Cold Intimacies: The Paradox of Digital Dating in China

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Abstract: With the rapid growth of digital technology, digital dating platforms has become an integral part of social interaction and romantic relationships. In China, the rise of dating apps has significantly commodified interpersonal engagements. Platforms like Tantan have not only redefined how young people connect but have also facilitated a new form of "cold intimacy". This study explores the evolving landscape of online dating in China, particularly through the lens of the Tantan app, and examines how it reshapes young people's perceptions and practices of intimacy. Using Lauren Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism," this paper investigates how the promise of connection through dating platforms may foster an attachment to unattainable ideals, leaving users disillusioned. It employs a mixed-methods approach to analyze user experiences, revealing how online dating commodifies intimacy and fosters "cold intimacy", where users quantify and homogenize themselves, catering to societal and personal expectations. The consequences of this commodification are explored through Byung-Chul Han's theories on the impact of consumer culture on human emotions. Ultimately, this paper concludes that in this consumer-driven, efficiency-obsessed emotional landscape, the pursuit of authentic intimacy becomes more elusive, as both societal pressures and digital platforms influence modern love. Understanding these dynamics offers insights into the challenges faced by contemporary Chinese youth as they navigate their romantic and emotional lives in a technology-mediated society.

Keywords: Cruel optimism, cold intimacy, commodification, emotional capitalism, digital dating platforms.

1. Introduction

In April 2017, China's government issued the *Middle- and Long-term Youth Development Plan (2016-2025)*, elevating youth dating services to a national priority [1]. Despite efforts to encourage marriage among young adults, marriage rates continue to decline while the single population grows, with 134 million unmarried people aged 20-49. As online dating expands, with over 30 million Chinese users as of June 2022, it provides an efficient way for youth to connect independently. Yet surveys show that few lasting relationships are established through these platforms, which raises the issue of why intimate relationships remain elusive despite the convenience of digital connections. Understanding young singles' relationship expectations is crucial for the government to effectively engage with this demographic and support their development in this key life stage.

The concept of "cruel optimism", as described by Lauren Berlant, may provide some insights into this phenomenon. Cruel optimism refers to the attachment to objects or experiences that are obstacles

to one's flourishing [2]. In the context of online dating, the promise of finding love and connection through these platforms may be a form of cruel optimism, as the reality often falls short of expectations. Furthermore, Friedrich Engels' ideas in *The Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State* suggest that the institution of marriage and the family has been shaped by economic and social forces throughout history [3]. In the modern era, the rise of digital technologies and the emotional capitalism they facilitate may be reshaping intimate relationships in ways that prioritize efficiency and individualism over deeper connection and commitment. Yan Yunxiang's work on modern love in China also provides a relevant framework for understanding the challenges of online dating. Yan argues that the pursuit of romantic love has become a central preoccupation in contemporary Chinese society [4], but that this ideal is often in tension with the practical realities of social and economic pressures.

This essay explores how online dating platforms, specifically China's Tantan app, are reshaping young people's perceptions and practices of intimacy through the lens of emotional capitalism and cold intimacy theory [5]. In an era where emotions and relationships are increasingly commodified, these platforms are altering the very logic of how connections are formed and maintained. Through an analysis of young Chinese users' experiences on Tantan, this study investigates how the app shapes expectations and perceptions of love, and how these shifting views in turn influence intimate practices. "Eros as excess and transgression denies both work and bare life" [6]. Philosopher Byung-Chul Han asserts in his book *The Agony of Eros*, that the ecstatic, transgressive nature of Eros is at odds with the efficiency-driven logic of modern society, which frames the central paradox. This essay aims to unpack the reasons why it is easier than ever to establish superficial digital connections yet harder to forge deep, intimate bonds in an age of unprecedented technological connectivity. By situating this question within the context of China's rapidly evolving dating app scene, this study seeks to delve into the complex interplay of love, labor, and technology in shaping the affective lives of contemporary Chinese youth. Furthermore, the research explores how digital dating platforms are reshaping the modern emotional landscape for young people, emphasizes the growing disconnect between the pursuit of idealized intimacy and its disappointing reality. By discussing the role of commodification in these platforms, this paper sheds light on the unintended emotional consequences that come with swiping for love. The results could provoke deeper reflection about the limits of digital connection and inspire more human-centered approaches to designing technologists that genuinely complement emotional fulfillment.

