

Gender and the *privacy paradox* in Chinese college students' locative dating communication

Global Media and China
2021, Vol. 6(2) 225–240

© The Author(s) 2021

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/20594364211017333

journals.sagepub.com/home/gch



Altman Yuzhu Peng 
Newcastle University, UK

Abstract

This article explores the role gender plays in addressing the *privacy paradox* in the context of young Chinese people's locative dating communication. Based on a case study of 19 Chinese college students, I explore differing privacy management strategies adopted by female and male participants in their use of WeChat *People Nearby*. This gendered phenomenon reveals how *People Nearby* works within patriarchal Chinese society to pose more privacy-related risks to women than to men in locative dating communication. The research findings shed new light on the socio-technological processes through which existing gender power relations are reproduced in young Chinese people's use of locative social media applications.

Keywords

Chinese college students, gender, locative social media, *privacy paradox*, WeChat *People Nearby*

Introduction

Contemporary scholarship on digital cultures has explored the *privacy paradox* in young people's social media use (Chambers, 2017). The *privacy paradox* refers to an inconsistency between social media users' privacy concerns and their actual privacy behaviours (Kokolakis, 2017). As an emerging type of social media, locative social media applications mainly allow nearby users to detect one another's profiles, enabling them to pursue romantic or sexual encounters in the same geographic area. Using these applications requires that users make their digital profile viewable to nearby strangers, which potentially limits their ability to protect their privacy (Hjorth & Gu, 2012). Amid the popularity of locative social media applications around the world, the *privacy paradox* becomes a thorny issue that young people encounter in locative dating communication.

Corresponding author:

Altman Yuzhu Peng, Media, Culture & Heritage, School of Arts and Cultures, Newcastle University, Room 2.73, Armstrong Building, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 7RU, Tyne & Wear, UK.

Email: altman.peng@ncl.ac.uk



Creative Commons Non Commercial CC BY-NC: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>) which permits non-commercial use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage>).

Much of the existing *privacy paradox* literature tends to analyse young people as a homogenized social group (Kokolakis, 2017). Yet, research shows that female and male users often have different perceptions and expectations of privacy on the Internet, and these differences are configured by the patriarchal ordering of society (Park, 2015). An exploration of young people's gendered privacy behaviours on social media, thus, addresses the omission of a gendered scope in the existing *privacy paradox* literature by foregrounding the processes through which gender inequality is reflected in digital cultures.

In particular, the Chinese high-tech industry is now no longer a global-trend follower. Running parallel to the rapid development of China's digital infrastructure, many social media applications have been launched by Chinese high-tech companies and some pioneer applications have even reached out to the international market (Keane & Fung, 2018). In China, while a few of these applications are designed for the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) community, the majority are used by heterosexuals (L.-S. Chan, 2018). This article focuses on heterosexuals' use of locative social media applications. With heterosexual, young Chinese people's active use of locative social media (Z.-T. Chen & Cheung, 2018; de Seta & Zhang, 2015), an analysis of their approaches to privacy management helps to address the omission of a gendered scope in the existing *privacy paradox* literature.

This article is based on a case study of Chinese college students' use of WeChat *People Nearby*. WeChat is the most popular Chinese social media application, adopted by over 1 billion users worldwide (Tencent, 2019). This application has a locative dating function, *People Nearby*, which enables users to access a list displaying the profiles of fellow users whose locations are proximate to their own (Xue et al., 2017). Often, moving away from home to study in a different city, Chinese college students are distanced from their social networks developed in their hometowns. This life experience encourages them to use locative social media applications to socialize with nearby strangers (de Seta & Zhang, 2015). Chinese college students certainly cannot speak on behalf of all young Chinese people. Yet, as active users of locative social media applications, their navigation of the *privacy paradox* indeed offers rich empirical data to shed new light on the gender dynamics established in the Chinese context of locative dating communication.

Based on interviews with 19 Chinese college students, I explore how female and male participants use differing privacy management strategies in *People Nearby*-facilitated locative dating communication. I argue that gender power relations, which already exist in non-digital, heterosexual dating encounters between young Chinese people (Blair & Madigan, 2016), are invoked in locative dating communication as a result of their gendered navigation of the *privacy paradox*. This reveals how aspects of gender inequality are reproduced in the Chinese context of locative dating communication, by subjecting young Chinese women to greater restrictions when they attempt to capitalize on the dating opportunities offered by *People Nearby*.

In the following sections, I proceed with a review of the notions of privacy and the *privacy paradox* in locative social media use. This is followed by an explanation of the research methods and an analysis of the research findings. I conclude by expounding the implications of a gendered analysis of locative dating communication through tracing users' privacy behaviours.

Literature review

A contextualized understanding of privacy

Rooted in Western societies, the notion of privacy is associated with one's selective control of other social members' 'access to the self' (Altman, 1976, p. 8). This definition captures the dynamic

processes through which personal boundaries are contextually managed ‘along a spectrum of openness and closeness’ (Palen & Dourish, 2003, p. 130). Kokolakis (2017, p. 123) identifies three types of privacy: (1) informational privacy, which refers to private information about a person; (2) territorial privacy, which is concerned with the physical surroundings of the person; and (3) privacy of the person, which relates to the protection of the body against unexpected interference, such as a ‘physical search’. While informational privacy is socio-psychological, the latter two types suggest physical dimensions of the concept of privacy. In this sense, the notion of privacy shows entangled relations with both emotional intimacy and physical proximity, allowing them to regulate their personal realm ‘efficiently without interference or intrusion from the outside’ (Y. Chan, 2000, p. 1). As Altman (1976) notes, mutual trust can be built through the sharing of privacy, which promotes the development of intimate social relations.

