including those who have never been married, claimed that they would accept a divorced partner. Likewise, in contrast to the traditional view that a divorced woman is devalued and is not allowed to ask for betrothal gifts, many users support that divorced women deserve equal respect in their second marriages. For example:

An old marriage certificate means nothing to an alive person! ('Flying like a kite', female, posted on Tantan).

Many male users agreed with this view, with some even asserting that they preferred divorced women because they believe that divorced women are more patient and tolerant of their partners. Instead of focusing on the females' sexual experiences in the previous marriage, such users pay more attention to the positive qualities and personal traits that are shaped by a failed marriage:

Compared to unmarried females of the same age, divorced females are usually less demanding in their choice of partners. […] Having gone through a failed marriage, they have learned valuable lessons so they tend to cherish their next marriages more (Dongdong, male, posted on Soul #divorce).

Moreover, some divorced users tend to seek divorced partners only, stating that divorced people shared the experience of failed marriages so could better understand each other. Some users also stated that they preferred divorced partners with children because they can't have children for various reasons. However, there are fewer comments concerning divorced men, perhaps indicating how divorced women remain a controversial topic and still face more pressure and difficulty seeking a partner than their male counterparts.

8.6. Conclusion

This study contends that dating apps have the potential to empower users, particularly female users, in challenging conventional gender roles and societal norms surrounding marriage. It suggests that dating apps empower women by enabling them to fulfil their sexual desires and assert control over their relationships. Furthermore, due to the competitive nature of the male-dominated dating pool and the anonymity facilitated by dating apps, male users often display pro-gender equality attitudes and exhibit respect towards women to enhance their attractiveness. Additionally, dating apps provide a platform for individuals to defy the notion of filial piety by facilitating the search for partners who embrace a DINK lifestyle, which may be deemed unacceptable through traditional dating channels. Moreover, the study highlights that dating apps serve as a space where users can seek guidance on a variety of topics, including marriage, family, legal matters, and emotional

support, thereby fostering a sense of community and mutual assistance and leading to relationships with diminished parental involvement.

The upcoming chapter will conclude the entire thesis.

Chapter Nine: Conclusion

9.1. Introduction

This study aims to reveal the influence of traditional values of dating and marriage on dating app usage in China. It also aims to demonstrate how social class contributes to a new variable shaping the use of dating apps. This chapter summarizes the key findings of this research, highlighting research contributions, both theoretical and practical, while outlining the strengths and limitations of this research and providing recommendations for further research. The following section summarizes key findings that answer the research questions:

9.2. Summary of Research Findings

RQ1. Do class elements (income, occupation, education, housing, or hukou) significantly impact the use of dating apps? How?

It shows that several class elements are important for users when choosing potential partners on dating apps. In particular, income, education, and occupation are important elements, for both males and females, for attracting and selecting potential partners. Moreover, the results of the ANOVA Analysis suggest that education is significantly related to business and distraction motives, while occupation is significantly related to business, socialising, social approval, and relationship-seeking motives.

RQ2. How do the middle and lower classes differ in their use of dating apps?

The data suggests that the habitus and tastes of users exert significant influence on how users engage with dating apps, their motives for using them, and their preferences for potential partners. While dating apps enable users to approach partners anonymously, the poor reputation of these apps causes middle-class users to worry about the potential loss of social status. Consequently, they seek to distinguish themselves from the lower class by using niche and new dating apps in order to avoid contact with partners perceived to have lowbrow tastes. This has resulted in an 'app hierarchy' based on potential users' income and education, motivations, and age.

Further, this shows that middle-class users are more motivated to seek casual sex while their lower-class counterparts are more motivated to seek relationships and business, these differing motivations being important reasons for the different preferences regarding partners' past sexual experiences, comparative age, and partners' income and education, with lower-class users retaining stricter requirements regarding the quality of potential partners on dating apps.

In general, middle-class men retain more advantages than their lower-class counterparts when seeking both long-term and short-term (casual sex) partners both because of their advanced economic condition and their strategic communication skills, cultivated within their given social background. They are the least likely to seek long-term relationships on dating apps, however. Given better economic conditions, middle-class women seek to fulfil upper-level needs, such as gender equality and the respect of their partners, which runs contrary to lower-class men's expectations of their partners. Cultivated in an environment in which sons are still preferred to daughters, lower-class men seek to control their relationships (Shen, 2016; Jin, 2011; Tang, Ma, & Jin, 2009), so they are stricter regarding expectations of potential partners in terms of age, sexual experience, and education. Deprived of resources, lower-class women still seek to exchange their sex for economic improvement, thus they tend to suppress female sexuality. Such differences prevent users from establishing long-term or close relationships with partners from other classes despite the chances of approaching them offered by dating

apps. Instead, class-bound relationships are perpetuated and even reinforced by dating apps, given that they are more comfortable with partners from similar backgrounds.

RQ3.a. Why do male and female users differ in seeking sex on dating apps?

Patriarchal settings significantly shape users' perspectives toward sex and their use of dating apps for seeking sex. While females have equal levels of sexual desire, they are still encouraged to suppress their desires and act passively to serve the patriarchal construct of relationships. Women suffer more severe critique than males for using dating apps, are less likely to be forgiven by their partners for using dating apps and are more likely to be rejected for doing so. Such double standards are not broken down by dating apps but rather transferred through the use of dating apps, which exacerbate the importance of male users' wealth and female users' appearance. The skewed sex ratio on apps also intensifies fierce competition among male users and makes them exaggerate their economic capacity to attract partners, and thus suffer potential economic loss for being 'generous'.

RQ3.b. Why do users seek serious relationships or marriage partners on dating apps?

It shows that dating apps are pragmatically employed by contemporary Chinese users as a complementary channel for traditional blind dating to fulfil

social expectations of “marrying at the right age”. This supports my central argument that dating apps reflect and perpetuate filial cultures in China. However, it also shows that users frequently use apps to discuss wider social issues connected to family conflicts such as *fudimo*, *mabaonan*, and betrothal gifts, thus highlighting how apps offer a digital space within which to discuss and reassess traditional values associated with marriage and relationships in China. This research shows that users perpetuate such traditional beliefs about gender roles, with females expected to be subordinate to their husbands and to devote more time and resources to their families. Therefore, apps act as a platform for perpetuating traditional beliefs.

RQ4. How do dating apps challenge traditional dating and marriage cultures in China?

It indicates that dating apps can offer women a chance to subvert and challenge male-dominated relations and satisfy their sexual desires by engaging them in online discussions about gender issues, questioning traditional forms of long-term relationships and gender roles within them, and forcing male users to change their expectations of their wives. Furthermore, it is evident that dating apps facilitate users in challenging the notion of filial piety by seeking DINK (Double Income, No Kids) relationships, fostering independent relationships with less parental involvement, and even considering divorce.

9.3. Research Implications

9.3.1. Social Implications

These findings confirmed the impact of traditional dating cultures (male superiority, filial piety, and class-bound relationship) on modern dating practices, including the use of dating apps to approach potential partners. Thus, there are implications for society.

First, this study identified the cognitive dissonance of using dating apps, which is associated with the continuing stigma of sex and a lack of sexual knowledge. Also, this research reveals gender inequality in seeking sex and using dating apps, as reflected by fewer female app users and fewer motives for seeking sex on dating apps. Such inequality not only suppresses female sexuality as socially unacceptable, but also places great pressure on males seeking sex, resulting in a huge sexual gap. These findings suggest that cultural modernization lags far behind technological advancement in China. To release and satisfy sexual desire, it is important to offer sufficient sex education and help people recognize and accept sexual desire as a basic human desire, such as eating and drinking. Further, females' sexual desires and needs should be equally addressed and respected rather than denied or ignored. Administrators of dating apps should guide users' attention to gender issues and lead pro-gender equality content to influence users' views.

