

The background of the top half of the poster is a stylized illustration in shades of orange and brown. It depicts several young women from an Asian perspective, each holding and looking at a smartphone. The illustration is semi-transparent, allowing the text to be overlaid.

Digital Intimacy, Young Women & Social Transformation in Asia

A hybrid symposium

8 April 2024 | 9:30am – 2pm

Zoom | #04-04, AS8, National University of Singapore



Department of Communications & New Media
Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences

Cultural Research Centre

This Symposium is funded by the NUS Start Up Grant for the Cultural Research Centre at the Department of Communications and New Media, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore, and is the culmination of research funded by the Hong Kong Research Grant Council (RGG#13600720).

Programme Schedule

Host: Dr Hety Wong; Research Associate, Cultural Research Centre, National University of Singapore

9:30am	Welcome Speech Prof Audrey Yue Professor and Head, Department of Communications and New Media, National University of Singapore
Session 1	
9:40am	Digital Intimacies, Gendered Modernity and the Neo-Liberal Subject I Prof Tejaswini Niranjana Professor, Centre for Inter-Asian Research, Ahmedabad University
10:00am	Digital Intimacies, Gendered Modernity and the Neo-Liberal Subject II A/P Ritty Lukose Associate Professor, Gallatin School of Individualized Study, New York University
10:20am	Morning Tea
Session 2	
11:00am	Digital Intimacy: Young Women and Social Transformation in Asia – The Bangalore Chapter A/P Nitya Vasudevan Associate Professor, School of Arts and Sciences, Azim Premji University Ms Chinmayi Ramaiah Consulting Psychotherapist, Parivarthan Counselling, Training and Research Centre
11:20am	Increased Daily Labor, Decreased Connectivity: Digital Intimacy of Educated Young Women in China Dr Bai Meijiadai Lecturer, Department of Journalism, Liaoning University
11:40am	Young College Women in Guangzhou and Their Strategies in Forming Digital Intimacy Dr Hou Lixian Holly Lecturer, School of Foreign Studies, South China Agricultural University
12:00pm	Break
Session 3	
12:15pm	'Don't You Sink the Boat!': A Case Study of Hong Kong Young Women's Exploration of Digital Intimacies A/P Tang Tse Shang Denise Associate Professor, Department of Cultural Studies, Lingnan University Ms Chung Man Yin Independent Scholar
12:35pm	Digital Intimacy, Social Transformation and Young Women in Singapore: Fear, Insecurity and Play Prof Audrey Yue Professor and Head, Department of Communications and New Media, National University of Singapore Ms Chau Kam Sing Tina PhD Candidate, Cultural Studies in Asia PhD programme, National University of Singapore
12:55pm	Lunch
2:00pm	Business Meeting
7:00pm	End of Programme

Digital Intimacies, Gendered Modernity and the Neo-Liberal Subject I

Prof Tejaswini Niranjana

Centre for Inter-Asian Research, Ahmedabad University

How do the newer cultural practices around the digital relate to longer histories that entangle gender and sexuality with constructions of nation and modernity within Asian contexts? Digital mediations of everyday life in Asian contexts must be situated within regimes of liberalisation and the deepening of consumer culture which is spawning all kinds of value transformations, potential selves and futures to normalise aspiration as a form of social belonging, with female selves in particular being re-made as aspiring individuals. However, while we suggest that digital mediation is an important new context for negotiating gender and sexuality, this context is undergirded by longer histories of social change and transformation that unfurled as societies all over the world became modern from the nineteenth century onwards. While this was a worldwide process, the specific dynamics of modernity within Asian contexts are a crucial context for apprehending contemporary dynamics of digital mediation. These dynamics are both similar and different across Guangzhou, Bangalore, Singapore and Hong Kong, the cities on which our project is sited. Drawing out trajectories of modernity and the constitutive role of gender and sexuality in their formations is a crucial context for understanding the contemporary transformations that continue to shape and reshape these locations. 19th and early 20th century debates around culture, tradition, women and modernity in our four locations intersect with the formation of 'national' identities. Our contention is that the specific and dense historical trajectories we investigate are crucial for understanding how the digital is experienced by the young women who are at the centre of our project.