Despite faint traces of its presence in Chinese tradition, privacy is considered to be a modern, urban concept in China (Y. Chan, 2000). Ancient Chinese society was built upon *guanxi*: a social fabric made up of connections between relatives and acquaintances (Wu & Wall, 2019). In a *guanxi* society, individuals are defined as an integral part of a community. This contributes to a long history of collectivism in China, which encourages Chinese people to enjoy being ‘recognized and praised for their conduct or achievements by fellow clansmen [sic] and neighbours’ (Y. Chan, 2000, p. 2). These collectivist traditions offered Chinese people a different scope for the management of public–private boundaries. Most Chinese people lived together with large numbers of family members and were linked to each other in *guanxi* networks. They were less likely to keep personal matters hidden from the wider community’s scrutiny unless the matters were ‘bad secrets’ (Miller et al., 2016, p. 189).

Privacy is understood differently in contemporary China, especially in urban areas. As a term introduced from the West through cultural products (Miller et al., 2016), privacy has been recontextualized in Chinese society as a result of the changing socio-material conditions today (Peng, 2020c). Since the early 1980s, the Chinese government has introduced fertility control, which continues to be strictly implemented in cities (Chambers, 2012).¹ Fertility control has led to the normalization of single-child nuclear families in urban China, which has naturally reduced the number of relatives typically held by Chinese urbanites. Such family structure changes have occurred alongside the government’s reform of China’s economic sectors, which have favoured urban development. This reform has provided Chinese urbanites with material prosperity, allowing urban nuclear families to live in their own properties without sharing with other relatives. Post-reform social transformations have encouraged individual urbanites to recognize not only their value to the society but also their autonomy in their personal lives, despite the priority of realizing ‘a strong state’ and ‘a wealthy nation’ (Yan, 2010, p. 57). As such, while such transformations have not completely diminished the country’s collective traditions (Peng, 2020a; Peng & Chen, 2021), they have provided a fertile ground for cultivating Chinese people’s awareness of privacy.

Interestingly, the notion of privacy in Chinese people’s everyday lives entails a gendered dimension, which is shaped by China’s socio-economic structures in which nuclear families are organized as the basic units (Tang & Dong, 2006). While protection of privacy from people outside the family is seen as a virtue, ‘holding back information from family members, especially from the family head, is considered a violation of family tradition’ (Tang & Dong, 2006, p. 289). In this way, patriarchal orders become embedded in Chinese people’s privacy behaviours, evidenced by the phenomenon that wives and children often have limited rights to privacy in the home, because husbands are understood to be ‘family leaders’, who possess ‘absolute authority over their subordinates’ (Y. Chan, 2000, p. 16).

As a privileged generation of Chinese people, young Chinese people grew up with the post-reform consumption of international cultural goods, which facilitates the global exchange of liberal ideas (Peng, 2020a). Evidence shows that they generally have a higher degree of acceptance of individualist values compared with older generations (F. Liu, 2019). Young Chinese people often see privacy as symbolic of a progressive modern lifestyle and use the protection of privacy as a way to claim their sovereignty over the personal realm free from outside intrusion (Tang & Dong, 2006). While spending a considerable amount of time on social media, their daily privacy behaviours have increasingly become a socio-technological process relating to the changing nature of privacy within digital cultures.

Privacy and digital technologies

Contemporary scholarship has noted an inconsistency between young people's privacy concerns and their privacy behaviours, which is referred to as the *privacy paradox*, has become increasingly notable amid the widespread uptake of social media applications around the world (Chambers, 2017). The technological architecture of social media applications encourages users' public display of the self by creating digital profiles. The protocol of social media use necessitates being prepared to 'trade privacy regulation for convenience' (Chambers, 2017, p. 30). The *privacy paradox* is thereby created on social media, leading to tensions between young people's protections and expectations of privacy, given their active social media use.

The *privacy paradox* is salient in young Chinese people's social media use. As early adopters of social media applications in Chinese society, young Chinese people are often active social media users. Western experience shows that young people tend to share personal information recklessly on social media (Ringrose et al., 2013). Given the public visibility of a social media profile, unseen audiences are potentially attracted and such observers may lurk undetected when young people are contributing original content to the platforms (Chambers, 2017). In this way, social media use constitutes a form of surveillance in which users consciously or unconsciously monitor each other via browsing the content that they share on these applications. With this form of surveillance in mind, Ringrose et al. (2013) discover that stalking and cyber-bullying are collateral consequences of young people's reckless personal information sharing and that these entail greater impacts on young women's mental wellbeing than on that of men, evidenced by the fact that breaches of privacy (e.g. women are often victims of revenge pornographies). In this process, female users' agency becomes hindered in social media use because of the greater risks that revealing privacy poses to them compared with men.

The privacy paradox in locative social media use

Nowadays, the *privacy paradox* in digital cultures has intensified as a result of the challenges brought on by locative technologies. Locative social media applications are often designed for locative dating communication between users who are unknown to each other (Wang, 2020). To facilitate mediated matchmaking, users must reveal personal information in a digital profile, typically including their self-portrait photos and sexual orientation (X. Chen & Liu, 2019). On traditional social media, where connections are largely based on existing social ties, young people often use privacy settings to hide this personal information from strangers, who are considered to be unwanted intruders into privacy (Chambers, 2017). However, locative social media use defines

sharing such information as a prerequisite for furthering users' sociality. The relationship between the 'stranger' and 'intimacy' is thereby redefined on locative social media, complicating young people's management of public-private boundaries by propelling them to develop strategies that address the particularity of these platforms.