Second, these findings show that class elements such as income, education, and occupation are important criteria for potential partners, indicating that users are still motivated to maintain upward social mobility through dating or marriage. Due to insufficient coverage of medical care and social welfare, most users still experience unstable and insecure lives, which prevents them from seeking love. The government should seek to improve the social insurance system to solidify confidence in seeking to satisfy the need for love.

Finally, this research sheds light on these implications and offers valuable insights for dating app companies to enhance their services and contribute to societal needs. This research has significant implications for societal well-being, as dating app usage is closely linked to broader societal trends such as changing marriage patterns and evolving norms around gender and sexuality By taking into account the ways in which social class intersects with these trends, dating app companies can play a role in promoting social cohesion and inclusivity.

9.3.2. Theoretical Implications

This research has made a significant theoretical contribution to the expansion of the Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) with regard to users' motivations for using dating apps. By addressing the limitations of previous research, which primarily focused on personal characteristics while neglecting the influence of the general environment, this study extends UGT and enriches its

explanatory power. Specifically, it takes into account the influence of traditional cultural contexts, including gender inequality, class mobility, and filial culture, to explain the contextualized needs and motives behind using dating apps in urban China. Further, it highlights the role of social class as an influential personal factor because users' usage habitus is cultivated within their respective social classes, while also acknowledging the impact of class inequality on this factor.

Furthermore, this study is ground-breaking in identifying social class as a significant new variable in dating app usage, expanding the application of Bourdieu's theories of tastes and habitus from offline product selection to the realm of selecting dating apps. Moreover, this research contributes to the field by providing a framework for defining and studying social classes in China based on the country's specific economic and political contexts. The delineation of China's middle class, taking into account factors such as income, education, occupation, *hukou* (household registration), and housing, establishes a foundation for future investigations into Chinese social classes. This comprehensive approach to understanding social classes in China further enhances the theoretical contributions of this study.

9.4. Limitations and Further Research

This study illustrates the influence of traditional cultures of dating and marriage on the use of dating apps in China. As expected, however, there are

several limitations in terms of research objectives, research instruments, and research samples due to the nature of the research.

Regarding the limitations of the objectives, this study aimed to reveal the impact of traditional dating culture on dating app usage. It focuses on gender roles, class-bound relationships, and family values, identified through the literature review. Future research could benefit from incorporating unstructured interviews to further investigate the influence of additional cultural factors, such as *guanxi* (Chinese social networks that yield various life benefits) and *renqing* (emotional interactions and exchange of benefits), on the utilization of dating apps. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics at play in the Chinese dating app landscape, adding depth to our knowledge of this evolving phenomenon. Another limitation of the research objectives is that this study aims to compare the middle and the lower class to demonstrate the significance of social class in shaping dating app usage. Further studies could gain a deeper understanding of how social class affects this usage by comparison of other classes, such as the middle and upper classes.

Concerning limitations of research instruments, this study mainly applied self-reported measures. Therefore, it is likely that participants provided answers that adhere to social expectations to achieve social desirability or gave answers that they suspected the researcher wanted to hear. Given the sensitivity of the research topic and to ensure the reliability of self-reported

data, this study emphasized the anonymity and voluntariness of participants. The researcher never asked for participants' personal information, such as names or addresses that might potentially be tracked. The researcher also clarified how and where data would be used to reassure participants that data would neither be misused, nor reputations harmed. Further, participants were informed that they could suspend or end interviews whenever they felt uncomfortable and that they were entitled to withdraw any and all answers already given. In addition, the researcher posited neutral attitudes toward participant responses to encourage them to express their true feelings and attitudes rather than saying things to please the researcher. In future studies, it would be helpful to use other types of data sources such as experiments to triangulate data.

Regarding limitations of samples, there were only 25 participants in the semi-structured interviews. However, the interviews aimed to provide an in-depth understanding of the contexts and participants' experiences of dating app usage, rather than generating large numbers. The study's qualitative stage lacked engagement with a significant user group - married individuals, who are considered as key users of dating apps in the quantitative phase. Additionally, the sample population consisted of a large proportion of economically independent students, which could have influenced the results obtained. Further research would be useful for investigating users of different relationship statuses, especially married users, in order to explain why dating apps are popular among married users.

Finally, it would be interesting to conduct a longitudinal study to investigate changes in attitudes toward sex and dating along with the use of dating apps.

9.5. Concluding Remarks

This study has demonstrated that gender inequality, social class, and filial piety are significant contextual factors shaping the use of dating apps in China. It calls for more research on the environment and urges the government to make efforts to minimize gaps between males and females, and lower- and middle-class, to improve residents' well-being. This study also contributes to expanding the concept of class habitus from offline shopping to digital romance and addresses the limitations of UGT for the contextualised use of dating apps in collectivist societies such as China. Further studies are needed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the contextualized use of dating apps.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Ethical Approval

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University of Nottingham Ningbo

Research Ethics Checklist for Staff and Research Students

[strongly informed by the ESRC (2012) *Framework for Research Ethics*]

A checklist should be completed for **every** research project or thesis where the research involves the **participation of people**, **the use of secondary datasets or archives relating to people and/or access to field sites or animals**. It will be used to identify whether a full application for ethics approval needs to be submitted.
You must not begin data collection or approach potential research participants until you have completed this form, received ethical clearance, and submitted this form for retention with the appropriate administrative staff.

The principal investigator or, where the principal investigator is a student, the supervisor, is responsible for exercising appropriate professional judgement in this review.

Completing the form includes providing brief details about yourself and the research in Sections 1 and 2 and ticking some boxes in Sections 3 and/or 4, 5, 6. **Ticking a shaded box in Sections 3, 4, 5 or 6 requires further action by the researcher**. Two things need to be stressed:

- Ticking one or more shaded boxes does **not** mean that you cannot conduct your research as currently anticipated; however, it does mean that further questions will need to be asked and addressed, further discussions will need to take place, and alternatives may need to be considered or additional actions undertaken.
- Avoiding the shaded boxes does **not** mean that ethical considerations can subsequently be 'forgotten'; on the contrary, research ethics - for everyone and in every project – should involve an ongoing process of reflection and debate.

The following checklist is a starting point for an ongoing process of reflection about the ethical issues concerning your study.

SECTION 1: THE RESEARCHER(S)

1.1: Name of principal researcher:

1.2: Status: ☐ Staff

☒ Postgraduate research student

1.3: School/Division: School of International Communications

1.4: Email address: hnxxw4@nottingham.edu.cn

1.5: Names of other project members (if applicable):

1.6: Names of Supervisors (if applicable): Mary Ainslie, Xiaoge Xu

	Yes	No
1.7: I have read the University of Nottingham's *Code of Research Conduct and Research Ethics* (2010) and agree to abide by it: http://www.nottingham.edu.cn/en/research/researchethics/ethics-approval-process.aspx	☒	☐
1.8: (If applicable) I have read the University of Nottingham's *e-Ethics@Nottingham: Ethical Issues in Digitally Based Research* (2012) and agree to abide by it. http://www.nottingham.edu.cn/en/research/documents/e-ethics-at-the-university-of-nottingham.pdf	☒	☐
1.9: When conducting research on people (Section 5) I will prepare both a *participant consent form* as well as a *participant information sheet*. I am aware that the following templates are available on the Ethics webpage: http://www.nottingham.edu.cn/en/research/researchethics/ethics-approval-process.aspx • Participant consent form 1 • Participant Information Sheet English and Chinese	☒	☐

SECTION 2: THE RESEARCH

2.1: **Title of project:** The impact of social class in using mobile dating in urban China

Please provide brief details (50-150 words) about your proposed research, as indicated in each section

2.2: **Research question(s) or aim(s)**

Research aims: To test the elements of social class as new variables for using dating apps in China; To compare the effectiveness of social class with other existing variables (e.g., gender, age) in predicting the use of dating apps among heterosexuals in urban China.

