



"Man Mum" Phenomenon: Digital Age Intimacy and the Commodification of Emotional Labor in Contemporary Chinese Society

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Abstract - The emergence of the "man mum" phenomenon in urban China represents a fascinating convergence of technological mediation, evolving gender dynamics, and commercialized emotional support systems. This comprehensive analysis examines how young Chinese women increasingly seek paid platonic physical comfort from men who embody both traditional masculine strength and nurturing feminine qualities. Through examination of social media discourse, digital platform mechanics, and consumer behavioral patterns, this study reveals how commodified emotional services reflect deeper societal transformations in contemporary China. The research explores the linguistic evolution of the term from its origins describing muscular men to its current meaning encompassing gentle, patient emotional providers. By analyzing the service's operational framework wherein women pay 20–50 yuan for five-minute hugs arranged through chat applications in public spaces this investigation illuminates sophisticated boundary management strategies that distinguish these interactions from romantic or therapeutic relationships. The study further considers potential international implications, particularly within Indian cultural contexts, examining how different societies might adapt or resist similar emotional commodification models. Through cross-cultural analysis and exploration of underlying socioeconomic drivers, this research demonstrates how the "man mum" phenomenon serves as a lens for understanding broader shifts in intimacy, social isolation, and coping mechanisms within high-pressure urban environments, offering insights for future social innovation strategies worldwide.

Keywords: Emotional Labor Commodification, Digital Age Intimacy, Platonic Physical Comfort, Urban Social Isolation, Gender Performance Evolution, Cross-Cultural Adaptation, Boundary Management Strategies, Chinese Social Innovation.

1. INTRODUCTION AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The rapid transformation of Chinese society through urbanization and digital connectivity has fundamentally altered traditional patterns of social interaction, emotional support, and intimate relationships. Within this evolving landscape, the "man mum" phenomenon has emerged as a particularly compelling example of how contemporary urban dwellers are reimagining the boundaries between commercial transactions and emotional fulfillment. This novel service model, where young women pay men modest fees for brief, platonic physical comfort, challenges conventional understandings of intimacy, masculinity, and the commodification of care work.

The significance of this phenomenon extends far beyond its immediate commercial aspects. It represents a unique intersection of several powerful social forces: the digitization of interpersonal connections, the evolution of gender roles and expressions, the commercialization of traditionally informal support systems, and the development of new coping mechanisms for urban stress and isolation. Understanding the "man

mum" phenomenon requires examining these interconnected dynamics within the broader context of China's rapidly changing social fabric.



Fig -1: "man mum" trend in China

At its core, this phenomenon illuminates how traditional care work historically performed by women within family and community structures is being reconceptualized and commodified within digital marketplaces. The fact that men are now providing nurturing services typically associated with maternal care suggests significant shifts in gender performance and expectations. Simultaneously, the willingness of young women to pay for such services indicates both changing economic circumstances and evolving strategies for managing emotional needs within increasingly atomized urban environments.

The theoretical framework for understanding this phenomenon draws from multiple disciplinary perspectives. Sociological theories of emotional labor, originally developed by Arlie Hochschild, provide insight into how feelings and physical comfort are being transformed into market commodities. Gender studies perspectives illuminate how the "man mum" model challenges traditional masculine roles while potentially reinforcing certain feminine needs for protection and nurturing. Digital sociology offers tools for understanding how technology platforms facilitate new forms of intimacy while maintaining necessary boundaries between participants.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND LINGUISTIC EVOLUTION

The term "man mum" represents a fascinating case study in semantic evolution that mirrors broader cultural transformations in contemporary China. Initially, this phrase emerged within Chinese internet culture to describe physically imposing, muscular men often fitness enthusiasts or body builders who symbolized protection and physical security. The original usage emphasized traditional masculine attributes strength, physical dominance, and the ability to provide safety through intimidating presence. However, the meaning has undergone a remarkable transformation that reflects changing cultural attitudes toward masculinity and emotional expression. Contemporary usage of "man mum" has shifted to describe men who combine physical strength with traditionally feminine qualities such as gentleness,



patience, emotional availability, and nurturing capacity. This linguistic evolution parallels broader global trends toward more flexible gender expressions while maintaining distinctly Chinese cultural characteristics.