Locative social media applications bring about a convergence of the physical and informational dimensions of privacy by utilizing GPS signals to locate users' physical positions and link these to their digital profiles. This locative feature is designed to support social interactions between strangers seeking dating encounters nearby (Ward, 2017). While using this locative feature, users' physical body and mobility become entwined with their presence in mediated communication (Hjorth & Gu, 2012). This action compels young people to give up control over aspects of their physical privacy by providing nearby strangers with access to their current location. This may invite unknown stalkers to track their whereabouts. The physical and informational dimensions of privacy are, therefore, deeply entangled in locative dating communication, connecting users' management of privacy ever more closely to their safety concerns.

For women, in particular, their safety concerns are inscribed by the patriarchal ordering of society in which women are stereotypically portrayed by the media as physically weaker than men and vulnerable to violent crimes. Evidence shows that across different cultural contexts women tend to express a higher degree of concerns over personal safety than men (J. Liu et al., 2009). The convergence of physical and informational privacy on locative social media, thus, may bring to the fore gendered aspects of the relationship between emotional intimacy and physical proximity by propelling women to exert greater efforts to tackle the possibility of being stalked by nearby strangers on these platforms. An ethnographic study of Chinese migrant workers by Miller et al. (2016) has touched upon such gender power relations in locative social media use in China. By exploring how male migrant workers use WeChat *People Nearby* to organize affairs without being discovered by their wives, their research shows that the privacy enjoyed by male migrant workers is associated with Chinese patriarchal values, which consider that 'men ought to be more expansively social than women' (Miller et al., 2016, p. 122). However, while the existing literature has revealed aspects of the interplay between gender and privacy in locative dating communication, a systematic, in-depth analysis of how this interplay is shaped in socio-technological processes unique to young Chinese people's locative social media use is generally lacking.

Addressing the abovementioned omission in the *privacy paradox* literature, in particular, helps to fully account for the feminist potential of locative social media applications. Previous studies on the feminist potential of media technologies are largely informed by a techno-feminist approach, which scrutinizes the interplay between gender and technology (Peng, 2020b; Wajcman, 2004). Based on this approach, an optimistic view considers locative social media applications as a type of 'feminist' technology, which can provide women with the opportunity to disrupt patriarchy. Through interviews with young, urban female users, L.-S. Chan (2018) reveals that Momo has been employed by Chinese women to challenge aspects of patriarchy by way of (1) expressing their sexual desires through interacting or developing sexual or romantic relationships with men, (2) enjoying the pleasure of gazing at male bodies via browsing male users' profiles and (3) easily reporting sexual harassment when being verbally insulted by men on this locative social media. However, without analysing men's participation, L.-S. Chan (2018, p. 298) also notes that the findings might have partially concealed the 'structural gender inequality embedded in the sexual double standard, marriage expectations, and state policies', which continue to influence female Chinese users' locative dating communication.

The *privacy paradox* represents a risk axis of locative dating communication, which is contextualized in relation to patriarchal Chinese gender norms. It shapes young Chinese people's gendered modes of appropriating locative social media applications by compelling women and men to develop different approaches to managing their privacy on these platforms. These young people's gendered navigation of the *privacy paradox* is, thus, part of the socio-technological process through which existing gender power relations are reproduced in their locative dating encounters. A pioneering study by Xue et al. (2017) has touched upon the gendered dimensions of users' privacy management strategies on locative dating applications. Their analysis of 3215 WeChat *People Nearby* users shows that significantly fewer women than men are using this function, because men are 'less privacy concerned' and 'more aggressive' when using *People Nearby* 'to establish new friends and mates' (Xue et al., 2017, p. 361). Yet, the study by Xue et al. (2017) is based on large-scale quantitative research, which does not account for the socio-political processes through which gender inequality is reproduced in locative dating communication.

Research questions

As the literature review reveals, the risk axis of the *privacy paradox* is a key factor, which influences young people's locative social media use. To unpack how this risk axis plays out in the Chinese context of locative social media use, this article analyses the interplay between young Chinese people's approaches to privacy management and gender inequality reflected in their use of WeChat *People Nearby*. In doing so, I explore the following questions:

1. How do female young Chinese people's perceptions of privacy on *People Nearby* differ from those of their male peers?
2. How do female and male young Chinese people's differing privacy perceptions encourage them to develop different privacy management strategies on *People Nearby*?
3. How do the different privacy management strategies cause female young Chinese people's difficulties in their *People Nearby*-facilitated locative dating participation?

Research methods

To answer these questions, the present study was guided by Kanel's (2018) employment of a constructionist epistemology in research design. Specifically, a case study was conducted, collecting empirical data through interviews with 19 Chinese college students (aged 18~23, 11 were women and 8 were men) regarding their use of WeChat *People Nearby*. The 19 participants were recruited from an independent college located in Southeast China and affiliated with a top Chinese university. In China, independent colleges are private higher education institutions affiliated with a reputable public university; their tuition fees are higher than those of their public counterparts. Students of independent colleges are generally from middle-class urban families and are beneficiaries of the post-reform economic growth. The research participant recruitment advertisement was distributed to the college's undergraduates. As part of a larger research project, a total of 19 students specifically agreed to participate in the present research that explores their use of *People Nearby*. The female-male ratio of the participants is generally balanced, and the participants present a wide range of habits in their use of *People Nearby*.

The empirical data were collected by conducting instant-messaging interviews with the research participants. Instant messaging is a cost-efficient and convenient research instrument for collecting interview data. Following this rationale, I added the participants as friends on WeChat and conducted semi-structured interviews with each of them via instant messages. The duration of each interview was approximately an hour. I asked participants questions regarding their participation in *People Nearby* use, including whether they have any concerns over their use or non-use of the function, and invited them to share their personal experiences with the function. The interviews with all participants were conducted in Mandarin Chinese. I translated the interview transcripts into English and provided each participant with a pseudonym.

