Advances in Digital Intimacy Research

Jason Vincent A. Cabañes and Cecilia S. Uy-Tioco (Eds.), **Mobile Media and Social Intimacies in Asia: Reconfiguring Local Ties and Enacting Global Relationships**, Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 2020, 211 pp., $72.00 (hardcover).

Amir Hetsroni and Meriç Tuncez (Eds.), **It Happened On Tinder: Reflections and Studies on Internet-Infused Dating**, Amsterdam, The Netherlands: The Institute of Network Cultures, 2019, 219 pp., free (digital).

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From the rise of Facebook to the birth of Tinder, digital and mobile media have fundamentally transformed intimate practices and reconfigured intimacy in the 21st century. In reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic, global citizens have also developed various virtual means to stay connected with their beloved. Two collections of research essays, *Mobile Media and Social Intimacies in Asia*, edited by Jason Vincent A. Cabañes and Cecilia S. Uy-Tioco, and *It Happened on Tinder*, edited by Amir Hetsroni and Meriç Tuncez, offer a variety of perspectives for the critical examination of digital intimacy. These two anthologies address various forms of intimate relationships. Contributors of *Mobile Media and Social Intimacies in Asia* collectively highlight the social and "glocal" nature of intimacy. By social, they mean that intimate relationships are often defined by different ideals of relationships shaped by social and cultural factors. By "glocal," they mean that these different ideals of relationships result from a constant negotiation between "global modernity and local everyday life" (p. 3). These authors discuss affective relationships such as family relationships and fandom. Essays in *It Happened on Tinder*, though, examine exclusively online dating practices across various geographical regions.
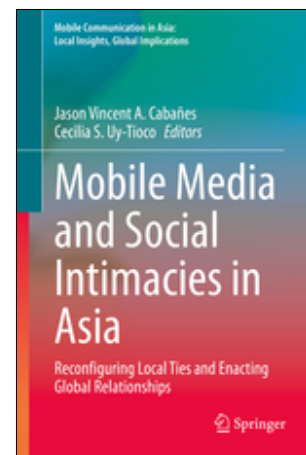
Readers should understand that these two edited volumes are not in-depth investigations into a particular topic in a particular sociocultural setting; instead, the beauty of these two volumes lies in their ability to offer analyses of issues related to digital intimacy across national and cultural boundaries. The editors of *Mobile Media and Social Intimacies in Asia* divide the work into two sections. In Part I, "Reconfiguring Local Ties," several research teams examine the use of social media by young gay men in China (chapter 2), Malaysians (chapter 3), wives of gay men in China (known as *tongqis*, chapter 4), middle-aged Korean women (known as *ajummas*, chapter 5), and fans of pop music (chapter 6). Coincidentally, most of these communities are stigmatized within their larger society. In China, same-sex relationships do not receive any legal recognition or protection (chapter 2); wives of gay men are often perceived as HIV carriers (chapter 4); *ajummas* are seen as loud, disorderly, and lacking technology skills (chapter 5); fans' behavior is treated as immature (chapter 6). Therefore, social media offer these

communities a place to socialize, seek emotional support, and carry out activities that are dismissed by mainstream society. The worldmaking project afforded by digital media is available not only to queer communities but also to other walks of life (Berlant & Warner, 1998).

Of course, these researchers are careful not to fall into the fallacy of technological utopianism. While they reveal how digital media have helped members of these communities cope with their predicaments, they are also aware that technology is not a solution to social issues. For instance, although *tongqis* can use online forums to share their experiences in discovering that their husband is gay, divorcing under the current Chinese marriage law is not easy (chapter 4). Therefore, *tongqis* still cannot leave their problematic marriages. The minor improvements brought by digital media to these marginalized communities, as I have argued elsewhere, may mask the more deep-rooted, systematic injustice in society (Chan, 2018).

Part II of *Mobile Media and Social Intimacies in Asia* is called "Enacting Global Relationships." In particular, chapters 8–11 deal with what Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2013) refer to as "world families," which are families "that live together across . . . frontiers" (p. 15). I am delighted that these studies are included in this anthology because they help broaden our imagination of digital intimacy, which is oftentimes treated as a synonym for online dating. These investigations also illustrate the social aspect of intimacies: the responsibilities of parents to their children and those of children to their parents are largely socially and culturally defined. These chapters explore how digital media have reconfigured and helped people fulfill these responsibilities.

