Strategic, Conflicted, and Interpellated: Hong Kong and Chinese Queer Women's Use of Identity Labels on Lesbian Dating Apps

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Dating apps have become an indispensable part of lesbian lives in China and Hong Kong. These platforms give queer women the choice to use identity labels to describe their gender presentations and dating preferences. For example, *T* and *TB* signify masculine presentation; *P* and *TBG* signify femininity and attraction to *T* and *TB*; *H* describes in-between-ness; *pure* refers to feminine women who are exclusively attracted to other feminine women; and *no label* indicates a rejection of all labels. Drawing from seven in-depth interviews and participant observations, this article illustrates how these women creatively interact with the apps' affordance to strategically self-present. It demonstrates that these women feel ambivalent about using labels, which they see as both effective and restrictive, and argues that their app experiences can directly shape their own self-identity. Finally, this case study provides important insights into the challenges identity categories pose for dating app users of nonnormative sexuality and gender, which might be relevant to other cultural contexts.

Keywords: lesbian, dating app, self-presentation, affordance, interpellation, Hong Kong, China

Since the early 2010s, lesbian dating apps have emerged as a crucial sexual landscape for queer women in China and Hong Kong. The most popular app of this kind in China, Rela, boasts more than 5 million registered users ("Chinese Lesbian Dating App," 2017). Likewise, 30,000 women have registered on Hong Kong's enormously popular app Butterfly in just more than a year (Choy, 2018; Tang, 2015). These figures mirror similar trends across the world over the same period during which apps such as Tinder catered to millions per day globally while lesbian-specific apps also grew in popularity in the Anglophone West (Ferris & Duguay, 2020; MacKee, 2016; Murray & Ankerson, 2016; Newett, Churchill, & Robards, 2018). What distinguishes the Chinese-language apps from their English counterparts is their use of locally specific lesbian identity labels. To give an example, China's Rela gives users the option to self-identify as either *T*

(masculine), *P* (feminine), *H* (androgynous), *Bisexual*,[2] *Other*, or *undisclosed* (Chan, 2021a). Similarly, Hong Kong's Butterfly presents users with the choice among *TB* (masculine), *TBG* (feminine), *pure* (feminine-seeking feminine), and *no label* (not-categorizing) (Choy, 2018; Tang, 2015).

In what ways do these app designs draw from existing local sexual practices, and how do queer women use and feel about them? This study draws on seven in-depth individual interviews and supplementary participant observations to illustrate how queer women creatively use the apps' affordances for strategic self-presentation despite feeling ambivalent about identity labels themselves. Additionally, the article reveals the ways in which the apps' labeling system comes to shape users' own self-identity. Finally, I will use this case study to argue that queer dating apps provide unique self-presenting challenges for users of nonconforming sexual and gender and that this finding may resonate with such users in other societies.

Literature Review

The concept of *affordance* is widely used in dating app research. Coined by James Gibson (1979), affordance describes the ways in which animals perceive and interact with their surroundings. For example, an animal sees a cave and uses it as shelter. But a cave only becomes a shelter because the animal perceives it as such.[3] In the digital communication context, affordance describes the mutual relationship between a digital environment's objective properties and its users' subjective perceptions. It underscores both the constraints of the platform and users' agency (Chan, 2021a; Nagy & Neff, 2015).

Dating app affordance both enables *and* restricts users' experiences (Hutchby, 2001). For example, according to Chan (2021a), Chinese lesbian dating apps' community-oriented app designs can help build a strong lesbian community. Researchers studying men who have sex with men (MSM henceforth) have highlighted the ways in which Grindr's geolocative design helps users build new loose networks of sexual partners (Birnholtz & Abbott, 2015; Gudelunas, 2012; Race, 2015) and, at the same time, restricts users with its emphasis on self-presentations and short-lived encounters (Licoppe, Rivière, & Morel, 2016; Race, 2014; Yeo & Fung, 2018).

An identity-labeling system is a form of affordance. It restricts the encounters and relationships users can have with one another (one must pick a label and interact with a labeled user; Tang, 2015). It falsely assumes that a user can only have one identity at a time (Chan, 2021a). On the positive side, it gives users the ability to use labels for selective self-presentation. Selective self-presentation refers to the ways in which individuals strategically edit their appearances and behaviors to appeal to their targeted audience (Baumeister, 1982; Goffman, 1959; Gonzales & Meyers, 1993; Leary, 1996; Leary & Kowalski, 1990). This includes accessing the preferences of their targets and maintaining a desirable impression. In digital communications, users take advantage of platform affordances to create desired impressions (Hogan, 2010; Litt, 2012; Toma & Hancock, 2010; Walther, 1992, 2007), for example, by way of using a dating app's pre-inscribed features such as profile pictures (Degen & Kleeberg-Niepage, 2021; Miller, 2020), "interests" section (Klofstad, McDermott, & Hatemi, 2012), open-ended bio (Chan, 2021b), and in this case, lesbian identity labels.