To analyse the interview transcripts, I followed Saldana's (2016) two-cycle coding approach. I manually created the first-cycle coding for each answer that the participants provided to the interview questions. New codes were given to the same units of interview transcripts and were constantly compared with existing codes throughout the second-cycle coding process. I thematically categorized the second-cycle codes, focusing on (1) how each participant manages their privacy and (2) what factors influence their privacy behaviours on *People Nearby*. The transcripts of female and male participants were, respectively, analysed, and the results of the initial analysis of each gender group were compared with each other. In this way, I performed a comparative analysis to examine the differences between and the reasoning behind the privacy management strategies female and male participants adopted in using *People Nearby*.

Given the case-study nature of the present research and the scale of the data collection, I do not attempt to provide a grand narrative of locative dating communication in China. Based on interviews with 19 college students recruited from a specific institution, the research findings are not meant to represent Chinese college students' locative dating practice either. Instead, the study is underpinned by a clear research agenda, which is to unpack the detailed socio-political processes through which aspects of existing gender power relations may be reproduced in young Chinese people's locative dating communication in relation to women and men's differing approaches to privacy management on *People Nearby*.

Analytical discussion

I discovered that 15 of the 19 participants (7 women, 8 men) used *People Nearby*. The frequencies of use ranged from once every few days to an hour per day. Most participants noted having used the function to interact with nearby strangers for dates. Only two female participants said that their use of *People Nearby* is entirely to fill free time, with no dating intentions at all. In contrast to the prevailing attitudes of many Western societies, adolescent love in China is considered inappropriate in schools (L.-S. Chan, 2018). This means that many Chinese college students do not experience romantic relationships before entering university. As a result, *People Nearby* becomes the interactive arena where many Chinese college students begin contemplating romantic relationships for the first time in their lives. The comparative analysis shows that female and male participants swiftly develop a set of gendered habits in their use of *People Nearby*.

Gendered dating norms between women and men

Existing Chinese gendered dating norms, which encourage men to approach women rather than vice versa, are reproduced in the participants' use of *People Nearby*. In their late teens and early

twenties, young Chinese women would seem to be advantaged in romantic relationships. The Chinese government's fertility control has created an imbalanced female–male ratio in the Chinese population, as the traditional preference for sons resulted in more men being born than women. This has led to the phenomenon that there are more single men available than single women in Chinese society (Luo, 2017). The pressures of finding partners are largely placed upon men, who possess less 'bargaining power' because of their surplus on the marriage market (Luo, 2017). The seemingly advantageous position of young Chinese women contributes to the acceptance of a 'male-chasing-after-female' heterosexual dating protocol in Chinese society.

In *People Nearby* use, the practice of gendered dating norms is suggested by female and male Chinese college students' differing patterns of engagement with the function. Specifically, male participants tend to be more active in the use of the function. They often spend more time checking other users' profiles on *People Nearby*; seven out of eight male participants said that they generally use the function daily, for an average of over 30 minutes at a time, while the corresponding figures for female participants were less than 15 minutes per visit. The reason for this gendered difference in levels of activity on *People Nearby* is given by male participant Ning as men have to invest more time in dating communication, because the existing dating protocol propels them to take initiative in dating encounters. Ning's explanation is generally echoed by male participants:

Ning, man, 19 years old: I do not have a girlfriend [at the moment . . .]. This is why [I only socialize with women on *People Nearby* . . .]. Here you must take the initiative if you want to find a girl.

In contrast, female participants often reported a passive mode of engagement with *People Nearby*. Of the seven female participants who have used the function, none suggested that they ever initiated a conversation with men whom they did not know. For instance, participant Chen said that she checks 'greetings' received from men and 'occasionally' replies to them, but never sends greetings to men on *People Nearby*. Following heteronormative social conventions, Chen insists that women must be approached by men:

Chen, woman, 21 years old: I always receive a lot of messages [sent by men] on *People Nearby* [. . .]. I do not talk to anyone unless he talks to me first [on *People Nearby* . . .]. This is just what a girl does [. . .].

As in the above quotes from Ning and Chen, female and male participants' differing patterns of engagement with *People Nearby* are, to a certain extent, shaped by how its technological architecture is engineered to facilitate heterosexual dates in Chinese society where dating norms are deeply gendered. By making users' profiles publicly available on a list, the function allows strangers within the same geographical area to find each other's profile. The profiles are ordered by physical distance (from close to far away), allowing users to identify those in closest proximity (Xue et al., 2017). This locative feature is furnished with a gender filter, which allows a user to search for women or men only. Within the context of the heteronormative Chinese society, this gender filter encourages users to employ *People Nearby* to search for strangers to whom they are attracted. A digital register that imitates dating encounters in everyday life is constructed on *People Nearby*, encouraging the participants to adopt existing gendered dating norms to manage their use of the function. In this process, women and men's privacy concerns are differentially socio-technologically constituted, leading to their gendered navigation of the *privacy paradox* in *People Nearby* use.