Essays in *Mobile Media and Social Intimacies in Asia* collectively offer three directions for further research in digital intimacy. First, they encourage researchers to move beyond hookups and romantic relationships. As demonstrated by several chapters in the book, mediated family relationships and mediated fandom also provide insight into the dialogue on digital media, affect, and relationships. Second, researchers can make use of culturally sensitive metaphors as a lens to analyze emerging social relationships reconfigured by digital media. For example, chapter 5 speaks of digital *ppal-let-ter*—a wash place where Korean women congregated to do their laundry until the 1960s. The image of *ppal-let-ter* captures the social fabric unique to traditional Korean society. Third, researchers should pay attention to the sociocultural context in which digital media are employed. The same digital platform may carry different social significance in China, South Korea, Malaysia, or the Philippines.
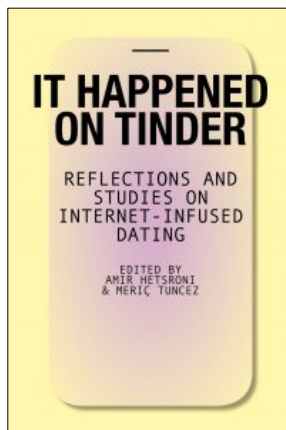
Wide geographical coverage is a highlight of *It Happened on Tinder*. Of 13 content chapters, eight look at the United States; the rest explore online dating in Brazil (chapter 3), Turkey (chapter 4), Belgium (chapters 7 and 10), and Israel (chapter 11). Apart from its broad geographical coverage, the book's second merit is the comprehensive perspective provided on online dating research; the collection looks at how user demographics, platform designs, and cultures influence online dating practices. Its third merit is that these essays touch upon sites or issues that are often neglected in conventional online dating research. For instance, chapter 6 investigates "dime

dating," an arrangement where "one individual receiv[es] compensation for going on a date" (p. 78). Chapter 9 examines the meanings behind bitmojis, a more customized type of emojis. Chapter 12 addresses online dating norms among Jewish people and different streams of Judaism.

While this collection of essays is impressive in terms of the content, I wish there had been stronger editorial guidance for the authors. For one thing, several content chapters, including the introduction chapter, refer to people with same-sex desire as "homosexuals," a term that has a negative, clinical connotation and is used by anti-gay parties (GLAAD, n.d.). Unlike *Mobile Media and Social Intimacies in Asia,* where most studies are qualitative-oriented, *It Happened on Tinder* includes quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method studies. While I applaud methodological diversity, methodological rigor must also be maintained. Some quantitative studies included in the anthology did not adopt a suitable sampling strategy or did not have a suitable sample size for a rigorous analysis. For instance, chapter 3 quantitatively compares views of 29 men with views of 25 women. Both groups were recruited through nonrandom sampling. Chapter 6 sets out to investigate dime dating, but only 16 of its 212 survey respondents self-identified as dime-dating participants. These samples are too small for meaningful statistical analyses. Some studies did not report the necessary statistics for readers to evaluate the soundness of the research design. For instance, chapter 3 involves quantifying qualitative interviews, but it did not report any intercoder reliabilities; chapter 5 employs two established scales, but it failed to provide relevant Cronbach's alphas.

Some studies' research design could be improved. For example, chapter 4 examines the visual self-presentation on Tinder by straight men and women and queer men and women. The research team coded each profile for the appearance of decorative artifacts, which were preclassified as gender-neutral (e.g., tattoos), masculine (e.g., muscle exposure), or feminine (e.g., earrings). I believe that this classification scheme is too rigid to capture the ambiguity of many gendered artifacts—for example, why would earrings be classified as feminine in the 21st century? Chapter 9 investigates the meanings of bitmojis. Its sole analytical method—semiotics—has, however, severely limited the insight this research can provide. The meanings of signs are produced when users apply those signs in a particular context. Therefore, without knowing how these popular bitmojis are used, it is impossible to unpack their social significance.

Mobile Media and Social Intimacies in Asia and *It Happened on Tinder* capture some of the latest issues about digital intimacy. Despite some methodological shortcomings of the latter, the studies presented in it are novel and address important changes in how relationships are negotiated in the age of social media. I would recommend them for students and researchers in digital media studies, gender studies, and international studies.

References

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