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[2] From my own observations, the category *bisexual* is not as commonly used as *T*, *P*, and *H*, likely because bisexual women themselves can also use *T*, *P*, and *H* to form same-sex relationships.
[3] This example was used by Chan (2021a) and Nagy and Neff (2015).

A key distinction between this study and other research on digital self-presenters is its focus on self-identity, in place of self-disclosure. For example, research on heterosexual digital daters (Carpenter & McEwan, 2016; Ellison & Hancock, 2013; Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006; Musil, Preglej, Ropert, Klasinc, & Babič, 2017; Toma & Hancock, 2010; Toma, Hancock, & Ellison, 2008) generally considers self-presentation to be a matter of accuracy. They examine whether users disclose accurate personal information such as age, weight, and height. Research on MSM app users (Chan, 2016; Lemke & Weber, 2017; McGuire, 2016) also focus on self-disclosure. Specifically, they examine whether MSM users disclose their faces in their profile pictures, and consider levels of facial self-disclosure in relation to users' perceived risks of being recognized and outed in mainstream homophobic societies. For this study, rather than focusing on objectively measurable indicators or privacy concerns, the focus is on subjective and unstable self-identity. To be sure, a lesbian app user's identity label is not fixed or ontological. A woman can self-identify as *TB* today and *no label* tomorrow, and it will not be comparable with lying about her age or hiding her face.

My approach to identity labels follows from a constructivist approach similar to that of gender studies scholars Judith Butler (1999) and Anne Fausto-Sterling (2012). These scholars show that gender identities are social constructs. A person is not born with a gender identity. They become a man or a woman when they are exposed to gender binarism and construct their self-identity accordingly. Similarly, lesbian dating app users' identity labels are not a matter of factual self-disclosure but self-construction. In cultural studies, interpellation is a key theory in understanding how we construct self-identities. The term was proposed by Louis Althusser (1970/1971), who argues that subjectivity arises from one's position within broad social structures. For example, we become gendered when medical authority assigns us maleness or femaleness at birth (Butler, 2011). We become sons and daughters when we are born into heteronormative kinship systems (Mageo, 2012). And we become citizens and patriots in nationalist cultures (Zake, 2002). Lesbian dating apps are similarly digital social structures that shape personal identities. Pushing beyond the scope of affordance (e.g., mutual interactions between digital objects and users), an interpellation approach to dating apps reveals that users can themselves be transformed by the digital environments. Users reflect, learn, and craft their identities through their interactions with the app. They assume new identities—become someone new—on the apps.

In addition to affordance and interpellation, this study also draws on the recent affective turn in queer digital intimacy. Elija Cassidy's (2018) and Lik Sam Chan's (2021a) studies on Australian and Chinese MSM, respectively, reveal feelings of reluctance and ambivalence. They highlight the ways in which app users may experience positive emotions about connecting with other MSM as well as negative emotions concerning being outed, harassed, and associated with sexual promiscuity. In this sense, this study's extension of these themes of discontent also echoes with Nagy and Neff's (2015) theory of imagined affordance, which they define as the combined effects of the "material, mediated, and emotional aspects of technological artifacts" (p. 7). The scope of this study therefore not only covers queer women's rational tactics but also their emotional states, in particular their senses of disempowerment and internal conflicts.

Finally, in a recent meta-study, Wu and Ward (2018) argue that established literature has yet to historicize queer dating apps and that a genealogical (Allen-Robertson, 2017) or an archaeological (Parikka, 2012) approach could identify the ways in which queer app designs draw from prior sexual practices and sexual knowledges that predate the arrival of digital platforms. In the following sections, I will take precisely a genealogical approach to outline a clear lineage of identity label uses from the late 20th century to the digital present. In doing so, this article again complicates the framework of affordance by positioning the

app design itself as the contemporary extension of decades-old uses of identity labels, rather than as purely the inventions of fully agential app developers.

