

# THE REPORTER FILES 3: LOW-TEMP RELATIONSHIPS

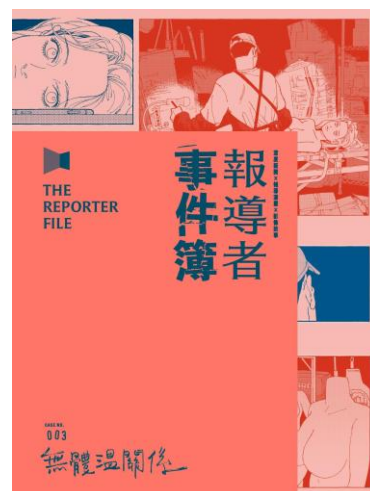
## 報導者事件簿 003：無體溫 關係

*This sweeping exploration of interpersonal relationships in the digital age is led by the author, who works as an investigative journalist for the independent Taiwan-based non-profit news organization The Reporter, and Huihui, a vanguard comic-book illustrator and long-term observer of non-mainstream relationships.*

Since its founding, the non-profit media organization *The Reporter* has worked to expand the scope and range of media coverage, shedding light on relevant, timely issues overlooked or superficially covered by mainstream outlets. In pursuit of its mission, the group has also dipped its toes into publishing. Each book in *The Reporter Files* series, apart from breaking down a real-world story in words and pictures, includes an abridged version in comic strip format to further draw readers into the narrative. While similarly edited and formatted, each volume stands well on its own.

*Low-Temp Relationships*, the third book in the series published in 2024, explores the recent proliferation of non-traditional “low-temperature” relationships, many of which see face-to-face interactions, promises of fidelity and even long-term stability as optional. The book is presented in four main sections, including manga, in-depth reporting, every picture tells a story, and the epilogue.

A few of the many subtopics addressed in the narrative include post-pandemic trends such as sleep calling and eatgetherring apps, dates for rent, AV girl photoshoots, and digital-only love. Expert takes add



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objectivity and depth to each social phenomenon, while photos bring visual depth and character to the stories. Starting from recent innovations in the silicone sex doll industry, this work plumbs the true value of relationships and intimacy.

Comic strip images crafted by a talented manga artist Huihui add impact to the topic and interview narratives and breathe form into reader imaginations and honest realism into stories.

While learning about the latest trends and changes in the intimate relationship landscape, readers' eyes are opened to the uniqueness of the individual human experience and encouraged to expand their horizons when exploring new friendship and intimate relationship possibilities.

## Comics by Huihui

漫畫／廢廢子

Huihui is a graduate of the Department of Fine Arts at National Taiwan Normal University and the Experimental Animation Program at CalArts. She has staged multiple solo exhibitions of her work in Taipei, and was a featured artist in the Taiwan Pavilion at the Angoulême International Comics Festival. Following the publishing of her first graphic novel, *Blowing-Up Adventure of Me!*, Huihui collaborated with playwright Chien Li-Ying to recast her script *Tender Is the Night* as a graphic novel. *The Reporter Files 3: Low-Temp Relationships* published in 2024, is her most recent work.

## Text and Photos by The Reporter

文字及攝影／報導者

Established in 2015 as Taiwan's first non-profit online media outlet, *The Reporter* is dedicated to investigative journalism and in-depth reporting in the public sphere.

# THE REPORTER FILES 3: LOW-TEMP RELATIONSHIPS

Comics by Huihui; text and photos by The Reporter

Translated by Chris Findler

## Editor's Report: Low-Temp Relationships Beyond Morality

In the spring of 2019, William Kung, a journalist for *The Reporter*, diligently tracked down dates for hire, sleep calling, dating apps, and porn star studio shoots. Phenomena like these reflect the new face of intimate relationships, so I chose to name this series "In Pursuit of Low-Temp Intimacy" to set them apart from traditional relationships in which individuals sought soulmates and long-term bonds.

COVID-19 and the post-pandemic world did nothing to stop or even slow the advance of these trends. In fact, in interviews and field studies, we discovered that other types of intimate relationships continued to emerge.

We recently interviewed A-Jen, a 42-year-old gentleman, who was a mailman for nine years, later sold books, and now drives a truck for a logistics company. Considerate and quick with a smile, he was with three women in relationships that lasted an average of five years each. When the topic of marriage came up in our discussion, however, A-Jen became visibly distraught: "I work long hours. I have to drive on weekends and even during the Lunar New Year. When I got home, I used to dread that my girlfriend would want to go out to see a movie or something...or on New Year's Eve, that she'd want to drive around and check out the sights... (After dating a few years,) girls yearn to get married, but things like wedding gowns, rings, and photos cost a lot. And after kids come along, life only gets harder."