2.3: Summary of method(s) of data collection

First, it will conduct an online survey to ask questions in users' motives of using dating apps, their presentation on dating apps, and their using preferences. The link of the questionnaire will be shared on various dating apps, including Tinder, Tantan, Momo, Soul etc, social media such as WeChat and QQ, and other questionnaire websites such as K Mission Survey to recruit around 400 dating app users (200 female) of varying demographics.

Second, I will conduct several focus groups and interviews to further support and explain the results of the surveys. The focus groups and interviews will take place in both on- and offline settings. The voice will be recorded and transcribed in its original language and then translated into English when necessary.

2.4: **Proposed site(s) of data collection**

Online: Links of the survey via websites/apps; video interviews.

Offline: Face-to face interviews in offices, café, or restaurants.

2.5: **How will access to participants and/or sites be gained?**

1. The student will post the survey link on social media and questionnaire websites and encourage dating app users to click and complete the survey.

2. Recruitment advertisements will be posted on social media and questionnaire websites to inform the potential participants and the interviewees will also be recruited from the survey, in which they indicate their willingness of participating in one-on-one interviews.

3. The researcher will ask her friends to help circulate the surveys and advertisements and encourage their friends to participate in this research.

4. A snowballing technique will be deployed, asking the respondents to invite their friends from dating apps.

SECTION 3: RESEARCH INVOLVING USE OF SECONDARY DATASETS OR ARCHIVES RELATING TO PEOPLE

If your research involves use of secondary datasets or archives relating to people all questions in Section 3 **must** be answered. If it does not, please tick the 'not relevant' box and go to Section 4.

NOT RELEVANT	☒

Please answer each question by ticking the appropriate box.

	Yes	No
3.1: Is the risk of disclosure of the identity of individuals low or non-existent in the use of this secondary data or archive?	☐	☐
3.2: Have you complied with the data access requirements of the supplier (where relevant), including any provisions relating to presumed consent and potential risk of disclosure of sensitive information?	☐	☐

SECTION 4: RESEARCH INVOLVING ACCESS TO FIELD SITES AND ANIMALS

If your research involves access to field sites and/or animals all questions in Section 4 **must** be answered. If it does not, please tick the 'not relevant' box and go to Section 5.

NOT RELEVANT	☒

Please answer each question by ticking the appropriate box.

	Yes	No
4.1: Has access been granted to the site?	☐	☐
4.2: Does the site have an official protective designation of any kind?	☐	☐

If yes, have the user guidelines of the body managing the site a) been accessed?	☐	☐
b) been integrated into the research methodology?	☐	☐
4.3: Will this research place the site, its associated wildlife and other people using the site at any greater physical risks than are experienced during normal site usage?	☐	☐
4.4: Will this research involve the collection of any materials from the site?	☐	☐
4.5: Will this research expose the researcher(s) to any significant risk of physical or emotional harm?	☐	☐
4.6: Will the research involve vertebrate animals (fish, birds, reptiles, amphibians, mammals) or the common octopus (*Octopus vulgaris*) in any capacity?	☐	☐
If yes, will the research with vertebrates or octopi involve handling or interfering with the animal in any way or involve any activity that may cause pain, suffering, distress or lasting harm to the animal?	☐	☐

SECTION 5: RESEARCH INVOLVING THE PARTICIPATION OF PEOPLE

If your research involves the participation of people all questions in Section 4 **must** be answered.

Please answer each question by ticking the appropriate box.

A. General Issues

	Yes	No
5.1: Does the study involve participants age 16 or over who are unable to give informed consent? (e.g. people with cognitive impairment, learning disabilities, mental health conditions, physical or sensory impairments?	☐	☒
5.2: Does the research involve other vulnerable groups such as children (**aged under 16**) or those in unequal relationships with the researcher? (e.g. your own students)	☐	☒
5.3: Will this research require the cooperation of a gatekeeper* for initial access to the groups or individuals to be recruited?	☐	☒
5.4: Will this research involve discussion of sensitive topics (e.g. sexual activity, drug use, physical or mental health)?	☒	☐
5.5: Could the study induce psychological stress or anxiety or cause harm or negative consequences beyond the risks encountered in normal life?	☐	☒
5.6: Are drugs, placebos or other substances (e.g. food substances, vitamins) to be administered to the study participants or will the study involve invasive, intrusive or potentially harmful procedures of any kind?	☐	☒
5.7: Will this research involve people taking part in the study without their knowledge and consent at the time?	☐	☒

5.8: Does this research involve the internet or other visual/vocal methods where people may be identified?	☒	☐
5.9: Will this research involve access to personal information about identifiable individuals without their knowledge or consent?	☐	☒
5.10: Does the research involve recruiting members of the public as researchers (participant research)?	☐	☒
5.11: Will the research involve administrative or secure data that requires permission from the appropriate authorities before use?	☐	☒
5.12: Is there a possibility that the safety of **the researcher** may be in question?	☐	☒
5.13: Will financial inducements (other than reasonable expenses and compensation for time) be offered to participants?	☐	☒

**Gatekeeper- a person who controls or facilitates access to the participants*

B. Before starting data collection

	Yes	No
6.12: My full identity will be revealed to all research participants.	☒	☐
6.13: All participants will be given accurate information about the nature of the research and the purposes to which the data will be put. (*An example of a Participant Information Sheet is available for you to amend and use* at xxxxx) *http://www.nottingham.edu.cn/en/research/documents/participant-information-sheet-in-english-and-chinese.doc*	☒	☐
6.14: All participants will freely consent to take part, and, where appropriate, this will be confirmed by use of a consent form. (An example of a Consent Form is available for you to amend and use at: http://www.nottingham.edu.cn/en/research/researchethics/ethics-approval-process.aspx)	☒	☐
6.15: All participants will freely consent to take part, but due to the qualitative nature of the research a formal consent form is either not feasible or is undesirable and alternative means of recording consent are proposed.	☐	☒
6.16: A signed copy of the consent form or (where appropriate) an alternative record of evidence of consent will be held by the researcher.	☒	☐
6.17: It will be made clear that declining to participate will have no negative consequences for the individual.	☒	☐
6.18: Participants will be asked for permission for quotations (from data) to be used in research outputs where this is intended.	☒	☐
6.19: I will inform participants how long the data collected from them will be kept.	☒	☐
6.20: Incentives (other than basic expenses) will be offered to potential participants as an inducement to participate in the research. (Here any incentives include cash payments and non-cash items such as vouchers and book tokens.)	☐	☒

6.21: For research conducted within, or concerning, organisations (e.g. universities, schools, hospitals, care homes, etc) I will gain authorisation in advance from an appropriate committee or individual.	☒	☐

C. During the process of data collection

	Yes	No
6.25: I will provide participants with my University contact details, and those of my supervisor (*where applicable*) so that they may get in touch about any aspect of the research if they wish to do so.	☒	☐
6.26: Participants will be guaranteed anonymity only insofar as they do not disclose any illegal activities.	☒	☐
6.27: Anonymity will not be guaranteed where there is disclosure or evidence of significant harm, abuse, neglect or danger to participants or to others.	☒	☐
6.28: All participants will be free to withdraw from the study at any time, including withdrawing data following its collection.	☒	☐
6.29: Data collection will take place only in public and/or professional spaces (e.g. in a work setting	☒	☐
6.30: Research participants will be informed when observations and/or recording is taking place.	☒	☐
6.31: Participants will be treated with dignity and respect at all times.	☒	☐

D. After collection of data

	Yes	No
6.32: Where anonymity has been agreed with the participant, data will be anonymised as soon as possible after collection.	☒	☐
6.33: All data collected will be stored in accordance with the requirements of the University's Code of Research Conduct	☒	☐
6.34: Data will only be used for the purposes outlined within the participant information sheet and the agreed terms of consent.	☒	☐
6.35: Details which could identify individual participants will not be disclosed to anyone other than the researcher, their supervisor and (if necessary) the Research Ethics Panel and external examiners without participants' explicit consent.	☒	☐

E. After completion of research

	Yes	No
6.37: Participants will be given the opportunity to know about the overall research findings.	☒	☐
6.38: All hard copies of data collection tools and data which enable the identification of individual participants will be destroyed.	☒	☐

*If you have **not** ticked any shaded boxes,* please send the completed and signed form to the School's Research Ethics Officers, with any further required documents, for approval and record-keeping.