Background

Hong Kong was a British colony from 1841 to 1997. Throughout the 20th century, the region received waves of ethnic Han Chinese immigrants from mainland China who were eager to escape the Chinese Civil War (1927–1949) and the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945). In the 1960s and 1970s, middle-class schoolgirls began using the English word "tomboy" (the precursor to today's *TB*) to refer to people who were assigned female at birth, who wore masculine clothing and desired normatively feminine women (Chou, 2000; Lai, 2003, 2007). At the time, the term described both female-to-male (*FTM*) transgender subjectivity and lesbian desires.[4] This word remained largely unheard of beyond schoolgirls' circles as the British colonial government held explicitly homophobic views and had made male homosexuality an offense punishable by life (Chou, 2001). It was not until 1992, after the decriminalization of male homosexuality in the previous year that a publicly visible lesbian scene began to develop in Hong Kong (Chou, 2001). It was during this decade that "tomboy" was abbreviated to *TB* to make it easier for lower-class non-English speakers to pronounce, and the term quickly became widely used (Chou, 2001; Tang, 2011). The same decade also recorded the use of the term *TBG* (abbreviated from "tomboy's girl"), which described feminine women who were romantically involved with *TB* (Wang, 2001).

The Hong Kong lesbian scene grew in the physical spaces of upstairs lesbian cafés and in the online spaces of bulletin boards, chat rooms, and Web pages (Lai, 2003; Tang, 2010, 2011, 2015). In a trade city with a world-leading Internet penetration rate (61% as of 2006),[5] young queer women quickly learned to use the Internet to share information. By the year 2000, the city had already developed its own lesbian social platform, Blur-f (Tang, 2015). On Blur-f, queer women interacted as *TB* and *TBG* and generally moved into *TB-TBG* coupledom. Those who were not comfortable identifying as *TB* or *TBG* soon developed the term *pure* as an alternative (Leung, 2008). At the time, *pure* indicated non-identification but its meaning gradually shifted to describe feminine women who exclusively date other feminine women.[6] *No label* eventually replaced it as the non-categorizing alternative. Blur-f eventually closed in 2011 due to a lack of ad revenue, prompting a team of developers to create the city's first lesbian dating app Butterfly in 2013 (Tang, 2015). Logically, Butterfly's design adopted the identity labels from its predecessor (Table 1).

Table 1. Identity Labels on Hong Kong's Lesbian Dating App Butterfly.

TB	Masculine user seeking feminine partner. Usually paired with *TBG*.
TBG	Feminine user seeking masculine partner. Usually paired with *TB.*
Pure	Feminine user seeking feminine partner.
No label	Non-identification.

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[4] This paragraph is a summary of the work undertaken by Chou (2000) and Lai (2003, 2007).

[5] This figure is quoted in Martin (2008) and originally came from China Internet Network Information Center's January 2006 report.

[6] The early definition of *pure* was recorded in Helen Hok-Sze Leung's (2008) ethnographic work. The new usage appears in my 2018 fieldwork.

Lesbian identity labels in China follow a closely related trajectory. In the early 20th century, Chinese intellectuals became intrigued by discussions on lesbian desires among Japanese and Western European sexologists (Sang, 2003). There was by then unprecedented public interest in understanding lesbianism, but such discussions were brought to a halt by the combination of Japanese invasions, civil wars, and the eventual victory of the Chinese Communist Party in 1949 (Sang, 2003). Under Mao Zedong's rule, literary and artistic representations of homosexuality became completely extinct (Sang, 2003). Gender itself was significantly transformed under Mao, who encouraged women to discard all signs of femininity (Liu, 1991; Rofel, 1999).

After Mao's death, Chinese reformists pushed to open the country to the outside world in 1978. This paved the way for lesbian identity labels to develop in China. In the late 1990s, young queer women in eastern seaboard urban cities began to have uncensored Internet access to the outside world (Martin, 2008). They connected with queer women in Hong Kong and Taiwan and learned about their lesbian identity labels (Engebretsen, 2014; Kam, 2013, 2014; Sang, 2003). Chinese queer women were initially confused as to what made a *tomboy* distinctive from the average woman, as the average woman in a Maoist society was already masculine (Wang, 1999, 2001). Over time, Chinese queer women eventually adopted the term *tomboy* and abbreviated it to *T*, and they started to refer to *T*'s feminine partners as *P* or *po* (the Mandarin word for wife; Fung, 2021). The term *H* later emerged to indicate a "halfway" midpoint between *T* and *P*. *H* may refer to fashion (androgyny), personality (neither assertive nor gentle), and/or sex positions (versatile).

Table 2. Identity Labels on Chinese Lesbian Dating App Rela.

T	Masculine user seeking feminine partner. Usually paired with *P*.
P	Feminine user seeking masculine partner. Usually paired with *T*.
H	Halfway between *T* and *P*.