In the end, A-Jen dropped out of the dating scene, opting instead for Yun Yun, his silicone doll girlfriend. 163-centimeters tall and tipping the scales at 34 kilos, she has real waist-length black hair, big greyish-green eyes, and skin so realistic you can see veins. A-Jen takes good care of Yun Yun, even buying her a new outfit online every month and hiring a beautician to change her make-up from time to time. He says that when he gets home after a tiring day at work and sees his beautiful Yun Yun standing there waiting for him, it's as if she's asking: "How was your day?" So he gripes a bit about work, gives her a big hug, and says, "Thanks". On his days off, they drive around, spend the night out, and do a photo shoot.

A-Jen lives with his parents and shows pictures of Yun Yun to friends and colleagues just like you would in any relationship. He says now that the pressure has been lifted, he is no longer anxious about finding a marriage partner. "It's like your luck has changed. There's none of that negative energy."

At this point, you might be wondering if an atypical relationship like his can truly replace intimacy with a real person.

There are actually many individuals who, like A-Jen, obtain comfort and confidence in “low-temp relationships”.

Are we witnessing the fading out and watering down of intimate relationships? How should we think about this?

It’s not that people don’t long to love or be loved; companionship is a universal need, but maintaining an intimate relationship in which you feel comfortable and at ease is, for many, out of reach.

Life is stressful and urban living spaces tight; we are spending more time working and worrying about how we are perceived online; and unnerving pestilences and wars keep erupting around the planet. Faced with challenges like these, it’s no wonder that many people find it difficult to muster up the time and energy to manage romantic relationships and deal with the emotional issues they bring.

So how should individuals build emotional bonds? How should emotions be understood? What can satisfy the demand for relationships that are just right, that don’t overheat, or that don’t require any temperature at all?

In *The Reporter Files 3: Low-Temp Relationships*, we profile some of contemporary society’s “isolated-yet-connected” intimacy modes, such as silicone mannequins (including the silicone mannequin industry and fan clubs), charge-by-the-hour dating, 90-second private studio photo shoots, online dating, and sleep call apps, all of which advocate intimacy with temperature-less objects and digital tools.

We interviewed people from all walks of life – truck drivers, warehouse personnel, chefs, office workers, and engineers; some single, some celibate, some unhappily married, and some who experience difficulties finding partners due to disabilities. The diverse companionship services and products we investigated were created to satisfy a range of needs. Some individuals utilize them purely for sexual release, but even more use them for emotional bonding and to fulfill the ritual of having a companion for special days, like the Lunar New Year, Valentine’s Day, Christmas, and birthdays.

We’ve seen advances in technology that enable silicone dolls to be sculpted to look like a particular individual and others that let people converse with AI programmed to use the voice of loved ones who have passed, thereby allowing love to continue and encouraging survivors to carry on.

We prattle on about decreasing marriage and birth rates being national security issues, insist that people “try and find their special someone”, and urge individuals to tie the knot and have kids to carry on the family line; however, we seem to forget that physical and mental well-being should be our first priorities. In this modern era of ours, where everything seems purposively designed to suck the spirit out of you, pushing people to pursue traditional approaches to intimacy is a moral dogma ripe with negativity.

Of the 9.16 million households in Taiwan today, 3.22 million consist of people living alone. Today, many roads can lead to self-fulfillment. In addition to getting married and having kids, other respectable choices include knowing how to be alone and take care of yourself, pursuing your own version of happiness, and enjoying diversified social relationships.

### **Sleep Calling, Eatgetherring, Painless Socializing - The Internet Generation Uses Companionship Apps to Deal with Loneliness**

Graced with beautiful eyes, Hsiao Yi is approaching thirty and left her most recent relationship a year ago. She has been unable to find a suitable partner and her relationships tend to end quickly, so her anxious parents want to help her find prospective mates. Faced with pressure from all sides, she has thrown herself into the arms of dating apps.

Hsiao Yi now has five or six of these app on her phone with algorithms designed to find one-on-one matches. They include Tinder, an old-fashioned dating app; the female-friendly Coffee Meets Bagel; and Yuanquan, which utilizes condition-based screening to increase match rates. She's been using some of the apps for as long as five years, making her an old-timer of sorts in the dating community.

Hsiao Yi has never taken a break from her dating apps. Although she generally uses them less when she's dating someone, she never actually goes cold turkey. She confides that she has figured out a way to "maximize" her efforts. She scrolls through her dating apps and clicks on "get to know" for as many people as possible.

She posts cheery outdoor selfies of herself on each of her accounts and, whenever she has a spare moment, opens one up and scrolls through photos of the guys. She says she regularly spends two to three hours each day on dating apps, especially when she's alone.