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If you have ticked any shaded boxes **you will need to describe more fully how you plan to deal with the ethical issues raised by your research**.

Responses to the ticked questions

5.4: Will this research involve discussion of sensitive topics (e.g. sexual activity, drug use, physical or mental health)?

Yes. My research will marginally involve discussion of sexual activity related to the use of dating applications. I will ask questions about users' intentions for using the apps in the survey which may involve sensitive options, such as casual sex motives and romantic relationships. I will indicate it before participants click the survey link. When participants click the link, they are fully aware of the topic and agree to provide their answers. Participants are also allowed to skip that question or ignore the options, or even give up the survey if they still feel uncomfortable.

5.8: Does this research involve the internet or other visual/vocal methods where people may be identified?

Yes. I am going to use online survey to collect my data and record the voice of the interviews. However, participants' identity will not be traced. The data will be saved in my personal computer with an advanced password and the online version will be deleted. Also, I will use USB sticks to transfer the data if necessary, and try to avoid online transition to secure the data. The data will not be disclosed to others. I will take measures to anonymise the data once collected. For example, I will separate the data from the identifying details of the participant and give the data a code and attach the code to the separate contact details.

Issues to consider in preparing an ethics review are given below. Please send this completed form to the Research Ethics Officer who will decide whether your project requires further review by the UNNC Research Ethics Sub-Committee and/or whether further information needs to be provided.

Please note that it is your responsibility to follow the University's ***Research Code of Conduct*** and any relevant academic or professional guidelines in the conduct of your study. **This includes providing appropriate information sheets and consent forms, and ensuring confidentiality in the storage and use of data. For guidance and UK regulations on the latter, please refer to** the *Data Protection Policy and Guidelines* of the University of Nottingham:

Policy - http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/%7Ebrzdpa/local/dp-policy.doc

Guidelines -http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/~brzdpa/local/dp-guidance.doc

Any significant change in the project question(s), design or conduct over the course of the research should be notified to the School Research Ethics Officer and may require a new application for ethical approval.

Signature of Principal Investigator/Researcher:

Signature of Supervisor (where appropriate):

Date 3 March 2021

Research Ethics Panel response

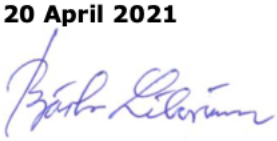
☐ the research can go ahead as planned

☐ further information is needed on the research protocol (see details below)

☐ amendments are requested to the research protocol (see details below)

Faculty REOs… .....
Date …18/4/21.....

20 April 2021



A. LIST OF POINTS TO CONSIDER WHEN SUBMITTING AN ETHICS REVIEW (taken from ESRC (2012) *Framework for Research Ethics*).

Risks

1. Have you considered risks to:
   - the research team?
   - the participants? *Eg harm, deception, impact of outcomes*
   - the data collected? *Eg storage, considerations of privacy, quality*
   - the research organisations, project partners and funders involved?
2. Might anyone else be put at risk as a consequence of this research?
3. What might these risks be?
4. How will you protect your data at the research site and away from the research site?
5. How can these risks be addressed?

Details and recruitment of participants

6. What types of people will be recruited? *Eg students, children, people with learning disabilities, elderly?*
7. How will the competence of participants to give informed consent be determined?
8. How, where, and by whom participants will be identified, approached, and recruited?

9. Will any unequal relationships exist between anyone involved in the recruitment and the potential participants?
10. Are there any benefits to participants?
11. Is there a need for participants to be de-briefed? By whom?

Research information

12. What information will participants be given about the research?
13. Who will benefit from this research?
14. Have you considered anonymity and confidentiality?
15. How will you store your collected data?
16. How will data be disposed of and after how long?
17. Are there any conflicts of interest in undertaking this research? *Eg financial reward for outcomes etc.*
18. Will you be collecting information through a third party?

Consent

19. Have you considered consent?
20. If using secondary data, does the consent from the primary data cover further analysis?
21. Can participants opt out?
22. Does your information sheet (or equivalent) contain all the information participants need?
23. If your research changes, how will consent be renegotiated?

Ethical procedures

24. Have you considered ethics within your plans for dissemination/impact?
25. Are there any additional issues that need to be considered? *Eg local customs, local 'gatekeepers', political sensitivities*
26. Have you considered the time you need to gain ethics approval?
27. How will the ethics aspects of the project be monitored throughout its course?
28. Is there an approved research ethics protocol that would be appropriate to use?
29. How will unforeseen or adverse events in the course of research be managed? *Eg do you have procedures to deal with any disclosures from vulnerable participants?*

Appendix 2. Participant Consent Form

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Project title: The Impact of cultural factors on the Use of dating apps in China

Researcher's name: Xianqin Wu

Supervisor's name: Mary Ainslie

- I have read the Participant Information Sheet and the nature and purpose of the research project have been explained to me. I understand and agree to take part.
- I understand the purpose of the research project and my involvement in it.
- I understand that I may withdraw from the research project at any stage and that this will not affect my status now or in the future.
- I understand that while information gained during the study may be published, I will not be identified, and my personal results will remain confidential.
- I understand that the interview will take more than 40 minutes and be recorded.
- I understand that data will be stored in accordance with data protection laws.
- I understand that I may contact the researcher or supervisor if I require more information about the research, and that I may contact the Research Ethics Sub-Committee of the University of Nottingham, Ningbo if I wish to make a complaint related to my involvement in the research.

Signed …… (participant)

Print name ……
Date ……

Contact details.

Researcher: Xianqin Wu hnxxw4@nottingham.edu.cn

Supervisor: Mary Ainslie mary.ainslie@nottingham.edu.cn

UNNC Research Ethics Sub-Committee Coordinator:

Joanna.Huang@nottingham.edu.cn

参与者同意书

项目标题　文化因素对使用约会交友软件的影响
研究者姓名　吴仙琴
导师姓名　Mary Ainslie

- 本人已阅读声明，项目组织者已经跟我解释了研究项目的性质和宗旨。本人理解并同意参与。
- 本人理解项目的目的和在项目中的参与作用。
- 本人明白可以在研究项目的任何阶段退出，不会因此影响现在以及将来的状况
- 本人明白研究过程中信息可能会被公开，但本人身份不会被确认，个人的调查结果始终是被保密。
- 本人知道面谈将持续 40 分钟以上，并将会被录音
- 本人了解数据会根据数据保护相关法律进行存储
- 本人知道，如果需要进一步有关研究的信息可以联系研究者或者导师，如果需要对参与研究提出投诉则可以联系宁波诺丁汉大学科研伦理小组委员会。

参与者签名……

日期……

联系方式
研究者：吴仙琴 hnxxw4@nottingham.edu.cn

导师: Mary Ainslie mary.ainslie@nottingham.edu.cn

诺丁汉大学研究道德委员会秘书： Ms Joanna Huang (Joanna.Huang@nottingham.edu.cn)

Appendix 3. Questionnaire

Survey on Chinese dating app users

Hello!