In the 2010s, identity labels crossed paths with China's exponentially growing pink economy (Table 2). State policies created a national start-up bloom and inadvertently encouraged queer tech professionals to develop products for the niche pink market (Liu, 2022). For example, Blued, a hugely successful app for MSM, was launched in 2012 and served 15 million registered users as of 2015 (Li, 2015). The first lesbian dating app Rela (formally The L) was launched the same year, and its most popular competitor Lesdo joined the market in the following year. By 2016, Lesdo was serving 1.5 million registered users, among whom 225,000 were active daily (Chan, 2021a; Liu, 2017). Despite their success, Chinese queer apps operate in an increasingly hostile political environment. In 2017, the state took down an MSM app (supposedly for sexually explicit content) and allegedly shut down Rela briefly for its participation in a same-sex marriage campaign (Chan, 2021a). Against this hostile climate, lesbian apps perform the dual functions of matchmaking and community-building (Chan, 2021a; Liu, 2017). Identity labels are relevant to both purposes, as this paper will show in the upcoming participant observation section.

Research Design

This study draws on qualitative interviews and participant observations. I interviewed seven queer women who identified themselves as lesbian dating app users. The interviews were taken from a large-scale project analyzing the everyday uses of identity labels in the lesbian communities in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China, and the project mainly focused on offline social interactions, media consumption, and private

autobiographies. A total of 40 participants were recruited through personal connections, social media recruitment advertisements, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) organizations, and snowball sampling. The project was open to anyone who self-identified as a member of the local lesbian community and posed no restrictions on participants' age, race, ethnicity, educational background, class, and sexual and gender identity. Among the seven interviewees appearing in this article, five attended in-person individual interviews in Cantonese, while two were interviewed in Mandarin. Interview data were translated by the author.

The sample consists of four Hong Kong and three mainland Chinese participants. Their ages range from 25 to 38 with an overall average of 32.2. All are ethnically Han Chinese, which reflects the ethnically homogeneous populations of both China and Hong Kong (Census and Statistics Department, 2017; National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2020). All are university-educated, hold white-collar positions, and belong to the middle-class.[7] Table 3 presents their demographic information. It should be noted that they do not maintain intergenerational relationships with older queer women; therefore, the views they express might represent only their generation. Participants are given pseudonyms and all identifiable information has been removed. The interviews received prior ethics approval.

Table 3. Participants' Demographic Information.

	Origins and Citizenship	Interview Site and Language	Age	Profession	Education	Identity Label
Sophia	Shanghai, China	Shanghai, Mandarin	36	Private educator	University	*H*
Sydney	Changsha, China	Shenzhen, Mandarin	27	Information technology consultant	University	*T*
Miu	Guangzhou, China	Hong Kong, Cantonese	25	Nonprofit organizer	University	Undisc-losed
Kit	Hong Kong	Hong Kong, Cantonese	34	Retailer	Postgraduate	*Pure*
Penelope	Hong Kong	Hong Kong, Cantonese	39	Social worker	Postgraduate	*TBG*
Piper	Hong Kong	Hong Kong, Cantonese	27	Financial planner	University	*No label*
Sarah	Hong Kong	Hong Kong, Cantonese	35	Clerk	Tertiary	*No label*

Data were analyzed through two cycles of coding: an initial cycle of provisional coding and a second cycle of pattern coding. My coding strategy draws from queer Asian ethnographic works (Baudinette, 2017; Benedicto, 2014; Engebretsen, 2014; Jackson, 2004; Li, 2011, 2017; Martin, 2008; Sinnott, 2004; Zhao, 2013) as well as Baxter's (2008) feminist post-structuralist discourse analysis approach. This approach sees

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[7] As a working definition, I draw on Yu's (2020) schema and define the middle classes as those who hold professional positions and/or enjoy geographic mobility.

interview data as (a) meaning-making processes that only make sense within a particular context or community, and (b) performative practices that contribute to the construction of speakers' subjectivities. Likewise, I approach my interview data as (a) locally specific discourses emerging among communities of queer women in China and Hong Kong and (b) as indicative of the ways in which the interviewees make sense of their own personal identities.

Importantly, while I initially set out to compare data from China and Hong Kong, I could not identify any significant differences between the two sets of data. This could be in part because of the small sample size, and in no way do I suggest that the lived experiences in the two regions are exactly the same (e.g., China's lesbian apps face much greater political pressure). But it does suggest the possibility of strong overlaps in user experiences of labels across the two regions. I will therefore address the seven interviews as one data set for the purpose of underlining similar themes that arose from all the interviews.

