

Behind the Hidden Identity: The Impact of the Rise of Anonymous Socializing Apps



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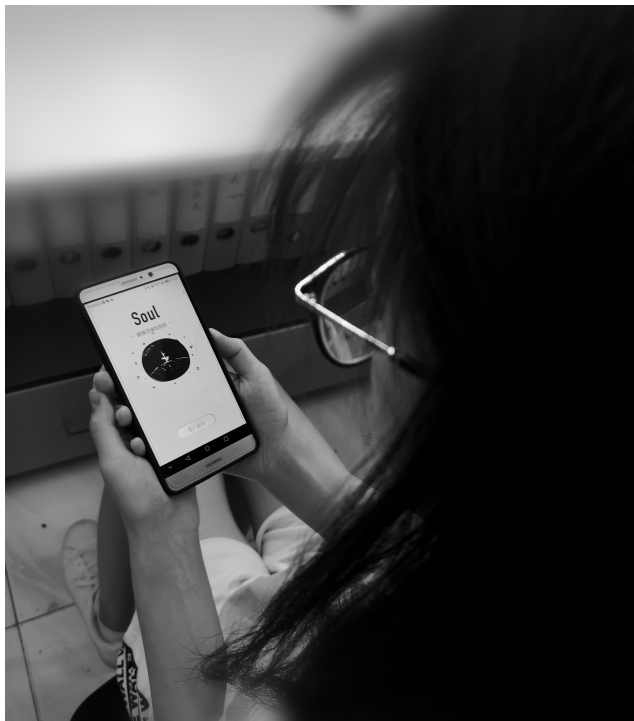
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“Cyber Love” credit to Sirui Lai

The Growing Popularity

When referring to social media, Gloria suddenly perked up and showed us an app called "Soul" on her phone with excitement. "I've been using Soul for 3 months," said Gloria Deng, an 18-year-old girl from Guangzhong, China. "B is my best friend, and we literally talk everything in Soul." She then kept talking about B with a rising pitch.

Soul is a socializing application which incorporates anonymous systems. In this app, your appearance, location, and name would be absolutely hidden; the only required information for registration is your gender and age.



"Looking for you by the track of your soul."

--When we asked Gloria Deng why she enjoyed chatting on "Soul" that much, she said nothing, but showed us this romantic slogan on its opening page.

Photo by *Wenqi Zhang*

Due to the anonymity, the app user "B" in Gloria's words was simply displayed to be a 20-year-old girl. Among pages of chat history with "B" shown by Gloria, their daily chatting has covered almost everything: school, hobbies, and even private relationship problems. Their intimate relationship in Soul totally surprised us, as they were said to be complete strangers 3 months ago.

Anonymous socializing is gradually gaining popularity. According to the report *The Generation of Online Socializing-- the Study of the Post-1995s' Social Life* published by KueClub on June 28, 2018 on its column, Soul has already become the most popular stranger-socializing app among the post-1995s after being launched for less than two years.

In fact, Soul is only one of the various similar applications. Among the users of those apps, it is accepted that meeting unacquainted people enlarges their social circles, releasing loneliness when they get depressed; furthermore, people tend to be more comfortable speaking out their hidden secrets, "I feel more protected with a hidden identity. It is easier for me to open my heart when I am free of annoying gossips in real life," remarked Gloria.