Relations between privacy and intimacy in women and men's social encounters

The *privacy paradox* comes into force on *People Nearby* by creating entangled relations between privacy and intimacy when the participants adhere to the gendered norms to search for heterosexual dates. Specifically, research on locative dating communication shows that using personal information, such as self-portrait photos, to construct a user profile is crucial to the development of intimacy between strangers on locative social media (Choi et al., 2018). The participants' locative dating communication is no exception to this rule: both female and male participants agree that using a selfie as a WeChat profile image increases the opportunities for developing romantic relationships on *People Nearby*. The use of one's self-portrait photo encodes a sense of self into these students' WeChat profiles; it turns a stranger's access to their profiles into means to develop intimacy with them. In this way, disclosing privacy to strangers, in the form of making oneself visible, becomes a 'concrete psychological contract', which ensures a social encounter 'would take shape in mutually agreed upon and equitable manner' in mediated, locative matchmaking (Choi et al., 2018, p. 130). The entangled relations between privacy and intimacy configured by *People Nearby* encourage these young people to trade off privacy to enhance their sociality.

However, the development of intimacy through privacy generally comprises heavier burdens for women than for men. Across different socio-cultural contexts, intimacy has historically been considered women's work (Chambers, 2017). Such a tendency is also found in China, where the revived patriarchal values once again encourage men to be expansively social and compel women to retreat from the public sphere to provide emotional labour in the home (F. Liu, 2019). Against this patriarchal backdrop, the amount of privacy that female users must trade to develop intimacy is amplified in the pattern of dating encounters facilitated by *People Nearby*, as revealed by the quotes from both female and men participants below:

Ning, man, 19 years old: I often 'clean' my location after using *People Nearby* [. . .] to avoid being found. I do this because WeChat [*People Nearby*] allows me to do it.

Xue, woman, 22-year-old: Waiting to be chased after on *People Nearby* means you have to keep your profile accessible to anyone for a long time [. . .]. The feeling is like being placed on the market.

Xue and Ning are not isolated examples. Thirteen participants, including five women and eight men who admitted to having used the function for dating purposes, agreed with the statement that women and men experience different levels of control over their privacy on *People Nearby*. These levels of control over privacy are socio-technologically mediated: *People Nearby* does not automatically share users' locative information; when a user chooses to activate this function, their profile becomes visible to other users and remains so for several hours, unless the user manually deletes their locative traces. Certainly, both female and male users are encouraged to voluntarily reveal their profile to seek opportunities for romantic encounters. However, male participants said that they have the autonomy to decide whether to hide their locative traces from *People Nearby* and, thus, render themselves inaccessible to strangers. Their experience shows that this privacy control does not greatly affect their opportunities to develop romantic relationships with women, because the gendered dating norms expect them to take an active role in such social encounters. This produces a pattern of men's locative dating activities in which they can remain invisible to large numbers of uninvited users. The same method of maintaining privacy is, however, not as straightforward for women, who wish to enjoy dating opportunities. The expectation that women

do not initiate such social interactions propels female users to make their WeChat profile continuously accessible to their male peers. In this way, the female participants are compelled to relinquish more privacy than their male counterparts, posing more privacy-related risks to women than to men when they use the function for dating purposes.

Possibility of jeopardizing women's reputation

Female participants experience greater risks than their male peers when their privacy is traded off to facilitate locative dating encounters on *People Nearby*. These risks are entwined with the potential for reputation damage, which is configured by a perception of a blurred boundary between locative dating and searching for sexual partners in Chinese society (L.-S. Chan, 2018). This perception is well documented in the quotes below:

Hui, man, 19 years old: I am using WeChat not just for hooking-up, [so] I would not talk to a girl [whose profile] is always there [on People Nearby].

Chen, woman, 21 years old: I do not know whether people are using it [People Nearby] for one-night stands. Maybe there are but I am definitely not.

Throughout the interviews, 'hooking up' and 'one-night stands' were constantly mentioned by both female and male participants. While these participants acknowledged the potential use of *People Nearby* to find sexual partners, they all distanced themselves from sexual motives of this kind. I must acknowledge that, as researchers who do not share existing personal connections with the participants, I might not always gather answers fully reflecting their thoughts on sensitive topics during the interviews. The fact that all these participants denied having used *People Nearby* to seek sexual partners is likely to be the effect of a 'slut-shaming' discourse of locative social media use in Chinese society. Active use of locative social media applications is often stigmatized by a 'slut-shaming' discourse, which tarnishes users' reputations by associating them with frequent casual sex (T. Liu, 2016). In China, such a 'slut-shaming' discourse has emerged from the branding strategies adopted by pioneer Chinese locative social media applications, such as Momo, which sought to target young Chinese users' sexual desire (T. Liu, 2016). This discourse has also been elaborated by the Chinese mass media, which constantly labels users of locative social media applications as seekers of casual sex (L.-S. Chan, 2018). The spread of the 'slut-shaming' discourse means that young Chinese people may risk jeopardizing their reputations if their use of locative social media applications is discovered by others who were previously known to them. This discourse appears to have affected the participants during the interviews, shown in their anxiety about others interpreting their use of *People Nearby* as sexually driven.

The 'slut-shaming' discourse is meant to apply to both female and male users of locative social media applications. However, within Chinese society, where patriarchal values are on the revival, men's casual sexual encounters with women are seen as a form of masculine achievement (Miller et al., 2016). As such, the Chinese 'slut-shaming' discourse presents a sexual double standard by targeting women rather than men. In the case study, this sexual double standard is manifest by the fact that female participants are more likely than male participants to express concerns about reputation relating to their use of *People Nearby*. Without a larger sample, I was unable to identify the extent to which the sexual double standard of the Chinese 'slut-shaming' discourse has influenced all Chinese college students' privacy behaviours in locative dating communication. However,

among the participants, there were only women who decided to ‘opt-out’ of using *People Nearby*, as the below quote suggests:

Su, woman, 19 years old: I used *People Nearby* but I have stopped using it [. . .]. I do not want to be misunderstood that I am looking for [. . .] one-night stands.