This questionnaire survey investigates the use of dating apps such as *Tantan, Momo, Blued, Grindr, Tinder, Bumble, Soul, Hily, Spot, Jimu, Zhenai.com, City Dating,* or *WeChat's' Nearby People by people* over the age of 18. The survey results are strictly confidential, available to the research only, and are for academic research only. If you are willing to participate in this online survey, please click on 'Next'.

Participant Information

This is research on dating APP users initiated by Xianqin Wu, a doctoral student at the University of Nottingham Ningbo China.

This questionnaire survey will not involve your personal identity. Please rest assured to answer truthfully. The questionnaire contains 24 questions, approximately 5 minutes. Your participation is voluntary. You can choose to withdraw from the survey midway at any time. Thank you for your participation!

If you have any questions about this research, you can contact me via my email at hnxxw4@nottingham.edu.cn or contact me at 15325747945.

Please press the 'Next' button to indicate your agreement to participate in this study.

1. Have you ever used or are you currently using a dating app? (e.g., Exploring, Momo, Blued, Grindr, Tinder, Bumble, Soul, Hily, Spot Stamping, Jimu, Zhenai Network, City Dating, or WeChat's' Nearby People 'dating apps)
○ Yes
○ No (please end the survey)

2. What are your favourite dating apps?
□Tinder □Tantan □Momo □Soul □Hily
□ Nearby people (WeChat) □ Blued □ Bumble □ Grindr □ Hinge
□ OKCupid □ Spot Stamping □ Jimu □ Zhenai Network □ City Dating
□ Other_____*

3. What are the basic features of your favourite dating apps?
□ Location pairing □ Swiping pairing □ Story/album/square
□ Encounter □ Secret Love Assistance □ Live Broadcast
□ Interest pairing □ Online chat □ Games
□ Group □ Other_____*

4. Have you ever subscribed to the VIP function on dating apps?
○ Yes
○ No (please skip to question 7)

5. How much is your monthly subscription fee (in yuan)?
○ Less than 2 ○ 3-10 ○ 11-30
○ 31-50 ○ 51-100 ○ 101-500
○ Over 500
Dependent on (Title: 4. Have you ever subscribed to the VIP function on dating apps?) Option 1

6. What VIP features are you most interested in?
□ Change location □ Super like □ Unlimited like
□ Exclusive badge/prominent nickname □ Ad-free browsing □ Infinite rewinding/review
□ Restrict the disclosure of personal information □ See who likes you □ Quick chat
□ Increase exposure rate □ Other_____

7. How often do you use dating apps?
○ Less than once a month ○ Once to four times a month ○ At least once a week
○ At least once a day ○ I can't remember

8. How long do you use dating apps each time?
○ Over 1 hour ○ 20 minutes to 1 hour (inclusive) ○ 5 minutes to 20 minutes (inclusive)
○ Less than 5 minutes (including 5 minutes) ○ Can't remember clearly

9. Please select the following personal information you presented in your dating profiles:
□ Age □ Gender □ Appearance (photo)
□ Personality □ Education level □ Income
□ Career □ Interests and hobbies □ Values/outlook on life
□ Life experience □ Current location/distance □ Hometown (household registration)
□ Housing status □ Other_____

10. What are your screening criteria for potential partners?
□ Age □ Gender □ Appearance (photo)
□ Personality □ Education level □ Income
□ Career □ Interests and hobbies □ Values/life views
□ Life experience □ Current location/distance □ Hometown (household registration)
□ If s/he owns a house/apartment □ Other_____

11. What is the most important reason for your use of dating apps?
□ Find a partner (boyfriend/girlfriend, marriage partner) □ Kill time □ Increase sexual experience
□ Seeking a sense of belonging □ Satisfying curiosity □ Improve flirting/communicating skills
□ Expand social circle □ Because my friends are using it □ Forget about ex
□ Use while traveling □ I want others to respect me □ Sexual orientation
□ Distract attention from learning/work □ promote business □ Other

12. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following reasons for using the dating app? (Including 58 sub questions) [Matrix scale questions]*

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Mildly disagree	Neutral	Mildly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
So1. In order to enhance self-esteem	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
So2. In order to gain recognition from others.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Pa3. Because it's fun.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Pa4. In order to stay relax.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Bus1. In order to reach out to my potential customers.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Bus2. In order to attract more people to buy my products.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Pa5. To pass the time.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o

So3. To see how popular I am.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
So4. In order to gain recognition.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Bus3. To promote my product	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Pa6. I pass time when I'm bored.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Pa7. In order to keep oneself busy.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Re 1. In order to establish a serious relationship.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Re 2. In order to fall in love.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
So5. In order to better show my charm.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
So6. In order to gain attention.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Pa1. In order to have fun when I have nothing to do.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Pa2. For entertainment.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Re3. In order to meet a future husband or wife.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Se5. To satisfy Sexual fantasy	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Se6. In order to find a lover	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Fl1. In order to learn how to flirt.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Re4. In order to find someone to date	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Re5. In order to establish emotional connections with people on the platform.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Se3. To see how easy it is to find a Sexual partner.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Se4. In order to increase my	o	o	o	o	o	o	o

sexual experience							
Fl2. In order to improve my social skills.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Fl3. In order to increase my flirting experience.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Se1. In order to find friends who can have sexual intercourse.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Se2. In search of a one-night stand.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Bus4. To advertise my product	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Fl4. Because it's difficult to talk to people in real life	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Tr3. In order to learn about popular scenic spots in foreign countries or Shinshiro through local people.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Tr4. It's easy to find people to meet in foreign countries or other cities.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Tr5. Expand my social network in a new environment.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Fl5. Because taking the first step on a dating app is more enjoyable.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
F6. In order to increase confidence in my social skills.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Tr1. In order to obtain tips from local people (in restaurants, shopping venues, gathering places, etc.) during travel.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o

Tr2. In order to meet other travelers/locals in the new city.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Ex1. This way, I no longer focus my attention on my ex boy/girlfriend	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Be3. Because it is a fashion.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Be4. Because dating apps are very popular.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Pe1. Because my friend thinks I should use dating apps.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Pe2. Recommended by friends	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Ex2. In order to forget my ex boy/girlfriend	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Ex3 I want to think less about my ex boy/girlfriend	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Be 1. Because everyone uses dating apps.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Be 2. Because I want to become fashionable.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Pe3. Someone else helped me register an account for dating app	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
so2.In order to make new friends.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
so2.In order to broaden my social network.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Se3. In order to meet single individuals with similar sexual orientations.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Di1. In order to take a break during work or study.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Di2. To procrastinate on what I should do	o	o	o	o	o	o	o

(work, study, etc.).							
so3. In order to meet new friends.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
so 4. In order to talk to people I don't know.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Di3. In order to overcome boredom during work or study.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Cu1. To see how this app works	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Cu2. Out of curiosity.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
To establish connections with others who share the same sexual orientation.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
In order to meet people with similar sexual orientations.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Cu3. I just want to give it a try.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o

13. What type of city do you come from (where your household registration is located)?

o Old tier 1 cities o New tier 1 cities
o Tier 2 cities o Tier 3 cities
o Tier 4 cities o Tier 5 cities
o Rural areas

14. What is your education level (including ongoing education)?

o Primary school o Junior high school o High school and vocational secondary school
o Junior college o Undergraduate o Graduate
o Doctoral degree o Below primary school

15. What is the current pre-tax personal monthly income (in yuan) of you or your family's main source of income?

o Less than 2000 o 2000-5000 o 5000-15000
o 15000-30000 o 30000-50000 o 50000-100000
o Over 100000