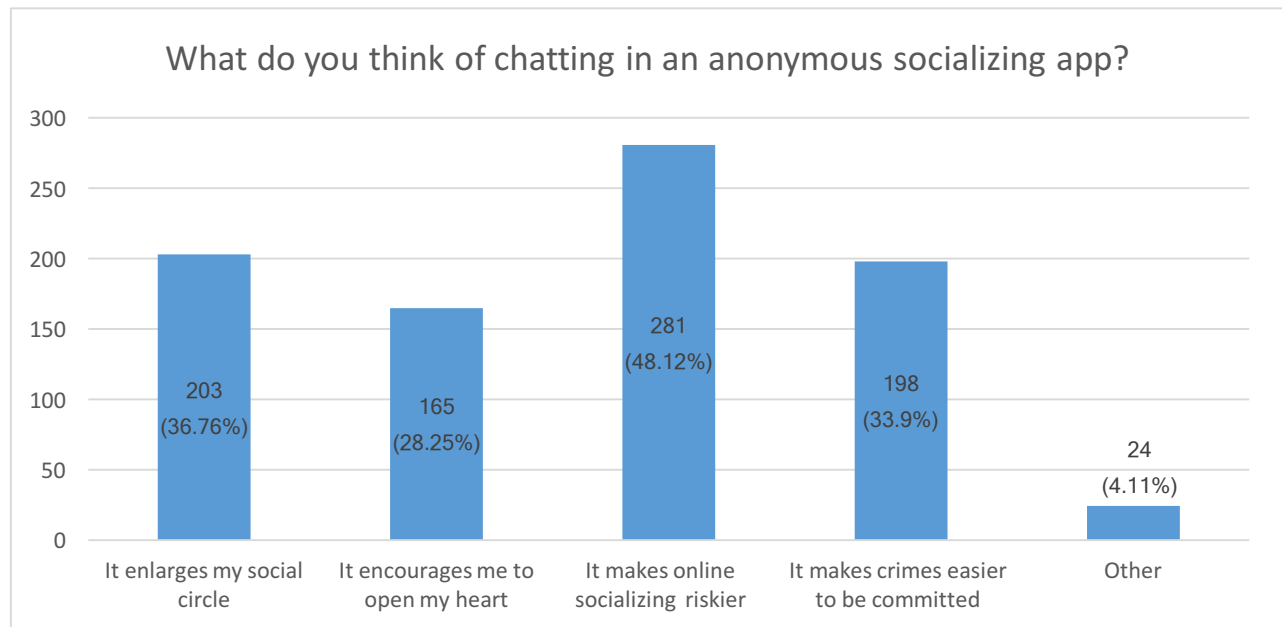
The Social Concern

Instead of being a supporter, Gloria's mother, Ms.Wang, disapproves of her daughter's obsession for Soul. "All information could be made up in social media," she frowned. "Gloria believes that she is chatting with a 20-year-old girl, but who knows whether it is true or not? A 50-year-old man can also be disguised easily as this identity if he wants."

Ms.Wang is not the only person who has reservations about the anonymity. When we asked people "What do you think of chatting in an anonymous socializing app" -- a multiple-choice question involved in the relevant survey conducted by our team -- 48.1% of the 584 respondents chose the option that "it makes online socializing riskier", and 33.9% of the respondents doubted that "crimes are easier to be committed".

Their concerns are definitely not groundless. Back in 2017, Dr. Louise Almond from the University of Liverpool published an article called "*Stranger danger*" in the online and real world. "Our relationship with 'strangers' has been evolving, and social media has torn down some of the barriers that used to protect us," she claimed in the article. "For female victims of serious sexual assaults, 16% were recorded as 'stranger relationships'," Dr.Almond referred to the report released by the Office of National Statistics in 2015. Due to the fact that personal information could be

highly unreliable in social media, building interpersonal relations is deemed to be risky and perilous.



According to our results collected from 584 responses, when being provided both positive-tending and negative-tending options, the majority of the respondents were inclined to choose the latter ones.

A Protective Mask?

Apart from stranger-socializing apps like Soul, Tantan, etc, anonymous systems are also used in Question & Answer apps such as Zhihu. As the most prevalent Q&A app among social media, Zhihu allows its users to hide their identity when asking or answering a question according to their preference.

Unlike Soul, Q&A is not mainly used for meeting new people, but rather for interchanging perspectives; therefore, we've observed an interesting fact that people seemed to be less concerned about sharing personal information on those socializing apps. According to our survey, when people considered “posting” instead of “chatting” with the use of anonymous systems, 57.2% of the respondents showed their relatively positive attitude that “anonymity encourages people to bravely voice their real perspectives”.

The results made us wonder the reason why people are more open to anonymity among Q&A socializing apps. To find out the answer, our team analyzed the statistics in Zhihu to discover when people like to use anonymity the most. Here is the result: the users are more likely to hide their identity when including personal information in their answers. What's more, most of the anonymous answers receive plenty of social agreements for their frank sharing of personal experiences; the anonymity seems to give people a protective mask, shielding them from being recognized or accused by the public.