To better understand the app designs, I conducted participant observations intermittently between 2018 and 2022, and these digital data are included below. I decided not to include screencaps taken during my observations out of respect for users' privacy, especially considering the fact that lesbian app users have only shared their personal data under the assumption that it is viewable only by other app users. I will therefore include only publicly available promotional screenshots released by the app designers.

Participant Observations

The labeling system is built into the app designs of both Rela and Butterfly. Rela users can connect with one another through the app's geolocative interface (Figure 1). The interface is a grid-like platform showcasing the profile pictures of nearby users. If a user wishes to further narrow down the profiles appearing on this grid, they may do so by adding an identity label filter—for example, one that targets *P* users specifically—and the app will automatically screen out all other profiles. In addition, the app can also organize user profiles in a Tinder-like swiping interface (Figure 2). The swiping interface profile includes one's nickname, age, weight, height, relationship status, astrology, and identity label. It encourages users to quickly decide on whether to match with a potential partner based on such information. In other words, the app design incorporates identity labels as a quick partner-vetting tool that reduces the chances of mismatched relationships. Butterfly's approach to identity labels is noticeably similar. Though the app has no geolocative functions (presumably due to the fact that the majority of users are already based in the small city of Hong Kong),[8] the app also provides an identity label filter to screen out undesirable profiles on its grid-like interface (Figure 3). And, similar to Rela, identity labels also appear in user profiles alongside information such as age and bio.

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[8] According to Tang (2015), 70% of Butterfly users are based in Hong Kong. The remaining 30% are based in Taiwan and the diaspora.

Figure 1. Rela's geolocative interface (left) (Hangzhou Re Lan, 2022).
Figure 2. Rela's swiping interface (middle) (Hangzhou Re Lan, 2022).
Figure 3. Butterfly's matchmaking interface (right) (Butterfly Media, 2021).

Though app affordances (filters and user profiles) clearly invite users to draw on identity labels to quickly decide on whether to connect with each other, it would be a mistake to suggest that app users are fully compliant with or restricted by app designs. My observations indicate that it is common to see both Rela users and Butterfly users taking advantage of the open-text bio section to provide further information on their identity labels. Some would say they describe themselves as feminine (*TBG / P*) but are open to changing their gender presentations for their future partners. Others would openly challenge the definitions of identity labels. These examples reveal that app users can create alternative self-presentation strategies through the open-ended text section. They bear resemblances to the MSM users who include additional information on their profiles (e.g., neighborhood, city, and institutional ties) to make themselves more desirable (Birnholtz, Fitzpatrick, Handel, & Brubaker, 2014). Another similar case study is Singaporean MSM app users, who, when given Grindr's U.S.-centric racial categorization (which includes only broad terms such as *Asian*), decided to add locally specific race labels such as *Chinese* and *Malay* in their profiles (Ang, Tan, & Lou, 2021). In all three instances, self-presentations are not entirely restricted by what app developers intentionally include.

At the same time, some users voluntarily and actively use identity labels to create small virtual communities even when the app designs do not mandate label uses. On Rela, users regularly name their livestream chat rooms (Figure 4) using phrases such as *TPL* (*T-P Love*), *PPL* (*P-P Love*), and *TPH* (all users welcome). Identity labels sometimes appear in conjunction with other personal identity markers to create chat rooms such as *30+ PPL yinyue liaotian* (causal chat group for feminine music lovers aged 30 or above who are looking for love with one another), *TPH/30+ dongbei* (all users living in northwest China aged 30

or above), and *Beijing liaotian jiayou P jin* (causal chat and dating group for Beijing-based *P* users). The situation on Butterfly is similar. Though the app design itself does not allow group formations, Butterfly users regularly create discussion boards (Figure 5) to promote group chats that they created on other instant communication platforms. These include, for example, *25+ signal group pure only* (group chat for *pure* users aged 25 or above on the encrypted platform Signal) and *35+ LINE group TB TBG pure* (chat for *TB*, *TBG*, and *pure* users aged 35 or above on the Japanese app LINE). As previous research (Chan, 2021a; Liu, 2017) points out, lesbian dating apps serve a crucial function of building virtual marginalized communities for queer women by giving them alternative and relatively low-risk channels to seek out and support one another. Identity labels are part of that community-building process. Considering this in relation to my observations above, it can be said that Rela's and Butterfly's app affordances involve both objective app designs (i.e., filters and profiles that encourage label-based dating) and agential user perceptions (i.e., users' resistance to identity labels in the open-text bio and users' voluntary employment of labels for creating small networks). What is missing in this picture is the emotional states of users. In the following section, I turn to individual interviews to draw out the affective complexities of their experiences.