16. Do you have a house or an apartment?

o Yes

○ No (please skip to question 18)

17. What type of city is your house located in?
○ Old tier 1 cities ○ New tier 1 cities
○ Tier 2 cities ○ Tier 3 cities
○ Tier 4 cities ○ Tier 5 cities
○ Rural areas

18. What is your current job/position? If you are a full-time student, please choose the current occupation of your family's key income earner.
○ National and social leadership positions ○ Management positions ○ Private business owners
○ Professional and technical personnel positions ○ Middle and low-level government civil servants ○ Small business owners or bosses
○ Commercial service workers or factory workers ○ Farmers ○ Unemployed, semi unemployed

19. What type of city do you live in?
○ Old tier 1 cities ○ New tier 1 cities
○ Tier 2 cities ○ Tier 3 cities
○ Tier 4 cities ○ Tier 5 cities
○ Rural areas

20. What is your marital status?
○ Single
○ Married
○ In a serious/stable relationship
○ In casual/uncertain relationships
○ Other

21. Your age:
Under 18 years old ○ 18-25 ○ 26-30 ○ 31-40 ○ 41-50 ○ 51-60 ○ 60 and above

22. Your gender:
○ Male
Female
○ Other_____

23. What is your sexual orientation?
○ Homosexuality
○ Heterosexuality
○ Bisexuality
○ Other_____

24. May I ask if you are interested in participating in a one-on-one interview on this topic?

If interested, please leave your contact information so that we can contact you. If not interested, please write 'no'.

_____

国内约会交友 APP 用户情况调查

您好!

本次问卷调查研究年满 18 岁的交友 app 用户在使用包括探探、陌陌、Blued、Grindr、Tinder、Bumble、Soul、Hily，Spot 戳戳、积目、珍爱网、同城交友、或微信的'附近的人'等约会交友 APP 的情况。问卷调查结果是严格保密的，仅作学术研究，仅发起者一人可见，敬请放心如实回答。愿意参与本次网上问卷,请点击"下一页"。

同意书

这是一项由宁波诺丁汉大学博士生吴仙琴发起的针对约会交友 APP 用户的问卷调查的研究，十分感谢您的参与!

本次问卷调查不会涉及您个人身份，敬请放心如实回答。问卷含有 24 个问题，大约 5 分钟。您的参与是自愿的。您能够选择任何时候中途退出问卷调查。

如果您有任何关于这项研究的问题,您能够通过我的邮箱 hnxxw4@nottingham.edu.cn 和电话 15325747945 与我取得联系。

请按"下一页"键以示您同意参与本研究。

1. 您是否曾经使用过或正在使用约会交友 APP?（探探、陌陌、Blued、Grindr、Tinder、Bumble、Soul、Hily，Spot 戳戳、积目、珍爱网、同城交友、或微信的‘附近的人’等约会交友 APP） [单选题] *

○是

○否 (请结束本次问卷)

2. 您最常使用哪些约会 APP? [多选题] *

□Tinder	□探探	□陌陌	□Soul	□Hily
□附近的人 (微信)	□Blued	□Bumble	□Grindr	□Hinge
□OKCupid	□spot 戳戳	□积目	□珍爱网	□同城交友
□其他 _____*				

3. 您最喜欢的约会 APP 基础功能是什么? [多选题] *

□定位配对	□滑动配对	□故事/专辑/广场/朋友圈功能
□相遇	□暗恋助力	□直播
□兴趣配对	□在线聊天	□游戏
□群组	□其他 _____*	

4. 您曾经订阅过约会 APP 上的 VIP 功能吗? [单选题] *

○是

○否 (请跳至第 7 题)

5. 请问您一个月订阅费要花多少钱（元）? [单选题] *

○小于 2	○3-10	○11-30
○31-50	○51-100	○101-500
○超过 500		

依赖于（题目：4. 您曾经订阅...）第 1 个选项

6. 请问您最感兴趣的是哪些 vip 功能? [多选题] *

□更改位置 □超级喜欢 □无限喜欢

□独家徽章/突出的昵称 □免广告浏览 □无限倒带/回顾

□限制个人信息的公开 □看谁喜欢你 □快速聊天

□提高曝光率 □其他 _____

7. 您多久使用一次约会 APP? [单选题] *

○少于每月一次 ○每月一到四次 ○每周至少一次

○每天至少一次 ○我不记得了

8. 您每次使用约会 APP 多长时间? [单选题] *

○超过 1 小时 ○20 分钟至一小时（包括一小时） ○5 分钟到 20 分钟（包括 20 分钟）

○少于 5 分钟（包括 5 分钟） ○记不清了

9. 请选择下列您呈现在您的约会软件中的个人资料 [多选题] *

□年龄 □性别 □外表 （照片）

□性格 □教育程度 □收入

□职业 □兴趣爱好 □价值观/人生观

□人生经历 □当前位置/距离 □家乡（户口）

□是否有房 □其他 _____

10. 请问您在约会交友 app 上对潜在对象的筛选标准是什么呢 [多选题] *

□年龄 □性别 □外表 （照片）

□性格 □教育程度 □收入

□职业 □兴趣爱好 □价值观/人生观

□人生经历 □当前位置/距离 □家乡（户口）

□是否有房 □其他 _____

11. 请问您使用约会交友软件最重要的原因是什么？ [多选题] *

□找对象（男/女朋友、结婚对象）	□消磨时间	□寻找约炮对象，增加性体验
□寻求归属感	□满足好奇心	□锻炼调情/恋爱/聊天技能
□扩大社交圈子	□因为朋友都在用	□忘记前任
□旅行的时候玩玩	□想得到别人的认可	□寻找相同性取向的人
□从学习/工作中转移注意力	□商业引流，拓展业务	□其他

12. 您是何种程度同意或不同意以下使用约会 APP 的原因？（含 58 小题）[矩阵量表题] *

	非常不同意	不同意	比较不同意	中立	比较同意	同意	非常同意
So1.为了提升自尊	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
So2.为了获得他人的认可。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Pa3.因为它很好玩。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Pa4.为了放松。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Bus1.为了接触我的潜在客户。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Bus2.为了让更多人买我的东西。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Pa5. 为了打发时间。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
So3. 为了看看我有多招人喜欢。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
So4. 为了获得称赞。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Bus3.为了推销我的产品	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Pa6.因为我无聊时会打发时间。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Pa7. 为了使自己忙碌。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Re1.为了建立一段认真的关系。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Re2.为了坠入爱河。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
So5. 为了能够更好地估计自己的魅力。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o

So6.为了得到关注。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Pa1. 为了当我没事干时可以消遣。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Pa2.为了娱乐。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Re3.为了遇见未来的丈夫或妻子。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Se5. 为了满足性幻想	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Se6. 为了找情人	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Fl1. 为了要学会调情。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Re4. 为了找一个人约会	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Re5. 为了与平台上的人建立情感联系。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Se3. 为了看看找到性伴侣有多容易。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Se4. 为了增加我的性经历	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Fl2. 为了提高我的社交能力。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Fl3.为了增加我的调情经验。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Se1. 为了寻找有可以性交的朋友。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Se2. 为了寻找一夜情。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Bus4.为了给我的产品打广告	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Fl4.因为在现实生活中很难与人交谈	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Tr3. 为了通过本地人了解国外或新城市的热门景点。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Tr4.在国外或新城市轻松找到可以聚会的人。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Tr5.扩大我在新环境中的社交网络。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Fl5.因为在交友 app 上迈出	o	o	o	o	o	o	o