The transformation of this terminology coincides with significant generational changes in Chinese society. Younger Chinese citizens, particularly those born after the 1990s, have grown up in an era of increased global connectivity, changing family structures due to the one-child policy, and different economic pressures than their parents faced. These generational shifts have created new needs for emotional support and different expectations about gender roles and relationships. Unlike similar concepts in Western cultures, the "man mum" phenomenon explicitly maintains the combination of physical strength with nurturing behavior. This differs from Western models of sensitive masculinity, which often deemphasize physical dominance in favor of emotional intelligence. The Chinese model suggests a cultural preference for men who can provide both physical security and emotional comfort hybrid that speaks to specific cultural values and social needs. The linguistic evolution also reflects the influence of internet culture and social media on language development in China. Terms like "man mum" emerge from online communities, gain traction through social media platforms, and eventually influence offline behaviors and commercial services. This pattern demonstrates how digital communication shapes not only language but also social practices and economic opportunities.

3. SERVICE MECHANICS AND BOUNDARY MANAGEMENT

The operational structure of "man mum" services reveals sophisticated systems for managing the complex boundaries between commercial transaction, emotional support, and physical intimacy. These services typically operate through established chat applications such as WeChat, QQ, or specialized platforms designed for connecting service providers with consumers. The digital mediation serves multiple functions it provides initial screening and communication channels, enables payment processing, and creates documentation that can enhance safety for both parties. Pricing structures for these services reflect their positioning as accessible emotional support rather than luxury services. The standard rate of 20–50 yuan (approximately \$3–7 USD) for a five-minute hug places these services within reach of most urban young women while providing meaningful supplemental income for providers. This pricing strategy suggests the services are designed for regular use rather than special occasions, positioning them as routine self-care rather than extraordinary indulgence.

Location selection demonstrates careful attention to safety and social acceptability. Meetings typically occur in highly public spaces such as shopping malls, subway stations, parks, or busy commercial districts. These venues provide multiple advantages: they offer safety through visibility, reduce the risk of misinterpretation by observers, and create natural time limitations due to their transient nature. The public setting also helps maintain the service's platonic character by eliminating private spaces where boundaries might be more easily violated. The temporal structure of these interactions, typically limited to five minutes serves several important functions. Brief duration helps maintain emotional boundaries while providing sufficient time for meaningful physical comfort. It also supports the commercial viability of the service by allowing providers to serve multiple clients within reasonable timeframes. The time limitation creates a sense of special occasion that may enhance the emotional impact while preventing the development of more complex relationship dynamics.

Payment protocols typically involve advance payment through digital platforms, which serves both practical and psychological functions. Prepayment ensures provider compensation while removing



financial negotiations from the emotional interaction itself. This separation helps maintain the focus on emotional exchange rather than commercial transaction during the actual hug, preserving the authentic feeling that clients seek. The integration of gift-giving behaviors adds complexity to these otherwise straightforward commercial transactions. Many clients offer small gifts such as coffee, books, or snacks to their chosen "man mum" either before or after the hug. These gifts appear to serve psychological functions for clients, helping to humanize the interaction and express gratitude in ways that go beyond monetary payment. For providers, these gestures may help them feel valued as individuals rather than merely as service providers.

4. SOCIOECONOMIC DRIVERS AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The popularity of "man mum" services reflects multiple converging pressures within contemporary urban Chinese society that have created unprecedented demands for alternative forms of emotional support. Understanding these drivers requires examination of economic, social, and cultural factors that have fundamentally altered traditional support systems while creating new forms of stress and isolation.

Economic pressures on young urban Chinese women have intensified significantly in recent years. The competitive job market, rising housing costs, and changing family expectations have created high-stress environments where traditional support systems may feel inadequate or unavailable. Many young women work long hours in demanding careers, leaving limited time for developing and maintaining close personal relationships that might provide emotional support. The "man mum" service offers a time-efficient solution that fits within busy schedules while providing immediate emotional relief.