For female participant Su, her concerns that friends will perceive her unfavourably brought an end to her participation in *People Nearby*. This ‘opt-out’ privacy-protective strategy is also used by two other female participants, but the mention of this strategy is absent in the interviews with male participants. This phenomenon has possibly added another layer of evidence to the gender power relations, which reproduces aspect of existing patriarchal norms, in these young people’s locative dating communication. Specifically, loyalty to husbands has long been seen as the most important virtue of women in Chinese culture (Schaffer & Song, 2007). While research shows that Chinese women’s ability to express their desires has been enhanced by the rise of consumer culture, freedom to express sexual desire remains largely reserved for Chinese men (Song & Hird, 2014). Chinese women who openly express sexual desires are accused of being a ‘slut’, shown by the widespread, continuous criticisms to which Chinese feminist scholar Yinhe Li has been subjected following her call for women’s sexual liberation. To return to *People Nearby* use, the protocol of participation propels female users to give up more privacy than men by keeping their profile available for public access for a longer period. This leaves women with a dilemma concerning their privacy management because they are possibly targeted by the double-standard ‘slut-shaming’ discourse associated with the use of locative social media applications. In this way, the use of *People Nearby*, which propels female users to share more privacy, has encouraged these participants to navigate the *privacy paradox* in a gendered manner. This once again facilitates the reproduction of gender inequality in their locative dating communication by restricting female users’ ability to use *People Nearby* for dating purposes.

Women’s heightened personal safety concerns

The *privacy paradox* is additionally complicated for women by the convergence of their physical and informational privacy occurring in *People Nearby* use. As previously mentioned, *People Nearby* is designed to enable locative dating communication by attaching users’ physical positions to their WeChat profile. Populated by their authentic personal information, these participants’ profiles invest their presence in locative dating communication with a sense of self, which supports social interactions between nearby strangers seeking real-life dating encounters. Yet, using this function also means providing nearby strangers with knowledge of their whereabouts, which connects their privacy to both physical and psychological ‘access to the self’. Strangers, being previously unknown, share no pre-existing trust (Chambers, 2017). As discussed earlier, women who seek romantic encounters must keep their profiles publicly accessible to nearby strangers, whose personalities and other characteristics are unpredictable. To do so risks being stalked by nearby male strangers. In this way, the *privacy paradox* shapes another gendered feature of participation in using *People Nearby* by heightening female users’ concerns over their safety when they face the risks of being stalked. These personal safety concerns are vividly illustrated in female participant Zeng’s quote below:

Zeng, woman, 20 years old: I have once heard a story [. . .]. A girl was kidnapped [. . .] I mean the gangsters found her on WeChat because she did not clean her location [after using *People Nearby*]. [. . .] Do you not think this is horrifying? I cannot handle technology very well, so I choose not to [leave my locative traces on *People Nearby*].

Zeng explained her inactive use of *People Nearby* by referring to a story she was told by her parents. The story carries a warning that young women living alone in cities should avoid using *People Nearby*; their whereabouts must be carefully concealed to avoid the attention of male strangers who may follow them with suspicious motives. As discussed previously, within a patriarchal socio-cultural milieu, women are stereotypically constructed as being vulnerable, leading to their higher levels of anxiety about personal safety than men in everyday life. In China, the stereotype of vulnerable women is reinforced by the mass media, which continues to highlight women as victims of violent crimes in the news coverage (J. Liu et al., 2009). Interestingly, Zeng's quote suggests that the assumption of women's vulnerability is also intersected with the patriarchal discourse that posits women as less skilful technology users. This intersection confirms existing research findings in the West, which suggest that women are generally 'more sensitive in establishing private boundaries', but are less confident in their ability to protect their privacy on the Internet (Park, 2015, p. 252). It gives weight to Park's (2015) observation that 'women may rate their [privacy protection] skills lower than men do when there is, in fact, no significant difference' (p. 256). This kind of self-evaluation reshapes the privacy management approach women resort on locative social media.

Having accepted the patriarchal discourse of women possessing limited technological skills, the female participants become more concerned about the breaching of physical privacy in locative social media use than men. Such concerns enlarge the risk axis of the *privacy paradox*, causing many female participants to experience anxiety about their privacy, which prompts them to self-limit the potential of using *People Nearby* for locative dating purposes. The male participants, on the contrary, expressed relaxed attitudes, as exemplified by male participant Zu below:

Zu, man, 19 years old: I do not think any strangers [with suspicious motives] would be interested in following me [. . .]. Men are much stronger. We are capable of protecting ourselves.

Zu's comments were generally reiterated by other male participants. Unlike female participants, few concerns over unknown stalkers were raised by male participants at interviews. Comparable with the construction of a hegemonic male ideal in the West, traditional Chinese masculinity encourages men to be outgoing, strong and adventurous (Song & Hird, 2014). As a part of this socio-cultural tendency, male Chinese college students are expected to be competitive, which increases their self-confidence. This socio-culturally imposed self-confidence is reinforced by the masculine narrative of the technology. Together with the technological architecture of locative social media applications, which facilitates the gendered navigation of the *privacy paradox*, this belief emboldens men to consider that the benefits of disclosing privacy outweigh the possible consequences. This encourages these male participants to be more active than their female peers in exploring the opportunities of developing romantic relationships.

As the above analysis suggests, Chinese college students' use of *People Nearby* brings together their physical bodies and their presence in locative dating communication, causing a convergence of concerns over physical and informational privacy. This convergence takes place within the context of a patriarchal society in which women are stereotypically constructed as being vulnerable to

violent crimes, connecting women's privacy ever closer to the desire for personal safety. Resonating with the reputation risks that also target women, how some of the female participants are excluded from locative dating communication by their heightened safety concerns further highlights the production of gender power relations in these college students' use of *People Nearby*.