第一步比较令人愉快。							
FI6. 为了增强对自己社交技巧的信心。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Tr1. 为了在旅行时向当地人（在餐馆，购物场所，聚会场所等）获取提示。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Tr2. 为了在新的城市时结识其他旅行者/当地人。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Ex1.这样我就不再将注意力集中在我的前任身上。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Be3.因为这是一种时尚。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Be4.因为约会交友 app 很潮。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Pe1.因为我的朋友认为我应该使用约会交友软件。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Pe2.因为朋友推荐使用	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Ex2. 为了忘记我的前任。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Ex3 为了少想我的前任。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Be1.因为每个人都使用约会交友软件	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Be2.因为我想变得时髦。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Pe3.别人帮我注册了约会交友软件的账号	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
so1. 为了结交新朋友。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
so2. 为了拓宽我的社交网络。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
se3. 为了结识具有相似性取向的单身人士。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Di1. 为了在工作或学习期间可以休息一下。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o

Di2. 为了拖延我应该做的事情（工作，学习等）。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
so3. 为了去见新朋友。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
so4. 为了与我不认识的人交谈。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Di3.为了克服工作或学习时的无聊。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Cu1. 为了看看这个软件是怎么玩的	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Cu2.出于好奇。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
se1.为了与具有相同性取向的其他人建立联系。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
se2. 为了认识具有相同性取向的人。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Cu3.就想尝试一下。	o	o	o	o	o	o	o

13. 您来自什么类型的城市（您的户口所在地）? [单选题] *

o 老一线城市　　o新一线城市
o二线城市　　o三线城市
o四线城市　　o五线城市
o农村

14. 您的最高学历（包括在读）是什么? [单选题] *

o小学　　o初中　　o高中和职业中专
o大专　　o本科　　o研究生
o博士　　o小学以下

15. 您或您的家庭经济主要收入来源者当前的税前个人月收入（元）是多少?

[单选题] *

o少于 2,000	o2,000-5,000	o5,000-15,000
o15,000-30,000	o30,000-50,000	o50,000-100,000
o超过 100,000		

16. 你有房子吗? [单选题] *

o有

o没有 (请跳至第 18 题)

17. 您的房子在哪种类型的城市? [单选题] *

o 老一线城市	o新一线城市
o二线城市	o三线城市
o四线城市	o五线城市
o农村	

18. 您目前的工作/职位是什么？如果您是全日制学生，请选择您的家庭经济主要收入来源者的当前职业 [单选题] *

o国家和社会领导人职位	o管理人员职位	o私营企业主
o专业技术人员职位	o中低层政府公务员	o小型企业主或小老板
o商业服务工人或工厂工人	o农民	o失业，半失业

19. 您现在住在什么类型的城市? [单选题] *

o 老一线城市	o新一线城市
o二线城市	o三线城市
o四线城市	o五线城市
o农村	

20. 你的婚姻状况如何? [单选题] *

o单身

o已婚

o保持认真/稳定的关系

○在偶然/不确定的关系中

○其他

21. 您的年龄段：[单选题] *

○18 岁以下 ○18~25 ○26~30 ○31~40 ○41~50 ○51~60 ○60 以上

22. 请问您的性别 [单选题] *

○男

○女

○其他 _____

23. 请问您的性取向是什么 [单选题] *

○同性恋

○异性恋

○双性恋

○其他 _____

24. 请问您是否有兴趣参与关于此话题的一对一访谈？ [填空题] *

如有兴趣，请留下您的联系方式以便与您联系。如无，请写“无”。

_____

Note: Rankings of cities (“The Ranking List”, 2023)

三线城市 70个

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兰州	海口	湖州	扬州	洛阳	汕头	盐城
赣州	唐山	乌鲁木齐	济宁	镇江	廊坊	咸阳
泰州	芜湖	邯郸	揭阳	南阳	呼和浩特	阜阳
江门	银川	遵义	淮安	漳州	桂林	淄博
新乡	连云港	沧州	绵阳	衡阳	商丘	菏泽
信阳	襄阳	滁州	上饶	九江	宜昌	莆田
湛江	柳州	安庆	宿迁	肇庆	周口	邢台
荆州	三亚	岳阳	蚌埠	驻马店	泰安	潮州
株洲	威海	六安	常德	安阳	宿州	黄冈
德州	宁德	聊城	宜春	渭南	清远	南充

四线城市 90个

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马鞍山	开封	亳州	丽水	郴州	鞍山	宣城
许昌	衢州	孝感	枣庄	宜宾	邵阳	秦皇岛
泸州	舟山	南平	吉林	龙岩	三明	曲靖
梅州	德阳	湘潭	宝鸡	茂名	焦作	运城
平顶山	榆林	汕尾	怀化	吉安	日照	黄石
淮南	黔东南	鄂尔多斯	包头	韶关	永州	乐山
东营	晋中	滨州	营口	张家口	恩施	大庆
咸宁	毕节	河源	十堰	娄底	抚州	汉中
锦州	景德镇	眉山	大理	西宁	玉林	盘锦
临汾	衡水	黄山	红河	黔南	承德	濮阳
益阳	阳江	长治	齐齐哈尔	大同	铜仁	赤峰
内江	达州	北海	荆门	西双版纳	铜陵	遂宁
鄂州	佳木斯	淮北	漯河	延边	牡丹江	

五线城市 128个

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昭通	凉山	广安	丹东	六盘水	拉萨	辽阳
延安	铁岭	葫芦岛	抚顺	玉溪	百色	保山
萍乡	广元	三门峡	新余	湘西	晋城	天水
吕梁	随州	忻州	朝阳	池州	自贡	绥化
张家界	呼伦贝尔	丽江	云浮	普洱	梧州	鹰潭
安顺	贵港	德宏	四平	鹤壁	庆阳	本溪
安康	通化	钦州	楚雄	文山	通辽	资阳
阜新	松原	黔西南	伊犁	喀什	巴音郭楞	酒泉
阿克苏	巴中	锡林郭勒	河池	定西	巴彦淖尔	鸡西
攀枝花	黑河	贺州	白山	来宾	雅安	乌兰察布
临沧	阳泉	克拉玛依	嘉峪关	乌海	白银	张掖
昌吉	防城港	商洛	吴忠	白城	平凉	双鸭山
和田	铜川	陇南	鹤岗	朔州	辽源	七台河
金昌	哈密	阿拉善	石嘴山	兴安	伊春	崇左
林芝	固原	临夏	海西	儋州	怒江	武威
海东	阿勒泰	中卫	大兴安岭	塔城	博尔塔拉	昌都
迪庆	日喀则	甘孜	吐鲁番	阿坝	山南	甘南
阿里	果洛	那曲	三沙	海南	海北	玉树
克孜勒苏	黄南					

Appendix 4. Interview Framework

1. Could please tell me about yourself? (3 minutes)
- Where are you from?
- (If not a local) Why are you here?

2. Can you talk about your experience of using the dating app? (4 minutes)
- What apps do you usually use?
- Why do you choose these apps?
- How do you feel about using dating apps?
- When did you start using this type of app (for example, just graduated, or changed job)?
- Can you describe your specific situation at that time? (Such as economic status, interpersonal relationships, and physical and psychological changes)

3. Why did you use dating apps? (6 minutes)
- Have your reasons for using dating apps changed?
- (If any) how did it change?
- (If yes) What changed you?
- The results of my recent questionnaire show that the motivation for using dating apps has nothing to do with personal characteristics such as gender and age. What do you think?
- (Do you think people of different genders have different motivations for using dating apps?)
- What do you think about the reasons for using dating apps have to do with?
- why?
- Can you give me an example?

4. Do you usually put your authentic information on the personal information display of the app? (5 minutes)
- (Yes. High degree of authenticity) Why?
- (Yes/No. Low degree of authenticity) Why?
- In what aspects do you generally hide the truth?
- why?
- Do you think the others' information is true?
- If you score from 1 to 10, how much do you think the truthfulness of the information of most people you meet can be rated?
- How do you judge?
- Can you give me an example?