Figure 4. Rela's livestream interface (left)(Hangzhou Re Lan, 2022).
Figure 5. Butterfly's discussion board (right)(Butterfly Media, 2021).

Interviews

I first met Kit in Hong Kong's downtown industrial area, where she ran her retail business. Kit was a 34-year-old local woman with an athletic frame. In her teenage years, Kit identified as *TB*, had short hair, and dressed in trendy masculine activewear. But Kit claimed that she had grown out of this *TB* phase and

embraced her *pure* identity. She saw adult *TB* as people who were still stuck with an adolescent preoccupation with masculinity and found them undesirable as prospective partners. As we strolled through the brightly lit city streets and cheap eateries, she began telling me about this *pure*-exclusive group her friends ran:

> We recruit on Butterfly, of course. But many people just don't read the recruitment guidelines clearly! We get *TB* messaging us all the time. What don't they understand? *Pure* do not date *TB*. They say it's unfair. They don't understand it's just about getting a right match. Ok. For example, let's picture a hiring manager posting a job advertisement. It says you need an engineering degree to apply. Someone with a journalism degree applies. They get rejected and get very upset! What do these people want? It's them who don't follow the rules.

Kit's story was my introduction to the *pure*-exclusive side of the Hong Kong lesbian dating scene, and it quickly illustrates the fact that app users find labels to be essential in screening out unwanted others. Ideally, a *pure*-only disclaimer should preemptively shut out *TB* users. To put it directly, the goal of self-presenting is partner vetting.[9] But Kit also engaged in this practice in a state of constant discontent because while she may imagine there to be a fundamental difference between feminine-presenting *pure* and masculine-presenting *TB*, other users might not share her interpretations of gender expressions and, might as a result, breach the boundary she so wished to maintain.

Kit was not the only one frustrated. Soon after our interview, I met Miu at a bookstore café in downtown Hong Kong. Miu was from Guangzhou, China, and had just arrived in Hong Kong that morning, and took the time to see me before picking up her Hong Kong girlfriend from a nearby work address later that night. A 25-year-old who worked in a nonprofit organization, Miu spoke with a firmness that I had not expected from someone her age. When I asked her about her thoughts on identity labels, she began telling me pensively:

> Actually, I came to know about identity labels on dating apps. You know, like Rela. There, it is not an option to not use a label. [. . .] But you know, I've been on dating app for a year looking for casual sex. But sometimes labels are not very useful because there are people who use them to describe gender appearances, and there are others who use labels to describe sex positions [note: *T* for sexually penetrating partner; *P* for penetrated; *H* for versatile]. But these things don't have to correlate! It's frustrating.

Miu's annoyance—like Kit's—emerged from the paradoxical fact that labels are widely used as partner-vetting tools, but their meanings depend on individual interpretations. Users are dependent on labels for communicating about themselves and their sexual/romantic preferences, but at the same time, they might have conflicting interpretations and expectations based on the same sets of labels.

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[9] For a comparable example of dating app users employing self-presentation tactics to vet potential partners, see Chan (2021b).

And while Kit and Miu are disappointed in the inefficiency of labels, others are frustrated because they find labels to be so deeply embedded in the local lesbian dating scenes that they are completely inescapable. Take for example, my interview with Piper. I sat down with 27-year-old financial planner Piper at a Japanese café on a quiet evening. Piper had short hair, a gentle voice and an easy, calming energy. As a Hong Kong local, she has been using Butterfly for several years though the experience has so far frustrated her. She explained,

> Currently, my Butterfly profile describes me as *no label*. But actually, I have changed that a couple of times. You see, when I first registered, I also used *no label*. Most of the people who messaged me then were *TB*. I know myself well enough to know that I am not compatible with *TB*, so I had to do something to discourage them from messaging me. Naturally I changed my label to *pure*, because everyone knows *pure* and *TB* are competitors [for feminine women] and not themselves compatible partners. So that went well for a while, but at the end I went back to *no label*, because I just really don't like limiting myself.

Curious, I asked Piper if she wanted a dating app that did not use labels at all. Piper said she has in fact tried such an app. The app in question was Her, a British lesbian app popular among Hong Kong's White expats and did not employ the locals' labeling system. Piper elaborated,

> Her gave me the option to leave the "sexual identity" checkbox blank, so I did. And no one matched with me! Absolutely no one! It was the worst luck I ever had with dating. You know, at the end of the day, *no label* is still a label. It tells you something. It says, I don't care about labels! I cannot be categorized! It's an attitude. It's not the same as leaving the checkbox blank. If Butterfly ever gives us the option to leave it blank, I don't think people would do it.