The one-child policy's long-term effects have created unique family dynamics that influence support-seeking behaviors. Many young adults lack siblings who might traditionally provide peer support and emotional guidance. Additionally, the pressure to succeed professionally and personally often intensified by being the sole focus of parental expectations can create stress levels that family relationships alone cannot address. The "man mum" service provides support outside family structures, potentially reducing pressure on family relationships while addressing emotional needs.

Changing relationship patterns among young Chinese adults also contribute to demand for these services. Delayed marriage, increased focus on career development, and evolving expectations about romantic relationships have created periods of extended singlehood where traditional sources of physical comfort may be unavailable. Unlike romantic relationships, "man mum" services provide physical comfort without the emotional complexity, time investment, or potential disappointment associated with dating.

The cultural significance of physical touch in Chinese society adds another layer to understanding this phenomenon. While Chinese culture has traditionally been more reserved about physical contact between unrelated individuals compared to some Western cultures, urbanization and global cultural exchange have created new awareness of the importance of physical comfort for emotional well-being. The "man mum" service provides access to beneficial physical contact within culturally acceptable boundaries.

Social media and digital culture have also influenced the development and acceptance of these services. The normalization of sharing personal experiences online, combined with the visibility of mental health discussions, has reduced stigma around seeking emotional support. Social media platforms provide spaces where women can discuss their experiences with "man mum" services, share recommendations, and normalize what might otherwise be considered unusual behavior.



The phenomenon also reflects broader changes in Chinese society's approach to mental health and emotional well-being. Younger generations are more willing to acknowledge psychological needs and seek professional or semi-professional support for emotional challenges. The "man mum" service represents a middle ground between informal support from friends and formal therapeutic intervention, filling a gap in the emotional support ecosystem.

5. INTERNATIONAL IMPLICATIONS: POTENTIAL ADOPTION IN INDIAN SOCIETY

The potential adaptation of "man mum" services within Indian cultural contexts presents fascinating possibilities and challenges that illuminate fundamental differences in social structures, cultural values, and approaches to physical intimacy between societies. India's complex cultural landscape, characterized by significant regional variations, diverse religious traditions, and rapidly evolving urban-rural divides, would likely produce dramatically different manifestations of any similar service model.

Cultural Considerations and Adaptations

Indian society's relationship with physical contact between unrelated individuals varies significantly across regions, communities, and generational lines. Traditional values emphasizing modesty and appropriate behavior between unmarried men and women would likely necessitate substantial modifications to any Indian adaptation of the "man mum" model. Urban centers such as Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore, and Chennai, with their more cosmopolitan populations and increased exposure to global cultural trends, might prove more receptive to such services, particularly among younger, educated demographics.

However, the implementation would likely require significant cultural adaptations. The service might evolve to emphasize different forms of comfort perhaps focusing more on conversation, emotional support, or symbolic gestures rather than physical contact. The concept of "brotherly" or familial protection might provide a culturally acceptable framework for such services, drawing on traditional concepts of Rakhi relationships or familial bonds that transcend blood relations. Religious and spiritual traditions in India might also influence the development of emotional support services. The country's long tradition of spiritual guidance, meditation practices, and wellness services could provide alternative frameworks for commodified emotional support. Services might integrate elements of meditation, spiritual counseling, or wellness practices that align more closely with existing cultural expectations while addressing similar emotional needs.

Economic and Social Impact Potential

The economic implications of introducing similar services in India would reflect the country's unique economic landscape, characterized by significant income disparities and different consumer behavior patterns. Urban young professionals in India, particularly women in technology, finance, and other high-stress industries, face similar pressures to their Chinese counterparts intense work environments, limited social support networks, and delayed marriage patterns. These demographics might represent the primary market for adapted emotional support services.

The pricing structure would necessarily differ significantly from the Chinese model. While 20–50 yuan represents a modest expense for urban Chinese consumers, the equivalent purchasing power in India would require different pricing strategies. Services might need to position themselves either as premium wellness offerings for higher-income consumers or develop tiered pricing models that make them accessible to broader populations.



The potential for job creation represents another significant consideration. India's large population of educated young men, particularly in urban areas with limited employment opportunities, might find appeal in service roles that provide meaningful work and social contribution. However, the social stigma associated with such work might initially limit participation, requiring careful positioning and social acceptance-building.