5. How do you generally choose your potential daters? (criteria: face, age, education, location, etc.) (4 minutes)

- Which aspects account for more proportions?
- why?
- Under what circumstances do you think, or what expectations s/he meets in the end, do you want to see him/her?
- why?
- Can you give me an example?

6. How do you usually chat with people on dating apps? (For example, what did you say first, and then what did you talk about?) (5 minutes)
- What are the main topics to talk about?
- How long do you usually talk at a time?
- Have you ever met someone who makes you really want to keep in touch with?
- why?
- What happened then?

7. What do you think of the relationship developed on dating apps? (6 minutes)
- What type of friends do you think they are suitable to be (hook-up mates, chat friends, friends who can have sex, lovers, marriage partners, business partnerships or customers)?
- why?
- Do you know anyone who has developed from dating apps to getting married and having babies?
- What do you think of their relationship?
- Can you talk about the closest relationship you have?

8. What do you think of some married people who use dating apps? (3 minutes)
- Have you ever met some married people on dating apps?
- Do they disclose their marriage/relationship status on their profile page?
- How did you learn about their marriage/relationship status?

9. Have you met someone who has a different sexual orientation from yours on the dating app? (2 minutes)
- What kind of apps do you usually encounter them?
- How do you find that they are people with different sexual orientations?
- Can you talk about your experience?

10. What do you think of the "middle class"? (3 minutes)
- If income, education, occupation, house and *hukou* are all included in the definition of class, do you think you are considered to be in the middle class?
- why?

- Of all the people you meet in dating apps, what percentage are middle-class?
- How do you judge it?
- Can you give me an example?

11. Do you think people of different classes use dating apps differently? For example, a person with a relatively low-class status, such as a person who has no job, has a low education, and is receiving government relief funds, a middle class, such as an accountant in a private company, and a person of Wang Sicong level uses dating apps, will their goals and results be different? (10 minutes)
- What are the differences?
- why?
- What exactly is it like?
- Which class of people do you think is more likely to get satisfaction from this type of app?
- why?
- Can you give me an example? You can also talk about examples of friends you know.

12. Do you think the difference in social class has an impact on the progress of the relationship between two people? (4 minutes)
- Can you give me an example?
- My recent survey shows that middle-to-high-income people care less about their partners' income and personal values than low-income people. What do you think?

13. How do you and your partner get along? (5 minutes) (For example, do you think that boys should bear most of the household/living expenses, while girls should bear most of the housework and take care of the elderly and children?)
- Have you ever met someone with this traditional concept of labor distribution on a dating app?
- Can you talk about your experience of getting along with a boy/girl?

14. What do you think of a boy who frequently has sex with different girls? (5 minutes)
- What do you think of a girl who frequently has sex with different girls?
- Do you think there is any difference between the sexual desires of boys and girls? (Do boys have higher sexual desire needs than girls?)

1.聊天气/环境/食物 （了解人群的爱好、性格）（3 分钟）
你是哪里人呢？
（若非本地人）你什么时候来的呢？
跟家里人在一起吗？
（若没有跟家人一起）那你对这个城市感觉怎么样？

2.可以谈谈你的约会交友 app 的使用经历吗？（4 分钟）
你一般用什么 app 呢？
为什么选择这个软件呢？
你是什么阶段（如刚毕业，换工作）开始用这类 app 的呢？
可以描述一下当时你的具体情境吗？（如经济状况，人际关系，生理和心理等变化）

3.你当时使用这类 app 是为了找什么呢？(6 分钟)
你使用这类 app 的心态有发生变化吗？
（若有）是怎么变化的呢？
（若有）是什么事情改变了你呢？
我最近的问卷结果显示，使用约会交友 app 的动机跟性别、年龄等个人特征都没关系，你怎么看呢？
（你觉得不同性别的人使用这类 app 的动机会有区别吗？）
你认为使用约会交友 app 的原因会跟什么有关系呢？
为什么呢？
可以举个例子吗？

4.你一般会把自己的真实信息放到 app 的个人资料显示上吗？（5 分钟）
（会。真实的程度高）为什么呢？
（会/不会。真实的程度低）为什么呢？
你一般会在哪些方面隐瞒真实情况呢？
为什么呢？
你觉得对方的信息是真实的吗？
如果 1 到 10 评分，你觉得你遇到的大部分人的信息真实度可以评几分呢？
你是怎么判断的呢？

5.你一般是怎么选对象的呢？（看脸、年龄、学历、地点等）（2 分钟）
哪些方面占的比例更多呢？
为什么呢？
你觉得要在什么样的情况下，或者说，他最终符合你的哪些期待，你才有可能跟他约见面呢？
为什么呢？
可以举个例子吗？

6.你一般是怎么跟约会交友 app 上的对象聊的呢?
（比如说先说什么，然后又聊了什么？）（5 分钟）
主要聊些什么话题呢?
一般一次会聊多久呢?
有没有遇到过一个特别聊得来的人让你特别想跟她保持联系的人呢?
那后来怎么样了呢?
为什么呢?

7.你是怎么看待从约会交友 app 上发展起来的关系呢？？（5 分钟）
你觉得他们适合成为什么类型的朋友呢（炮友，聊天的朋友，可以发生性行为的朋友，男女朋友，结婚对象，生意上的合作关系或顾客）?
为什么呢?
有没有认识一些从约会交友 app 发展到结婚生娃的人呢?
你怎么看待他们的关系呢?
可以谈谈你保持的最亲密的一段关系吗?

8.你怎么看待一些使用约会软件的已婚人士呢？？（3 分钟）
你有没有在约会交友 app 上遇到过一些已婚人士呢?
他们有没有在个人资料页公开自己的婚姻/关系状态呢?
你是如何了解到他们的婚姻/关系状态呢?

9.你有没有在约会交友 app 上遇到一些跟你的性取向不同的人呢？（2 分钟）
一般在什么 app 上遇到的呢？你怎么发现他们是性取向不同的人呢?
可以讲讲你的经历吗?

10.你对‘中产阶层’怎么看？（15 分钟）
如果收入、学历、职业、房子和户口都放进阶层的定义指标里，你觉得自己算不算在中产阶层?
为什么呢?
你在约会交友 app 中遇到的所有有交流的人中，有多大比例是算中产阶级呢?
你是怎么判断出来的呢?
可以举个例子吗?

11.你觉得不同阶层的人使用 约会交友 app 有区别吗？（10 分钟）比如说，一个处于阶层地位比较低的人，比如没有工作，学历低，领政府救济金的人，一个中产阶层，比如私企的会计师啊，和一个王思聪级别的人，如果都用约会交友 app，他们的目的和结果会有区别吗?
会有什么样的区别呢?
为什么呢?
具体是什么样的呢?

你认为哪个阶层的人更容易从这类 app 中获得满足呢?
为什么?
可以举个例子吗?也可以说说你知道的朋友的例子。

12. 你觉得社会阶层的差异对两个人的关系进展有影响吗?
可以举个例子吗?
最近我的问卷调查显示 中高收入的比低收入的人更不在乎伴侣的收入和个人价值观,你怎么看呢?
13.你怎么看待传统的"男主外女主内"呢? 5 分钟)(比如说,你会不会认为男生应该承担大部分的家庭/生活开支,而女生应该承担大部分的家务并照料老人和孩子?)
你在约会交友 app 上遇到过抱有这种传统的男主外女主内观念的人吗?
可以讲讲你们的相处经历吗?

14.你怎么看待一个频繁和不同女生发生性行为的男生? (5 分钟)
你怎么看待一个频繁和不同女生发生性行为的女生?
你觉得男生跟女生的性欲有什么不同吗?(男生会不会比女生的性欲需求高呢?