2.   Method

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis to explore the phenomenon of "cold intimacy" in the context of online dating in China. The primary research platform is Tantan App, one of the mainstream application platforms for Internet dating in the country. Tantan has a large user base of young people who are facing pressure to get married and seeking intimate relationships, making it an ideal field site for this study.

The qualitative component of the study involves conducting in-depth interviews and content analysis to understand the users' perceptions, experiences, and emotional dynamics of online dating on Tantan. Interviews are conducted with a diverse sample of Tantan users, focusing on their motivations, expectations, and emotional responses to the platform. The interview questions aim to explore the participants' understanding of intimacy, how they perceive "cold intimacy," and the impact of digital interactions on their emotional well-being. Thematic analysis is used to identify recurring patterns and themes in the interview data, offering insights into the deeper socio-cultural implications of online dating in China.

The quantitative analysis includes data collection through surveys distributed to a larger group of Tantan users. The survey collects information on user demographics, usage patterns, and attitudes

towards online dating, including their experiences with forming and maintaining relationships on the platform. Statistical methods are applied to analyze the survey data, using descriptive statistics to summarize the demographic and behavioral trends, and inferential statistics to identify correlations between variables such as frequency of use and perceived emotional fulfillment. Data processing is conducted using statistical software, allowing for the identification of significant trends that can complement and contextualize the qualitative findings.

3. The Beginning of Cold Intimacy: Self-Quantification and Homogeneity

On the stage of social interaction, young people are often driven by this "rhythm of marriage" set by mainstream culture: in the short few years after completing their studies, they must face the major goal of life – getting married. This pressure often makes them feel depressed, as being unmarried seems to mark them as losers in life. They feel that they are standing still while their married peers are constantly moving forward. Under the dual pressure of social norms and family expectations, young people choose to seek intimate relationships through online dating platforms. This pursuit of love and connection, however, may be a form of "cruel optimism," as described by Berlant [2]. The promise of finding an ideal partner through these platforms often falls short of reality, creating a gap between expectations and experiences.

As young people navigate the world of online dating, they engage in a process of self-deconstruction and self-presentation that transforms the self into a quantifiable, tradeable, and competitive commodity. This process, which is referred as "self-quantification" [7], involves breaking down the self into different parts, such as tastes, ideas, personalities, and temperaments, and describing each one through standardized questionnaires on dating platforms like Tantan. By selectively disclosing the parts of themselves that have social or economic value, such as educational background or family status, individuals endow their "self" with a market value.

However, in the process of actively shaping a widely accepted "self", individuals often ignore their true selves, leading to a homogeneous environment. As Friedrich Engels argued in *The Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, economic and social forces shape the institution of marriage and family [3]. In the context of online dating, the rise of digital technologies and the emotional capitalism they facilitate may be reshaping intimate relationships in ways that prioritize efficiency and individualism over deeper connection and commitment.

This homogenization is further reinforced by the abstract and anonymous nature of the audience on digital blind date platforms. Self-presentation is directed at a broad, abstract audience rather than specific individuals, leading to standardization and the adoption of cultural paradigms of ideal personality to avoid controversy or dislike. Yan Yunxiang's work on modern love in China also sheds light on this phenomenon. Yan argues that the pursuit of romantic love has become a central preoccupation in contemporary Chinese society, but that this ideal is often in tension with the practical realities of social and economic pressures [4]. In the context of online dating, the pressure to find a partner who meets certain criteria may overshadow the desire for a relationship of depth and uniqueness.

As a result, the process of finding a partner on online dating platforms becomes more akin to searching for goods in a market that meet certain criteria than seeking a relationship of depth and uniqueness. This commodification of the self and the homogenization of self-presentation constitute the beginning of cold intimacy in the digital age.

