Online Dating as A Strategic Game: Why and How Men in Hong Kong Use QQ to Chase Women in Mainland China

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, why and how Men in Hong Kong use QQ — an online instant messenger for communication — to “chase” women in Mainland China are examined. Using online ethnography as the major research method, data was collected from the QQ forum — an online forum with men discussing issues related to the use of QQ for chasing girls. Data from the online forum was supplemented by e-interviews and face-to-face interviews. Social exchange theories, sociology of emotions and theories of Goffman regarding the presentation of self were used to make sense of the data. The distinction between negotiated exchange and reciprocal exchange is a key focus in this study. I argue that chasing girls through QQ is a reciprocal exchange process in which the resources to be exchanged in the interaction are not negotiated. Rather, the men provide resources to the girls hoping for rewards in return, but rewards are not guaranteed. This characteristic of reciprocal exchange makes people who chase girls through QQ very strategic in their actions. They try to maximize the rewards and minimize the costs of the exchange process at the same time by adopting different strategies, such as constructing an attractive online identity by strategic self-presentation, or by selecting the kinds of girls to meet. The role of emotions in the exchange process is also examined. Emotions can be seen as by-products caused by the exchange process, as well as something mediating the exchange process and affecting the exchange outcome. On the one hand, positive emotions such as pride and trust can be seen as rewards in the exchange process, while negative emotions such as shame and guilt can be seen as costs produced by the exchange process. On the other hand, the cultural/normative approach to emotions suggests that expectations of which emotions to be felt depend on the social
context of the culture. Thus, what emotions are supposed to be felt by the men during and after the chasing process are socially defined and the men learn these emotional norms through the QQ forum. However, sometimes it is difficult for the men to control their emotions and thus some of them become “sunken boats”, which means that they fall in love with girls whom they are not supposed to love. They can no longer calculate the costs and rewards rationally in that they may provide too many resources to the girls without getting enough rewards in return. In short, the men see chasing girls through QQ as a game in which they try to win the game by getting the rewards they want without paying too much costs.
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