Tejaswini Niranjana is the Director of the Centre for Inter-Asian Research at the Ahmedabad University. She was two-term Chair of the Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Society. Her theory of the relationship between colonialism and translation, writings on feminism and the 'culture question' in India, and her practice-based research into music (specifically Caribbean music, Hindustani classical music, and India-China collaborations) have contributed to the fields of cultural studies, gender studies, translation, and ethnomusicology. *Siting Translation: History, Post-structuralism and the Colonial Context* (Berkeley, 1992), *Mobilizing India: Women, Music and Migration between India and Trinidad* (Durham, 2006), and *Musicophilia in Mumbai* (Durham, 2020) are some of her published books.

Digital Intimacies, Gendered Modernity and the Neo-Liberal Subject II

A/P Ritty Lukose

Associate Professor, Gallatin School of Individualized Study, New York University

How do the newer cultural practices around the digital relate to longer histories that entangle gender and sexuality with constructions of nation and modernity within Asian contexts? Digital mediations of everyday life in Asian contexts must be situated within regimes of liberalisation and the deepening of consumer culture, which is spawning all kinds of value transformations, potential selves and futures to normalise aspiration as a form of social belonging, with female selves in particular being re-made as aspiring individuals. However, while we suggest that digital mediation is an important new context for negotiating gender and sexuality, this context is undergirded by longer histories of social change and transformation that unfurled as societies all over the world became modern from the nineteenth century onwards. While this was a worldwide process, the specific dynamics of modernity within Asian contexts are a crucial context for apprehending the contemporary dynamics of digital mediation. These dynamics are both similar and different across Guangzhou, Bangalore, Singapore and Hong Kong, the cities on which our project is sited. Drawing out the trajectories of modernity and the constitutive role of gender and sexuality in their formations is a crucial context for understanding the contemporary transformations that continue to shape and reshape these locations. 19th and early 20th century debates around culture, tradition, women and modernity in our four locations intersect with the formation of 'national' identities. Our contention is that the specific and dense historical trajectories we investigate are crucial for understanding how the digital is experienced by the young women who are at the centre of our project.

Ritty Lukose is Associate Professor at the Gallatin School at New York University. She is the author of *Liberalization's Children: Gender, Youth and Consumer Citizenship in Globalizing India* (2009) and co-editor of *South Asian Feminisms* (2012). She has published in journals such as *Cultural Anthropology*, *Social History*, *Social Analysis*, and *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*. Recent publications include 'Decolonizing Feminism in the #MeToo Era' in *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* (2018), 'South Asia' in *The Routledge Global History of Feminism* (2022) and 'The Great Indian Kitchen: Taste, Distaste, Feminism and Women's Emancipation' in *Verge: Studies in Global Asias* (2023).

Digital Intimacy: Young Women and Social Transformation in Asia – The Bangalore Chapter

A/P Nitya Vasudevan

Associate Professor, School of Arts and Sciences, Azim Premji University

Ms Chinmayi Ramaiah

Parivarthan Counselling, Training and Research Centre

In our presentation, we discuss insights into Digital Intimacy gleaned from the context of Bangalore, one of the research sites of the project. Bangalore has a specific history of technological modernity in India, ranging from early investments in scientific research to the more recent proliferation of Information and Communication Technology. In our conversations with young women in the city, we sought to understand how the everyday lives of these women are shaped by the discourse of digital and technologized life. Staying attentive to the question of social transformation and self-fashioning, we ask what digitally mediated intimacy does in the lives of young women and how they define, experience, shape and perform intimacy online. We attempt to bring together narratives of how young women in Bangalore speak about their histories of migration, their aspirations around education, career, and marriage, the underlying ideas of social and economic mobility, and how these inform or are informed by their digital practices. The presentation moves through the various questions we have asked of the interviews, pertaining to, for example, the ways in which boundaries are drawn between online and offline life; a sense of identity and the expression of an 'authentic' self; work and content creation online; risk and safety online; digital histories in families; and how these young women understand their practices of digital intimacy.