4. The Operation of Cold Intimacy: The Logic of Emotional "Coldness" in Interactive Situations

Online dating platforms provide users with unique emotional experiences by designing specific interactive situations. These platforms use algorithms to match users with potential partners every day, promoting interaction through various functions such as "text pair" and "audio pair". These designs shape a specific emotional logic that affects users' emotional choices, expressions, rhythms, and expectations.

4.1. Shallowness of Intimacy Emotional Choice

4.1.1. Dependence upon First Meeting

On online dating platforms, huge databases provide many potential candidates. If users have specific criteria for mate selection, such as hoping to find a partner under 35 years old with a master's degree or above, countless people fitting this description will be waiting to be found. Online dating situates users as choosers from the beginning, giving them unprecedented freedom and power to choose, in sharp contrast to traditional dating methods that often require a long period of observation and understanding before making a choice.

In an online dating environment, users only need to click "like" or "dislike" to decide whether to choose the other person, a rapid selection process often completed before actual interaction. This selectivity introduces a new kind of interchangeability, profoundly changing the public's view of emotional life. In the digital emotional world, with so many potential candidates, users can easily fall into the notion that every object can be replaced by someone else, making it easier to quickly browse and evaluate potential mates without spending much time getting to know them.

Instrumental rationality invades people's emotional lives, conveying the idea that romantic encounters should result from making the best choices. As Byung-Chul Han states, "in the course of a politicization of all spheres of life, it (love) is being domesticated into a consumer formula devoid of risk and daring, without excess or madness. All negativity, all negative feeling, is avoided" [6]. Faced with a sea of choices, individual desires increasingly depend on a highly introspective examination of the self, resulting in emotions being suppressed in constant comparisons.

4.1.2. Emotional Expression: "Like Means Like"

Traditionally, people think of "like" as a sign of a close, exclusive, and mutual relationship. However, in online dating platforms, the "like" button has been given new meanings and functions, becoming something that can be accumulated, compatible, divisible, and infinitely generated. Users can like multiple times in a short period based on their own filtering criteria and current mood, expressing "like" to multiple people and receiving an unlimited accumulation of "likes" from others within a specific time frame.

When serious and solemn intimacy becomes a finger-clicking game, many young users do not sincerely cash in "likes" into online intimacy. The link between "like" and the original intimate relationship is gradually severed, causing more young people to reflect on what "like" means and triggering distrust in the rapid formation of online intimate relationships. Although the establishment of virtual intimacy has become easy and random, it is still difficult to achieve true intimacy from a strange relationship to soul compatibility.

In short, online dating platforms push intimate relationships to a more intense level. The huge user database makes people make choices too quickly when faced with many potential partners, without spending enough time to get to know each other deeply. "Like" no longer represents a deep emotional

connection of exclusivity and mutuality, and the creation, development, and maintenance of intimate relationships are reduced to a series of quick, superficial interactions.

4.2. The Fluidity of Intimacy

4.2.1. Emotional Rhythm

In modern society with an accelerated pace of life and scarce leisure time, establishing intimate relationships has become particularly difficult. As Byung-Chul Han argues, the Internet positions individuals as desiring subjects who increasingly realize their wishes and feelings through commodities and media images, with their imaginative faculties shaped by the market and mass culture [6]. This commodification of emotional needs has given rise to efficiency-driven dating practices like speed dating. Apps like Tantan, especially with the "Buzz World" feature, embody a fast-food-style emotional consumerism, where conversations are automatically cut off after five minutes and users can quickly move on to the next potential match. This assembly-line approach to emotional communication challenges traditional notions of slowly cultivated intimacy and creates a state of patterned social interaction. While the desire for stable, intimate relationships grows stronger in an increasingly mobile and unstable society, the pursuit of love through high-speed, high-volume social methods creates potential contradictions. Many online daters recognize that this approach hinders deep connection, yet they persist with the expectation of efficiently making friends or finding a match.

This tension between the desire for authentic intimacy and the allure of efficient, technology-mediated connection reflects the broader challenges individuals face in navigating the complex interplay of emotions and relationships.