6. SOCIAL INNOVATION AND MENTAL HEALTH IMPLICATIONS

The introduction of structured emotional support services could contribute to important conversations about mental health awareness in Indian society. Urban India has experienced significant increases in reported mental health challenges, particularly among young professionals dealing with workplace stress, family expectations, and social pressures. Accessible emotional support services could provide valuable supplements to traditional mental health resources, which remain limited and often stigmatized.

Educational institutions in India might find value in adapted versions of these services. Universities and colleges could potentially implement peer support programs that incorporate elements of structured emotional comfort within appropriate cultural boundaries. Such programs could address the significant mental health challenges facing Indian students while creating opportunities for meaningful peer connection and support.

The potential impact on gender roles and expectations in Indian society represents another significant consideration. Introducing services where men provide nurturing, emotional support could contribute to evolving conversations about masculinity and emotional expression. This might complement ongoing social changes in urban India, where traditional gender roles are already being questioned and redefined among younger generations.

7. GLOBAL IMPLICATIONS AND CROSS-CULTURAL ANALYSIS

The "man mum" phenomenon represents part of a broader global trend toward the commercialization of emotional support and intimate services, suggesting universal human needs that transcend specific cultural contexts while manifesting in culturally specific ways. Examining potential international adaptations reveals both common underlying drivers and significant cultural variations in acceptable responses to emotional needs.

Western societies with established therapeutic cultures might integrate similar services into existing wellness and mental health frameworks. Countries such as the United States, Canada, and those in Western Europe already have commercial markets for various forms of therapeutic touch, emotional support animals, and alternative wellness services. The "man mum" model might find acceptance as another option within this broader ecosystem, particularly if positioned as a wellness service rather than a social innovation.

However, Western adaptations would likely emphasize different aspects of the service. Professional licensing, formal training programs, and integration with healthcare systems might be required for acceptance within societies that heavily regulate therapeutic services. The services might also evolve to serve broader demographics, including elderly populations, individuals with social anxiety, or people recovering from trauma or loss.



Scandinavian countries, with their progressive approaches to gender equality and social services, might prove particularly receptive to services that challenge traditional gender roles while addressing social isolation. The Nordic model of comprehensive social support might incorporate similar services as publicly funded programs designed to address loneliness and social disconnection, particularly among immigrant populations or individuals experiencing social isolation.

In contrast, societies with stronger family-based support systems might view commodified emotional services as unnecessary or concerning. Mediterranean cultures, many Latin American societies, and traditional communities worldwide might resist the commercialization of comfort and emotional support, viewing such services as symptomatic of social breakdown rather than innovative solutions. The phenomenon also raises important questions about the future of human connection in increasing digital societies. As automation and artificial intelligence transform work and social interaction patterns globally, the demand for authentic human connection may increase across cultures. The "man mum" model demonstrates one possible response to these changes, suggesting that human societies will develop creative solutions to maintain meaningful interpersonal connection even within highly technologized environments.

Transformative Frameworks for Innovation

The "man mum" phenomenon offers several innovative frameworks that organizations, communities, and individuals can adapt to address contemporary challenges in human connection, emotional support, and social isolation. These frameworks transcend the specific context of paid hugging services and provide models for creating supportive, bounded interactions in various professional and personal contexts.

Boundary Management and Safe Intimacy Models

The sophisticated boundary management strategies demonstrated in "man mum" services provide valuable templates for creating safe spaces for vulnerable interactions in professional settings. Healthcare organizations, educational institutions, and counseling services can learn from the explicit negotiation of expectations, clear time parameters, and appropriate behavioral guidelines that characterize these services.

For example, healthcare providers working with trauma survivors or individuals requiring emotional support might adapt the temporal structure and public setting preferences that make "man mum" services feel safe for participants. The model of brief, structured interactions with clear parameters could inform the design of peer support programs, therapeutic interventions, or crisis response services. Corporate environments could also benefit from understanding how these services create safety through transparency and structure. Employee assistance programs, workplace mental health initiatives, and leadership development programs might incorporate elements of explicit boundary setting and structured supportive interactions to create psychologically safe environments for vulnerable conversations or emotional expression.