### **Early Maturation and Late Marriage Creating Today's Online Companionship Culture**

Hsiao Yi, who spends a great deal of time gazing at her screen, explains that on Tinder, swiping left means "Nope", while swiping right indicates "Like". When she swipes right, she's usually completing a match, meaning she and the gentleman have "clicked". Whenever that happens, the scene from the 1995 romantic drama *Before Sunrise*, where Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy exchange glances, pops into her mind and she finds herself fantasizing about love once again.

There was a time when the dialog section on Hsiao Yi's accounts seemed to go on forever. Her phone would "ding, ding, ding" incessantly with notifications of successful matches and no matter how much she scrolled down, she could never reach the end of her messages. It seemed like every few hours, somebody new wanted to get to know her. The dating apps would bring a smile to her lips and boost her confidence.

"When I get a notification, it means somebody out there might like me. Dating apps are like a treasure trove for me," Hsiao Yi explains. In the real world, she's been an inveterate loser in the game of love; however, in the virtual world, she's a winner. As she searches for new relationships, expectations build. She strives to establish connections with people on dating apps to find companionship and, more importantly, gradually repair her self-identity.

Online relationships like Hsiao Yi's, however, are nothing new.

*The Wall Street Journal* interviewed Stephanie Coontz, historian and emeritus professor at Evergreen State College in the US, for a 2019 article titled "For Teens, Romances Where the Couple Never Meets are Now Normal".

Coontz, who researches American families and intimate relationships, points out that young people today are using technologies at their disposal to deal with a relationship landscape marked by earlier puberty and later marriages, with the gap between the two now roughly fifteen to twenty years. This is a period young people are now using to experiment more flexibly with their options for sex and intimacy.

Coontz also discovered that, whereas previous generations tended to engage in physical interaction, youth today prefer interacting online. She shares an example to illustrate her point: In 2018, 23% of Americans between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine had yet to have their first sexual experience; in the early 1990s, the number was about half that.

This "sex drought" has flipped relationships on their head and online-only relationships have become more common.

Hsiao Yi explains that only about 1 in 400 of the people she meets on dating apps ends up becoming a friend in real life. She realizes that dating app relationships can be fake, but says when you meet strangers online, you can reply to them if you like or just ignore them. In any case, there are tons more out there waiting to meet you. Dating like this comes with "zero burden".

The way Millennials (like Hsiao Yi) and the younger Generation Z use the internet and interact on social media differs from older generations and they no longer use it just for work. They use social media platforms to connect with large numbers of strangers and the massive population of users is driving the new online "companionship culture".

### **100 Million Minutes of Loneliness, Sleep Calling with Strangers**

Goodnight is a voice-chat dating app that debuted in Taiwan in late 2015. Users don't have to post images or personal data and are matched randomly. System-matched contacts chat one-on-one for seven minutes before deciding mutually whether to "friend" one another.

In our interview with Goodnight founder Andy Huang, he reveals that Goodnight had over three million registered users in 2019, with an average of 400,000 calls made over the app each day. Customers, about 90% of which are below the age of thirty, log in on average three to four days a week, connecting with four or five strangers to chat. In the wake of the pandemic, membership soared to 14 million, with an average of 800,000 calls made each day.

This huge number of users spurred a new phenomenon known as sleep calling.

"Sleep calling" allows users to take advantage of the anonymity of this voice-chat app to talk with somebody until they fall asleep. This can be done with a regular or randomly-assigned partner. You can shoot the breeze or simply listen to the sound of their breathing or other background noises.

When sleep calling came up in our conversation, Huang, himself a dating app aficionado, pointed out, "This novel phenomenon is trending. Monthly call minutes on Goodnight increased

from 40 million to 60-70 million in two years (2017-2019), indicating that users are no longer using the app for short calls only; they are using it for companionship, talking with somebody until they fall asleep.”

In 2023, Goodnight’s monthly call minutes rocketed to 110 million. Huang believes this to be due to increases in both new subscribers and sleep calling. “Everybody needs the sound of a voice,” he explains.

Growth in this area is something he had not foreseen. Huang notes the Goodnight app was developed to provide clients “authentic” connections in “real time”. He wanted to help people establish connections with others without pressure and, hopefully, become friends in the real world. That’s why the app is voice based and, unlike most dating apps, does not focus on graphics and physical appearance.

On the other hand, the app also helps people deal with the issue of “ubiquitous loneliness”.

Huang explains that, prior to launching the business, he and his friends conducted in-depth interviews with one hundred individuals to better understand what the face of dating would look like in ten to fifteen years. They found a common denominator: Everybody felt that the convenience of technology allows people to connect easily with others, increasing interpersonal relations in terms of breadth, but not necessarily in terms of depth. “Over the course of those interviews, I could sense that everybody was lonely. They felt that relationships established with the aid of technology were superficial,” he said.