4.2.2. Emotional Expectations "The Next One Will Be More Perfect"

In the realm of online dating, young users exhibit a paradoxical "there is no rush" attitude, despite their eagerness to find an ideal partner quickly. They spend significant time searching countless profiles, yet often express a sentiment of "would rather be single than settle."

A striking discrepancy emerges. Despite high participation, the rate of successful matches remains surprisingly low. Compared to offline blind dates, people apply more stringent and specific criteria when choosing a mate online. The public nature of these platforms removes blind dates from the context of acquaintance society and exempts users from obligations like protecting the introducer's face.

Rebecca Heino and others argue that the Internet has made people beyond one's own social level seem within reach, leading to increased selection standards and dissatisfaction with well-matched individuals [8]. This reflects the infiltration of idealism, consumption logic, and transaction logic into emotional life through Internet technology. The seemingly endless options offered by online dating platforms convince users that a better match always exists. Faced with a non-ideal potential spouse, most choose to continue searching for a more perfect partner to maximize value. However, this abundance of choice leaves young people exhausted and confused, unsure of what they are waiting for and hoping to meet an ideal partner who may not exist.

The pursuit of efficiency drives interactions at an assembly-line pace, fostering result-oriented, fast-food relationships. The shallowness and fluidity of these connections lead to alienated perceptions and directly impact the emotional market's structure, exacerbating existing inequalities. As intimacy becomes increasingly commodified and transactional, the authentic human connections that many yearn for remain elusive in the digital dating landscape.

5.   Consequences of Cold Intimacy

5.1.   The Matthew Effect of the Emotional Market

The rise of online dating, driven by consumer culture and technology, has transformed the emotional market into a more open and efficient form. While differing from traditional blind dating, its core principles of mate selection remain unchanged. This new market offers seemingly unlimited choices, with exchange efficiency, time efficiency, and comparative thinking emerging as key characteristics of power.

However, this shift reinforces structural inequalities in the emotional marketplace, a phenomenon known as the Matthew Effect [9]. Platform business strategies intentionally amplify these inequalities, relying on the high-intensity exposure of advantaged users to attract new users. Those with advantages in education, occupation, and income are often skewed by platform traffic, rationalizing divisions in social space. The dilution of emotion further increases the Matthew Effect. As emotions have materialized and surfaced, finding a partner becomes a personal pursuit based on choice, need, and identity improvement. In this context, commodities are abundant and easily obtainable, turning people into picky self-service consumers who rummage through the market with a shopping mentality, reducing the chosen ones to commodities on shelves.

Behind this seemingly prosperous emotional market lies endless alienation. Most young users pursue the top percent, seeking an ideal, perfect mate rather than a true match. This gives users with high education, excellent jobs, and outstanding appearance unprecedentedly abundant choices while marginalizing and excluding others from this media-based dating carnival.

5.2.   Emotional Conflicts and Group Alienation

5.2.1. The Dual Nature of "Choice": From Freedom to Self-Restraint

The focus of intimate relationships in the era of online dating shifts from the interaction between two parties to a self-centered, unilateral identity performance process. As Eva Illouz observes, consumer culture stimulates desire and imagination, with images competing aggressively to be "used" and individuals getting lost in reverie as a result [10]. The Internet positions the modern individual as a desiring subject, longing for experiences and living them in an imaginary, virtual mode. Increasingly, the self realizes its wishes and feelings through commodities and media images, with its imaginative faculty determined by the market and mass culture. Consequently, the emotional experience, originally jointly created by both parties, is detached from the bilateral intimate relationship. It is transformed into a competitive game of self-organization, catering to users' personal needs for perception and presentation of self-charm. Authentic connection is superseded by the drive to craft an alluring online persona, fueled by consumerist desires and fantasies shaped by the digital dating marketplace.