Conclusion

In this article, I have provided a case study of 19 Chinese college students' gendered privacy behaviours in their use of WeChat *People Nearby*. The outcomes of the research contribute to the intersections of gender, privacy and digital cultural studies by (1) broadly shedding light on the gendered nature of the *privacy paradox* in young people's locative dating communication, (2) specifically addressing the feminist potential of locative social media applications in the Chinese context.

As previously discussed, the existing literature in digital cultural studies has noted the *privacy paradox*, which leads to users' anxiety prompted by the 'difficulty of identifying the very contexts of data capture, interception, generation, registry, and leakage' on locative social media (Leszczynski, 2015, p. 980). This anxiety stems from users' desires to be aware of their personal and locative information and to control its disclosure, 'while feeling that any attempt at exerting such control is effectively futile' (Leszczynski, 2015, p. 965). However, most of this scholarship does not pay due attention to the gendered nature of the *privacy paradox*.

The present research reveals that the *privacy paradox* is inherently gendered because the notion of privacy is entangled with intimacy and entails a physical aspect. Contextualizing users' privacy behaviours in locative dating communication, female users are often propelled to relinquish more privacy and, therefore, bear more privacy-related risks, such as concerns over reputation and personal safety. In this way, female and male users' participation in locative dating communication become regulated by their differing navigation of the *privacy paradox* that reproduces aspects of existing gendered social protocol. In this case study, the existing Chinese gendered dating norms, which encourage women to be courted by men, are invoked by the participants in their use of *People Nearby*. Thus, unlike their male peers, who can easily delete their locative traces after using *People Nearby*, the female participants pursuing romantic encounters are compelled to keep their profile available to a large cohort of nearby users. This action not only propel women to engage in more intimacy work by way of disclosing privacy but also risks them divulging private information concerning their reputation and personal safety. The gendered *privacy paradox*, as constructed in the participants' use of *People Nearby*, thereby contributes to the reproduction of patriarchal gender power relations in their locative dating communication by restricting female participants' capacity to exploit the benefits of using this application to find romantic relationships. Such research findings provide a window into how gender inequality persists in digital cultures through the recreation of existing gendered norms that privilege men over women.

Based on this enhanced understanding of the *privacy paradox* in digital cultures, this research also addresses the emerging debates over the extent to which locative social media applications can be seen as a feminist technology in Chinese society. As previously discussed, L.-S. Chan's (2018, p. 309) research shows that popular Chinese locative social media applications allow young women to disrupt the patriarchy in Chinese society by empowering them to actively participate in locative dating communication. However, L.-S. Chan (2018) also acknowledges that the feminist potential

of locative social media applications must be further examined relative to the patriarchal socio-cultural milieu in which the applications are understood and appropriated by their users.

Building on an account of WeChat users' gendered engagement with *People Nearby* (Xue et al., 2017), the present research advances a feminist analysis of locative social media applications by focusing on how the *privacy paradox* creates a dilemma for female users in locative dating communication. As shown in the case study, the participants' privacy habits are engineered by their appropriation of the technological architecture of *People Nearby* in line with existing gendered norms in Chinese society. In this process, gender power relations are socio-technologically reproduced in their locative dating communication, providing male users with fewer restrictions when they exploit the functionality of locative social media applications. As such, the research contributes to techno-feminist literature by showing that the feminist potential of locative social media applications is limited in the contexts of the revived male dominance and the masculine narrative of technological usage. The research findings lend further weight to the argument that inequality in gender relations cannot be overcome with women's use of locative social media applications without challenging the patriarchal socio-economic structure of Chinese society.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Altman Yuzhu Peng  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3440-0761>

Note

1. Fertility control was once called the 'one-child policy', which allows each family to have one child only. It has been replaced by the 'two-child policy' since 2015.

References

- Altman, I. (1976). Privacy: A conceptual analysis. *Environment and Behavior*, 1(8), 7–30.
- Blair, S. L., & Madigan, T. J. (2016). Dating attitudes and expectations among young Chinese adults: An examination of gender differences. *Journal of Chinese Sociology*, 3(1), 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40711-016-0034-1>
- Chambers, D. (2012). *A sociology of family life: Change and diversity in intimate relations*. Polity Press.
- Chambers, D. (2017). Networked intimacy: Algorithmic friendship and scalable sociality. *European Journal of Communication*, 32(1), 26–36. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323116682792>
- Chan, L.-S. (2018). Liberating or disciplining? A technofeminist analysis of the use of dating apps among women in urban China. *Communication Culture & Critique*, 11(2), 298–314. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcy004>
- Chan, Y. (2000). Privacy in the family: Its hierarchical and asymmetric nature. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 31(1), 1–17.
- Chen, X., & Liu, T. (2019). On 'never right-swipe whites' and 'only date whites': Gendered and racialised digital dating experiences of the Australian Chinese diaspora. *Information Communication & Society*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2019.1697341>
- Chen, Z.-T., & Cheung, M. (2018). Privacy perception and protection on Chinese social media: A case study of WeChat. *Ethics and Information Technology*, 20(4), 279–289. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10676-018-9480-6>
- Choi, B., Wu, Y., Yu, J., & Land, L. P. W. (2018). Love at first sight: The interplay between privacy dispositions and privacy calculus in online social connectivity management. *Journal of the Association for Information Systems*, 19(3), 124–151. <https://doi.org/10.17705/1jais.00487>