Hybrid Gender Performance and Leadership Models

The gender performance demonstrated by "man mum" providers combining traditional masculine qualities of strength and protection with feminine-coded nurturing and emotional availability suggests innovative approaches to leadership and caregiving that could inform organizational development and educational practices. Contemporary leadership research increasingly emphasizes the importance of emotional intelligence, empathy, and supportive management styles while maintaining authority and decisiveness. The "man mum" model provides a concrete example of how individuals can embody these



seemingly contradictory qualities, offering a practical framework for developing leaders who can provide both strength and sensitivity.

Educational institutions could incorporate these insights into programs designed to prepare students for careers in healthcare, social services, education, or management. Training programs could explicitly address how to combine protective instincts with nurturing behaviors, helping future professionals develop more complete skill sets for supporting others while maintaining appropriate professional boundaries.

Digital Platform Design for Intimate Services

The technological infrastructure supporting "man mum" services offers insights for designing digital platforms that facilitate meaningful human connection while maintaining safety and appropriate boundaries. The integration of payment processing, communication channels, location coordination, and reputation systems provides a model for other services requiring trust and safety in intimate or vulnerable interactions. Designers of platforms for therapy, counseling, eldercare, childcare, or other personal services could learn from the security features, user interface design, and operational protocols that make "man mum" services successful. The emphasis on public meeting locations, time-limited interactions, and prepayment systems could inform the development of other platforms where safety and boundary management are crucial.

8. ACTIONABLE STRATEGIES FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION

Communities and organizations seeking to address social isolation, emotional support needs, and changing social dynamics can extract several practical strategies from the "man mum" phenomenon while adapting them to local cultural contexts and ethical considerations.

Community-Based Emotional Support Programs

Local communities could develop volunteer programs that provide structured emotional support and appropriate physical comfort within culturally acceptable parameters. These programs could address isolation among elderly populations, support new mothers, provide comfort for individuals experiencing grief or trauma, or offer peer support for people managing chronic mental health conditions.

Successful implementation would require careful training programs that teach volunteers how to provide appropriate emotional support, maintain healthy boundaries, and recognize when professional intervention might be necessary. The structured nature of "man mum" interactions with clear time limits, public settings, and specific purposes provides a framework for creating similar volunteer opportunities that maximize benefit while minimizing risk. Religious organizations, community centers, and nonprofit organizations could sponsor such programs, potentially creating intergenerational connections that address isolation across age groups. Pairing elderly community members with younger volunteers, for example, could provide mutual benefit by offering young people opportunities for meaningful service while providing elderly individuals with regular social contact and emotional support.

Educational Institution Support Networks

Schools, colleges, and universities could implement peer support programs that adapt the boundary management and structured interaction models demonstrated in "man mum" services. These programs could supplement professional counseling services while creating student leadership opportunities and building stronger campus communities.



Student volunteers could receive training in active listening, appropriate physical comfort (such as handholding or shoulder touches where culturally appropriate), and crisis recognition. Programs could operate through designated campus locations at specific times, creating predictable opportunities for students to seek and provide support. The integration of technology platforms like those used for "man mum" services could help students connect with peer supporters while maintaining privacy and reducing stigma. Students could request support through apps or online platforms, specify their preferences for type of interaction, and provide feedback that helps improve the program over time.

Workplace Mental Health Innovation

Employers could adapt insights from the "man mum" phenomenon to create more supportive workplace environments that address employee emotional needs while maintaining professional boundaries. This might include designated quiet spaces for brief emotional support conversations, trained peer support volunteers among staff, or structured programs that facilitate supportive interactions between colleagues.

Professional development programs could incorporate training on providing appropriate emotional support to colleagues, recognizing signs of distress, and maintaining healthy workplace relationships. The emphasis on brief, structured interactions with clear purposes could help employees feel more confident about offering support without overstepping professional boundaries. Some organizations might also consider partnering with external providers of emotional support services, offering employees access to professional services that address emotional needs in ways that supplement traditional employee assistance programs. This could be particularly valuable for organizations with high-stress environments or employees who work in isolation.

9. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The "man mum" phenomenon opens numerous avenues for future research that could enhance understanding of emotional labor, digital commerce, social isolation, and cross-cultural adaptation of social innovations. These research directions offer opportunities to develop more comprehensive theories of human emotional needs and effective intervention strategies.

Longitudinal Impact Studies

Long-term studies tracking the experiences and outcomes of both service providers and consumers could provide crucial insights into the efficacy and sustainability of commodified emotional support. Research could examine whether regular use of these services improves mental health outcomes, enhances social skills, or provides lasting emotional benefits. Conversely, studies could investigate potential negative effects such as dependency on paid emotional support or reduced motivation to develop unpaid supportive relationships.

Provider perspectives represent an equally important research focus. Studies could examine how offering emotional labor as a commercial service affects men's self-concept, emotional skills, and relationships with others. Research might investigate whether providing "man mum" services enhances empathy and emotional intelligence or potentially leads to emotional burnout or boundary confusion. Comparative studies examining users and non-users of these services could help identify the specific populations most likely to benefit and those for whom such services might be inappropriate or potentially harmful. This research could inform the development of screening protocols and best practices for similar services in other cultural contexts.

Cross-Cultural Adaptation Studies



Systematic research examining how different societies adapt, modify, or reject similar emotional support services could illuminate universal versus culturally specific aspects of human emotional needs. Studies could compare adaptation attempts across various countries and cultures, examining which elements of the "man mum" model translate successfully and which require significant modification.

Research could investigate how different cultural values regarding physical touch, gender roles, commercialization of care, and social support systems influence the acceptance and evolution of these services. Such studies could provide valuable insights for social entrepreneurs, policymakers, and organizations seeking to address social isolation in diverse cultural contexts. Anthropological research methods would be particularly valuable for understanding the deep cultural meanings and symbolic significance of these services within different societies. Ethnographic studies could reveal how participants understand and interpret their experiences, providing insights that quantitative measures might miss.

Technology and Human Connection Research

The role of digital platforms in facilitating intimate human connections represents another important research direction. Studies could examine how technology design influences the quality and safety of emotional support services, investigating which platform features most effectively balance accessibility with security.

Research could also explore the broader implications of digitally mediated emotional services for human social development. Questions might include whether reliance on apps and platforms for emotional connection affects the development of organic social skills or whether such services serve as steppingstones toward more traditional relationship formation. The integration of artificial intelligence and machine learning in emotional support platforms offers additional research opportunities. Studies could examine whether algorithmic matching between service providers and consumers improves outcomes, and how automated systems can enhance safety and quality control while preserving the human elements that make these services valuable.

10. CONCLUSION

The "man mum" phenomenon represents far more than a novel commercial service or curious cultural trend. It serves as a compelling lens through which to examine fundamental transformations in contemporary society, revealing how urbanization, digitalization, and changing social structures are reshaping the most basic human needs for connection, comfort, and emotional support. The emergence of paid platonic physical comfort services in urban China illuminates broader tensions between efficiency and intimacy, safety and vulnerability, tradition and innovation that characterize modern life worldwide.

Through its sophisticated boundary management systems, innovative gender performance models, and digital mediation strategies, the "man mum" phenomenon demonstrates remarkable human creativity in addressing age-old emotional needs within the constraints of contemporary urban existence. The fact that young women are willing to pay for brief hugs from specially chosen men speaks to both the scarcity of safe physical comfort in their daily lives and their economic capacity to seek creative solutions to emotional challenges. The potential for international adaptation of similar services reveals both universal human needs and significant cultural variations in acceptable responses to those needs. While the specific model of paid hugging services might not translate directly across all cultures, the underlying recognition of emotional support as a legitimate service category with commercial potential represents a significant social innovation with global implications.



Perhaps most importantly, the "man mum" phenomenon challenges assumptions about the inevitability of social isolation in modern urban environments. Rather than accepting loneliness and emotional disconnection as unavoidable consequences of contemporary life, this innovation demonstrates that societies can develop creative, culturally appropriate responses that honor human dignity while addressing genuine emotional needs. The lessons learned from China's experiment in commodified comfort may prove valuable for creating more connected, supportive communities worldwide, offering hope that technological advancement and social innovation can work together to enhance rather than diminish human connection in the digital age.

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