Piper's brief but illuminating reflection encapsulates another key theme: Lesbian dating app users feel drawn to identity labels because of their capacity to screen out unwanted matches, and yet, some feel confined by their own tactical use of this partner vetting tool. They not only perceive labels to be an unavoidable necessity to make themselves instantly recognizable and desirable but also resent having to reduce themselves to what they deem to be oversimplified categories. This is certainly true for Penelope. Penelope was a casual acquaintance I had met a few times prior, a 39-year-old social worker in Hong Kong for whom I have much respect. She usually spoke with quiet authority, so it was a complete surprise when she began speaking hesitantly in response to my question about her label:

> I re-installed Butterfly recently after not using it for some time, and this time I set my identity label to *TBG*. Previously, I used *no label*. And I . . . I just wanted to try it out. I don't really . . . I don't see myself as *TBG*. But I am quite certain that the people that I am attracted to would describe themselves as *TB*. But, in fact, my core belief is that we should not use labels at all. Sure, labels might say something about the kind of relationships you want to have, but every relationship is different! Everyone is different . . . and labels just don't capture that at all.

Another interviewee who shares this sense of confinement is 27-year-old Sydney. We were introduced to one another through WeChat acquittances and had not communicated much before meeting in person. We eventually met at a Western restaurant in a mall in Shenzhen, where she had moved to pursue a career in information technology. When I began the interview by asking about her label, Sydney hesitated:

> I am a *T . . .* ? I suppose. I remember finding out about labels from online forums during high school. And I just thought, I guess *T* looked quite cool, and I started dressing more androgynously or you can say masculine. But honestly as an adult, I only ever say that that I am a *T* when I am on lesbian dating apps. Otherwise, there is really no need. I just don't feel the need to define myself.

To rephrase Sydney's reflections, there is a perceived need to define oneself on a digital dating app, and at the same time, identity labels appear less like a necessity in otherwise offline spaces where one can more easily present oneself through contextual cues. Digital dating spaces are quick-paced and label-based. They demand effective self-presentations. In offline spaces, "there is really no (perceived) need" for labels.

Newcomers to lesbian dating apps cast another light on the intertwinement between digital dating and identity labels. Unlike the women who have already appeared in this study, the two interviewees below were relatively new to lesbian dating apps. One of them was Sophia, a 36-year-old Shanghainese educator with a cheerful personality. We talked casually over dinner in a middle-class residential area in Shanghai. Sophia had only recently signed up for a profile. She said:

> I always knew about the labels *T*, *P*, *H*. But I just never thought they were relevant to how I saw myself, you know? A short while ago my first lesbian relationship ended, and my friend encouraged me to download the app to find someone new. There, on the registration page, I was asked if I was *T*, *P*, or *H*. And I thought, oh I had to pick one. I was really, really taken aback! I didn't know what to do, and I just went with *H*. But I don't know, I don't think we should use labels. We are all just women after all.

It is Sophia's story that demonstrates how interpellation applies to lesbian dating apps. For Althusser (1970/1971), selfhood is not a biologically given but is constructed at the moment when we are addressed by society. In his classic example, a police officer yells "Hey, you!" and a person turns to answer it. In doing so, the person is hailed into the subject position of the interrogated. In Butler's (2011) gendered retelling, a doctor pronounces "It's a girl!" and the infant is hailed into the position of the girl. A lesbian dating app's registration page functions in a similar manner. Before using the app, Sophia did not have any identification with identity labels. But when she was asked to pick a label, she was hailed into conceptualizing herself as a *T*, *P*, or an *H*. To be sure, one is not born an *H* but *becomes* one in the process of using the app.[10]

I will end this section with a final interview with Sarah, which epitomizes the key themes that arose across the interviews (i.e., frustration over labels' ambiguity, conflicted feelings about label use, and creating

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[10] This is in reference to Simone de Beauvoir's (1949/1956) assertion that "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (p. 273).

a new sense of self). Sarah was a 35-year-old clerk in Hong Kong who had just recently come out to herself and installed Butterfly with the hope of connecting with the city's lesbian population. In a cramped café, she told me over Japanese snacks that

> I'm still confused about labels. The app asked me to pick one, but I hadn't even heard of some of them! I had to go and look up what they meant. And after some research, I figured I might be *no label*. But honestly, I'm still not sure if I understand them correctly. [. . .] Actually, it's depressing that we must do this. Dating is hard enough as it is. But then again it really is necessary. Labels do make it a lot easier to search for the right people and avoid mismatches. [. . .] Otherwise, you end up wasting each other's time. You must understand, I see the value in this. But it's so frustrating!