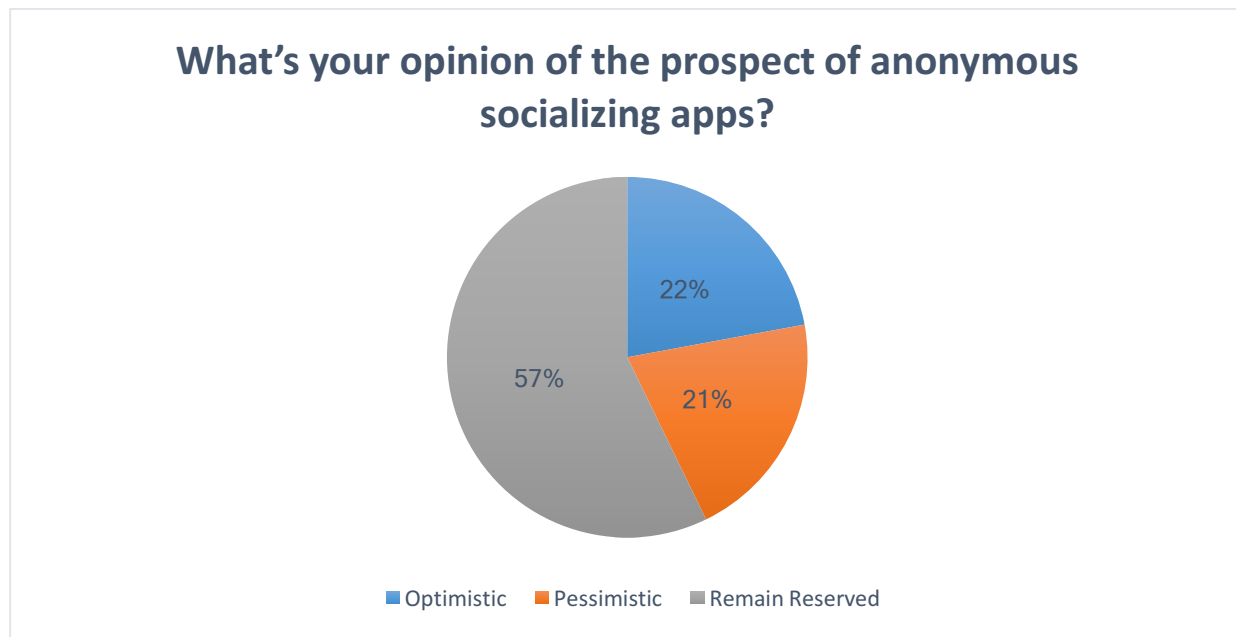
For example, for the question "what is the most daring thing you've ever done", about 46% of the total 676 answers are anonymous; among 2,628 answers to the question "How was your 23-year-old like", an anonymous one has ranked the highest in popularity with over 2.8k of "likes"; and for a very sensitive question asking "what should I do if I fall in love with my married boss", the top answer, written by an anonymous manager, has obtained 6.6k "likes" by revealing the corruptive side in the workplace.

"Individuals are unlikely to have intimate associations within a larger community, which makes me more comfortable and secure when sharing my stories," posted by an anonymous Zhihu user. As mentioned, Q&A apps such as Zhihu primarily serve as platforms for exchanging ideas among a community; without having direct, one-to-one conversations, people tend to focus more on the content delivered rather than the interpersonal relationship between each other. This shift in people's concentration, together with a weaker personal connection between individuals, could possibly make people less worried about including personal information in their expressions. Under such circumstance, the anonymity brings more positive impacts as it largely provides an opportunity for people to protect their privacy and security, simultaneously encouraging them to be more courageous in sharing their personal experiences.

The Prospect of Anonymous Socializing

What's your opinion of the prospect of the anonymous socializing apps? Among our respondents, more than half of them remained reserved, while 20% of them stayed pessimistic. "I think everyone

is aware of the cybersecurity issue," replied an anonymous respondent, "but social media is developing so fast that I don't know how we can control the use of it."



As the results shown above, more people tended to remain reserved about the prospect of the anonymous social media. It correspondingly reveals the conflict between the rapid growth of social network and the negative impact elicited by the anonymity.

The anonymous system has nevertheless drawn our attention to the role that identities play in social media. Whether being used in private or shared socializing relationships, anonymity does provide an opportunity for the users to share their real perspectives without real-life misgivings; however, it is also more challenging for everyone to take responsibility for their own comments and behaviors when being hidden under the protective mask. Therefore, the society should pay serious attention to the management of the anonymous system, and the designing companies should establish strategies for guiding people to use such apps properly at the same time.

When we asked Gloria about her viewpoint of the potential danger of anonymous socializing, she shrugged, "For me, cyber society and real life are two separate worlds, so I am very conscious about what cannot be said or done in social media." So will you accept B's invitation to meet each other in real life? We asked. The young girl in front of us hesitated for a while, then shook her head, "I don't think she will do so... but she'd better stay to be my best friend on the cyber side."