Nitya Vasudevan is Associate Professor of English at the School of Arts and Sciences, Azim Premji University (Bangalore). Her areas of interest include gender and feminist ethnography, cultural politics, Indian cinema and psychoanalysis. She is also a co-curator of the Bangalore Queer Film Festival.

Chinmayi Ramaiah is a Bangalore-based psychoanalyst-in-training of the Lacanian orientation. She works as a consulting psychotherapist with the Parivarthan Counselling, Training and Research Centre and the RNS Institute of Technology, Bangalore. She has recently been conducting research work for the project Digital Intimacy: Young Women and Social Transformation in Asia. She is an alumnus of Ambedkar University, Delhi from which she has an MPhil in Development Practice. Her research interests lie in the areas of caste studies in South Asia, digitally mediated experiences, and the desiring woman as a psychoanalytic subject.

Increased Daily Labor, Decreased Connectivity: Digital Intimacy of Educated Young Women in China

Dr Bai Meijiadai

Lecturer, Department of Journalism, Liaoning University

The digital ecologies within the ‘protection’ of the Great Fire Wall and on the other side of it are quite different. There is still a lack of studies on how Chinese-educated young women build intimate relationships on the digital platforms accessible in mainland China. This research, with semi-structured interviews, studies how educated women, from 18 to 25 years old, construct intimacy with digital media in Guangzhou, China. I recruited 32 interviewees by snowballing and online calling for participants. Because of the travel restrictions and lockdown during the pandemic, most interviews were conducted via video calls on WeChat. This paper uses a broad definition of intimacy: it includes the close relationship between relatives, friends, partners, roommates, and non-human objects. While equally susceptible to harassment online, this paper finds that educated young women are more ambitious about their grades and careers and less sexually active than their counterparts in Hong Kong and developed countries. Their daily lives, both in the real world and cyberspace, are invaded both algorithmically by the under-regulated social network apps and politically by surveillance and micromanagement. As a result, educated young women in China must perform much more labor in managing interpersonal relationships online, through grouping and tactics of invisibility. It may also be less likely for them to construct intimate relationships with strangers and acquaintances due to the lack of trust in the digital space caused by surveillance, censorship, and reporting.

Bai Meijiadai is a lecturer at Liaoning University, China. She completed her doctoral studies in Communications at the Institute of Communications Research, at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Her research examines gender, class, nationality in censorship and fandom in China, digital culture and democracy, and representation in films adapted from traditional Chinese folklore.

Young College Women in Guangzhou and Their Strategies in Forming Digital Intimacy

Dr Hou Lixian Holly

Lecturer, School of Foreign Studies, South China Agricultural University

Based on the in-depth interviews with 32 college girls aged 18 to 25 in Guangzhou from 2021 to 2022, this paper explores how young women in Guangzhou used WeChat and dating apps strategically to build different kinds of intimate relationships. It reveals that these young women adopted the strategy of ‘calmness’ to seek friendship and romance via the comparatively asexual and clean local dating app called SOUL. It further illustrates how they managed their self-presentation in the WeChat Moment via the tactic of ‘self-enhancement’ and crafted their ‘sunny and positive’ images. This paper aims to unravel the complex agency these young women demonstrated in the Chinese socio-political context and unique digital landscape.