Discussion

Taking an affordance approach, this article explores the ways in which affordances are produced mutually by objective app designs and user perceptions. While certain app designs (such as filters and user profiles) do require identity labels and encourage label-based user interactions, app users are not simply confined. They actively negotiate with label use through the open-text bio section. They voluntarily introduce label use to other areas of the apps to build small virtual communities. In addition, the app developers only incorporated labels because they already existed in local lesbian conventions. Therefore, it would be a mistake to understand label use as a top-down enforcement. It is a kind of affordance that is produced by app designs, user perceptions, and local genealogy.

Turning to the interview data, Nagy and Neff's (2015) refined concept of imagined affordance is particularly useful here because their approach involves not just user perceptions (e.g., users perceiving open-text bio as an opportunity to elaborate on labels) but also users' affective experiences. The women appearing in this article clearly expressed various forms of discontent. Miu and Kit were frustrated because the labels were too ambiguously defined to connect them with the right audience; Piper and Penelope felt conflicted because the labels they perceived to be most effective did not in fact reflect how they self-identified; Sydney felt pressured into having to categorize herself; and newcomers Sophia and Sarah were confused and frustrated about the labeling system. Their experiences clearly resemble the kind of "participatory reluctance" that Elija Cassidy (2018) observes in Australian MSM digital culture and the ambivalence about dating apps discussed in Lik Sam Chan's (2021a) study on Chinese MSM. However, a key difference between the two studies and this article is that while Cassidy's and Chan's participants feel conflicting emotions about various aspects of the apps (e.g., excitement about connecting with other MSM, fear about privacy, resentment toward the apps' association with promiscuity), the women in this study are conflicted about their own use of identity labels. Their discontent is not directed toward app developers for including a feature they do not want. On the contrary, they see labels as fundamental (e.g., recall Piper's suggestion that users do not want to leave their label blank).

These forms of discontent emerge from the fact that identity label is a partner-vetting self-presentation strategy with no ontological bases. Unlike self-disclosure of personal information, picking a label on the app is a process of self-creation within an existing discursive system. This is most evident for

Sophia and Sarah, who became *H* and *no label*, respectively, in the process of registering themselves on the apps. The less obvious examples are Piper and Penelope, who continuously reevaluated how they truly identified. For both, the private and offline selves are too complicated and nuanced to be fully captured by label categorization.

Here, I want to speculate on the cross-cultural applications that this study might have. Penelope's pointed observation that labels cannot capture the full complexities of diverse personalities is certainly indisputable, but the fact that she chose a label anyway (and one that she does not even identify with) suggests a certain self-presentation pressure. Similar instances appear in Anglophone lesbian online culture (Ferris & Duguay, 2020; Herrera, 2018; Hightower, 2015) where research participants expressed that they self-described as *lesbian* online but did not in fact identify with the term in private. Herrera (2018) observes that lesbian online daters might "perceive a powerful social requirement to make their sexuality intelligible to others" (p. 319). My suspicion is that, for people with nonnormative sexual and gender identities across different regions, there is a shared pressure to self-present in a straightforward and easily understandable way on queer online dating platforms. For example, one can easily imagine Halberstam's (1998) transgender butch figures struggling to identify themselves as *FTM*, *butch*, or *queer* on a dating app. Though the women in this article deal with a separate and locally distinctive set of identity categories, the pressure to draw on the existing categorization of gender and sexual identifications can very well be similar for queer dating app users in other societies.

Conclusion

This study examines identity labels as a form of affordance produced by local lesbian history, objective technological attributes, as well as users' agential uses and emotions. Focusing on affective experiences, I explore the ways in which queer women experience different forms of discontent such as frustration, confusion, and disempowerment despite the supposedly empowering prospect of a lesbian-specific app. I argue that these types of discontent stem from the fact that label is a self-presentation strategy that has no ontological basis, and this creates opportunities for mismatches as well as perceived pressure to interpellate oneself and to self-reduce to easily recognized identity categories. Though the study is limited by its relatively small sample of seven interviewees, it provides important insights into how future research may approach gendered and sexual self-identity in queer digital spaces, which cannot be adequately theorized and examined through the lens of objective self-disclosure alone. Furthermore, the study also serves as a call for future research to examine queer online daters' perceived pressure to self-present in cross-cultural and global contexts.

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