- de Seta, G., & Zhang, G. (2015). Stranger or lonely? Young Chinese and dating apps between the locational, the mobile and the social. In I. A. Degim, J. Johnson, & T. Fu (Eds.), *Online courtship: Interpersonal interactions across borders* (pp. 167–185). Institute of Network Cultures.
- Hjorth, L., & Gu, K. (2012). The place of emplaced visualities: A case study of smartphone visuality and location-based social media in Shanghai, China. *Continuum*, 26(5), 699–713. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0304312.2012.706459>
- Kanel, T. K. (2018). What are the impacts of the child grant policy in Nepal on Dalit women? A qualitative analysis. *Gender Technology and Development*, 22(3), 246–265. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09718524.2018.1546032>
- Keane, M., & Fung, A. Y. H. (2018). Digital platforms: Exerting China's new cultural power in the Asia-Pacific. *Media Industries*, 5(1), 47–50. <https://doi.org/10.3998/mij.15031809.0005.103>
- Kokolakis, S. (2017). Privacy attitudes and privacy behaviour: A review of current research on the privacy paradox phenomenon. *Computers and Security*, 64, 122–134. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cose.2015.07.002>
- Leszczynski, A. (2015). Spatial big data and anxieties of control. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 33(6), 965–984. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775815595814>
- Liu, F. (2019). Chinese young men's construction of exemplary masculinity: The hegemony of Chenggong. *Men and Masculinities*, 22(2), 294–316. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X17696911>
- Liu, J., Messner, S. F., Zhang, L., & Zhuo, Y. (2009). Socio-demographic correlates of fear of crime and the social context of contemporary urban China. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 44(1), 93–108. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-009-9255-7>
- Liu, T. (2016). Neoliberal ethos, state censorship, and sexual culture: A Chinese dating/hook-up app. *Continuum*, 30(5), 557–566. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2016.1210794>
- Luo, W. (2017). Television's 'leftover' bachelors and hegemonic masculinity in postsocialist China. *Women's Studies in Communication*, 40(2), 190–211. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2017.1295295>
- Miller, D., Costa, E., Haynes, N., McDonald, T., Nicolescu, R., Sinanan, J., Spyer, J., Venkatraman, S., & Wang, X. (2016). *How the world changed social media*. UCL Press.
- Palen, L., & Dourish, P. (2003). Unpacking 'privacy' for a networked world. In *Proceedings of the Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, Fort Lauderdale, FL, 2003* (pp. 129–136). ACM. <https://doi.org/10.1145/642633.642635>
- Park, Y. J. (2015). Do men and women differ in privacy? Gendered privacy and (in)equality on the Internet. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 50, 252–258. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.04.011>
- Peng, A. Y. (2020a). *A feminist reading of China's digital public sphere*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Peng, A. Y. (2020b). Alipay adds 'beauty filters' to face-scan payments: A form of patriarchal control over women's bodies. *Feminist Media Studies*, 20(4), 582–585. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1750779>
- Peng, A. Y. (2020c). Amplification of regional discrimination on Chinese news portals: An affective critical discourse analysis. *Convergence*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856520977851>
- Peng, A. Y., & Chen, S. (2021). Traditional Chinese medicine works: A politicised scientific debate in the COVID-19 pandemic. *Asian Journal of Communication*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01292986.2021.1913618>
- Ringrose, J., Harvey, L., Gill, R., & Livingstone, S. (2013). Teen girls, sexual double standards and 'sexting': Gendered value in digital image exchange. *Feminist Theory*, 14(3), 305–323. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700113499853>
- Saldana, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. SAGE.
- Schaffer, K., & Song, X. (2007). Unruly spaces: Gender, women's writing and indigenous feminism in China. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 16(1), 17–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589230601116125>
- Song, G., & Hird, D. (2014). *Men and masculinities in contemporary China*. Brill.
- Tang, S., & Dong, X. (2006). Parents' and children's perceptions of privacy rights in China: A cohort comparison. *Journal of Family Issues*, 27(3), 285–300. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X05283095>

- Tencent. (2019). *Tencent Holdings Limited - 2018 annual report*. https://www.annualreports.com/HostedData/AnnualReportArchive/t/OTC_TCEHY_2018.pdf
- Wajcman, J. (2004). *Technofeminism*. Polity Press.
- Wang, S. (2020). Calculating dating goals: Data gaming and algorithmic sociality on Blued, a Chinese gay dating app. *Information Communication & Society*, 23(2), 181–197. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2018.1490796>
- Ward, J. (2017). What are you doing on Tinder? Impression management on a matchmaking mobile app. *Information Communication & Society*, 20(11), 1644–1659. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1252412>
- Wu, Y., & Wall, M. (2019). The ties that bind: How the dominance of WeChat combines with Guanxi to inhibit and constrain China's contentious politics. *New Media & Society*, 21(8), 1714–1733. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819830072>
- Xue, M., Yang, L., Ross, K. W., & Qian, H. (2017). Characterizing user behaviours in location-based find-and-flirt services: Anonymity and demographics: A WeChat case study. *Peer-to-Peer Networking and Applications*, 10(2), 357–367. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12083-016-0444-5>
- Yan, Y. (2010). The Chinese path to individualization. *British Journal of Sociology*, 61(3), 489–512. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2010.01323.x>

Author biography

Altman Yuzhu Peng (PhD, Newcastle University, UK) is currently Lecturer in PR & Global Communications at Newcastle University (UK). Altman's research interests lie at the intersections of Feminism, Public Relations, and Media & Cultural Studies. He is author of *A Feminist Reading of China's Digital Public Sphere* and has previously published in peer-reviewed journals, such as *Asian Journal of Communication*, *Convergence*, *Chinese Journal of Communication*, *Feminist Media Studies*, and *Media International Australia*.