Huang says that voices are real; you can’t fake them. Following several interviews and extensive user analysis, he found chatting to be the easiest way to build relationships, because, in that moment, you’re listening to an actual person in a one-on-one conversation. When you talk with someone, it’s easier to become friends with them in the real world.

### **Online, A Hubbub of Voices; Offline, Nothing Changes**

After years of use and experimentation, however, Huang realized users rarely spoke with any one person for an extended period of time. Most didn’t end up becoming friends and simply drifted from one brief chat to the next. The anonymous voice dating format contributed to a large number of short-term online relationships. “The data provides us with direct evidence of loneliness,” he explains.

When she has free time, “Smiley”, a 24-year old white-collar worker and Goodnight client, uses the app to complain to strangers about her work and even tried sleep calling after reading about its popularity online. She recalls the experience. It started with a phone call at 11 p.m. It was after work and she had her television on. The two of them talked about their lives, interests, and views on current events to pass the time. Later, she found herself lying in bed drifting off. The conversation faded in and out until there was only the steady sound of their breathing. It really was like having somebody next to you, but she couldn’t recall what they talked about to save her soul.

“Sleep calling gives you a sense of companionship. I rent a place and generally just turn on the TV when I have nothing else to do, so having somebody to talk to is nice,” Smiley explains.

When bored, she finds someone to sleep call with. It's different, she says, from chatting with a boyfriend or girlfriend until you fall asleep. Sleep calling is safe; it's simply having a person, a voice, next to you. She uses the function a great deal and is considering looking for a long-term sleep call partner.

Intimacy without the intimacy. Low-temp relationships like these happen all the time online. But there are some who want to break down the virtual walls.

### **Socializing Through Eatgether: Shallow Relationships Are Just Fine**

Formed in 2016, Eatgether, which combines dining with socializing, is a case in point. Activities span the gamut and can be organized by anybody who uses the app. Participants can engage in shared interests; like dining, singing, sporting, and drinking; go on one-on-one dates; and even attend business-related events. It is claimed that these activities, which generally last for less than three hours, are conducive to starting new relationships. Users pay with a yellow wine glass token to join an event.

Describing their product as “a social revolution from the dining table”, Eatgether founder Mask Wu explains, “It differs from traditional dating apps, because our starting point isn't finding a partner. As food and beverage marketing specialists, our goal is to get consumers to dine out. Our research discovered that over 70% of diners go to restaurants to socialize.”

As of late 2023, Eatgether had accumulated 1.5 million members. Back-end data shows that over half of them are working professionals between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five, i.e., the loneliest sociodemographic and the group most closely tied to urban life.

“They're in that gap between graduation and marriage, a time marked by meeting members of the opposite sex, starting families, and developing careers, interests, and tastes. They don't necessarily use dating apps to find a fixed partner; they just want to relieve their loneliness and find respite for their souls,” Wu analyzes.

He explains that these online relationships with strangers differ from acquaintanceships on old social media platforms, like Facebook and Instagram, where people come across as close friends, but rarely interact in real life. They have a difficult time letting their hair down due to concerns over being judged by others in their echo chamber and they don't ask others out, because they're afraid of being rejected or laughed at. They'd rather ask strangers out, firstly, because it allows them to reinvent themselves and, secondly, because, if worse comes to worst, they only waste the time it takes to eat a meal.

When first launched, Eatgether shot out of the gate. In early 2018, they held only 2,000 get-togethers a month. By 2019, that number surged to over 10,000 and doubled again in 2023. Now, they generally hold more than 20,000 events each month. Females are four times more active than males in terms of signing up for and organizing activities. This app's success intimates a growing demand for socializing, especially in person.

But activities like these aimed at meeting strangers in the real world do not necessarily lead to stable, long-term relationships. More often than not, they also lead to relationships that don't last.

Wu points out that back-end data indicates that users participate in a wide range of activities. After members establish short-term connections with various other members, they search for new, interesting gatherings or relationships. Individuals have multiple acquaintances, but they keep looking for more and more connections and companions.

“It’s like buying a lottery ticket. The more you buy, the better your chances of hitting the jackpot. This inevitably leads to shallow relationships,” he says.

So do real life activities offer a solution to the loneliness so prevalent among today’s young people? That’s a big question.

Technology has changed the way young people get to know others. They start relationships faster, but also end them more quickly. They spend large amounts of time in virtual communities to avoid the pain of socializing and rejection, while accumulating a sense of security. It seems that finding a soulmate through speed dating or e-dating should probably be relegated to the realm of fairytales, something perhaps attainable only in a bygone era now clouded by nostalgic imagination.