Hou Lixian Holly is a lecturer in the School of Foreign Studies at South China Agricultural University, China. Her research interests are: digital feminism, queer politics, media studies and youth cultures. Her recent publications include ‘Creating Policy Change and New Gender Dynamics in China: Situating Lala Activists’ Politics of Assimilation in the Chinese Anti-Domestic Violence Movement’ (2023), ‘Rewriting “the Personal is Political”: Young Women’s Digital Activism and New Feminist Politics in China’ (2020), ‘A Study on the Strategy of the Youth’s Online Feminist Video Activism and its Precarity’ (2020, in Chinese).

'Don't You Sink the Boat!': A Case Study of Hong Kong Young Women's Exploration of Digital Intimacies

A/P Tang Tse Shang Denise

Associate Professor, Department of Cultural Studies, Lingnan University

Ms Chung Man Yin

Independent Scholar

This presentation focuses on key research findings from the Hong Kong cohort on the Digital Intimacy project. The rapid growth of the internet and the widespread use of social media have opened new avenues for young women in Hong Kong to engage in discussions about gender and sexuality. However, the digital world has not always been welcoming to them. Studies have shown that Hong Kong's online culture tends to be male-dominated, often sidelining women's issues and limiting their participation in important conversations. Popular local forums like HK Golden and LIHKG illustrate this male-centric online culture, where female perspectives are frequently overlooked or excluded, and female influencers tackling topics like sex and the body face significant criticism.

Despite these challenges, there has been a rise in gender-conscious social media accounts in recent years offering alternative spaces for young women to explore and express themselves online. '*Sinking the boat*' is an old saying that describes a male client falling in love with a female sex worker. The phrase has now extended to describe a person falling in love with someone whom you meet casually for sex and not supposed to have a long-term relationship with. "*Don't you sink the boat!*" was mentioned by an informant in this study, referring to her attitude when using dating apps. Drawing upon ethnographic data, this presentation will explore the evolving dynamics of habits and intimacy among young women in Hong Kong.

Tang Tse-Shang Denise is Associate Professor in the Department of Cultural Studies and Associate Dean in Teaching and Learning at Lingnan University, Hong Kong. Her research specializes in gender and sexualities with current ethnographic focus on older lesbians and bisexual women (Hong Kong, Taiwan & Singapore), transgender men and transmasculine persons (Bangkok & Hong Kong). Prior to entering academia, Tang was program manager and HIV testing counselor for communities including Asian & Pacific Islander LGBTQI+, survivors of sexual violence, First Nations women and youth in San Francisco, Seattle and Vancouver B.C.

Chung Man Yin was Research Officer at Lingnan University, Hong Kong. From 2021 – 2023, Chung coordinated and collected empirical data (Guangzhou & Hong Kong) for the project *Digital Intimacy: Young Women and Social Transformation in Asia*. Chung also co-authored a book chapter on *Digital intimacy in China*, published in the Routledge Handbook of Sexuality, Gender, Health and Rights (2023).

Digital Intimacy, Social Transformation and Young Women in Singapore: Fear, Insecurity and Play

Prof Audrey Yue

Professor and Head, Department of Communications and New Media,
National University of Singapore

Ms Chau Kam Sing Tina

PhD Candidate, Cultural Studies in Asia PhD programme, National University of Singapore

This paper examines digital intimacy as an affective register that young women engage in to manage and resolve neoliberalism's contradictions. It first identifies the transformations in digital infrastructure and sexual reform that have shaped the production of contemporary female youth subjectivities. It next examines the in-depth interviews conducted with 32 young women to reveal their new practices of drawing boundaries, making content, and using digital language with their loved ones, friends and families. It will show how these practices condition their normative life scripts and in doing so, negotiate the ambivalence of fear, insecurity and play.

Audrey Yue is Professor of Media, Culture and Critical Theory and Head of Department in the Department of Communications and New Media and National University of Singapore.

Chau Kam Sing Tina is a PhD student in the Cultural Studies in Asia PhD programme at the National University of Singapore.

Organising Committee of the

“Digital Intimacy, Young Women and Social Transformation in Asia” Symposium:

Prof Audrey Yue, Convenor

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