5.2.2. Both Ends of Waiting: From Hope to Disappointment

Young people who first join the online dating market often harbor romantic aspirations to find love and an ideal partner. However, as time passes and failed attempts accumulate, their emotional expectations fluctuate. Between efficient screening and low conversion rates, many suffer from the torment of "waiting". As usage time increases, the experience of "rejection", both explicit and implicit, is so frequent and direct that users must consume huge amounts of emotional energy to maintain their mentality. "Waiting for fate" becomes a temporary solution and spiritual sustenance, gradually leading to the collapse of mentality.

Some young people have begun to reflect on the inherent structural flaws of the online dating system, expressing concern about inequalities in the emotional marketplace that benefit some groups while leaving others trapped in a spiral of self-doubt and anxiety. As an embodiment of "cruel optimism", despite this, these individuals often do not leave the mechanism, instead gradually recognizing the alienation and inferiority of their self-worth as they accept the rules of the game [7].

Just as the proletariat is alienated and exploited under capitalism, those who struggle to find matches in the online dating world would be seen as victims of a system that pits individuals against each other and assigns value based on narrow, oppressive criteria. The feelings of alienation and inferiority experienced by these individuals are not personal failings, but rather the inevitable psychological consequences of participating in a marketplace that commodifies human relationships. From Engels' perspective, the problems young people face in online dating are not isolated issues but are fundamentally rooted in the contradictions of capitalism. Genuine human connection and fulfillment cannot be achieved within a system that prioritizes competition and the commodification of social relations.

6. Conclusion

This study explores the complex interplay of love, labor, and technology in shaping the affective lives of contemporary Chinese youth, focusing on the experiences of young Tantan users. From the perspectives of emotional capitalism and cold intimacy theory, it delves into the central paradox about the reasons why, in an age of unprecedented technological connectivity, it is easier than ever to establish superficial digital connections, yet harder to forge deep, intimate bonds.

The analysis has shown that despite the Chinese government's efforts to promote marriage and dating among young people, the rise of online platforms like Tantan has not necessarily translated into more lasting relationships. Instead, the commodification, homogenization, and efficiency-driven logic of these apps often foster shallow, alienating interactions that fail to satisfy users' yearning for authentic love and partnership. Theorists like Engels, Illouz, and Han help contextualize these challenges within the broader contradictions of capitalism and consumer culture, which prioritize individualism and instrumental rationality over genuine emotion and care. The cruel optimism identified by Berlant is evident in the cycle of waiting and disappointment many young daters face, as they pursue an ideal mate who remains elusive.

Ultimately, understanding young singles' relationship expectations and experiences requires grappling with the structural inequalities and pressures they navigate, both online and offline. The pursuit of romantic love in contemporary China is often in tension with practical realities and social norms. While digital platforms like Tantan offer new opportunities for connection, they also risk exacerbating existing power imbalances and eroding the space for transgressive, transformative intimacy.

In the face of the technology-driven "cooling" of emotions, it is quintessential to remain mindful of the deep, meaningful relationships that transcend the superficial allure of the unattainable. By doing so, the narrative of love for this generation can be redefined, finding harmony between the digital and the real, the transient and the enduring. It is important not to be swayed by the false promises of endless choice and algorithmic compatibility, but instead to listen to the whispers of the heart, guiding towards the authentic connections that are craved. It is in the vulnerability of true intimacy, and in the courage to open oneself to another, that the greatest rewards of love are found. By approaching digital encounters with compassion, honesty, and a willingness to see beyond the screen, bonds can be forged that stand the test of time and distance. In this brave new world of love, individuals should be the architects of their own happiness, building bridges of understanding and affection that span the divide between the virtual and the real.

However, the essay has certain shortcomings that should be addressed in future research. It lacks a comprehensive exploration of the potential negative psychological impacts of technology on relationships, particularly in how social media can foster superficial connections and contribute to emotional detachment. Future research should also focus on examining the role of technology in facilitating genuine communication, especially in contexts where in-person interaction is limited. Additionally, more empirical evidence is needed to better understand the balance between digital interactions and authentic relationships, as well as the long-term effects of relying on algorithmic matchmaking. By addressing these gaps, a more holistic understanding of modern love in the digital age can be developed, ultimately guiding individuals to form deeper, more meaningful connections.

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