

Platformized Intimacy: Dynamics of Relationship Building in Virtual Spaces Among Chinese Emerging Adults

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Abstract

China's online dating and matchmaking market has expanded rapidly over the past decade, yet many emerging adults continue to experience romantic instability and repeated relationship turnover. Within these digitally mediated relationships, ghosting, unilateral, unannounced ending of a relationship through digital silence has become increasingly common and is often associated with negative psychological effects. This study conceptualizes ghosting not simply as an individual behavioural choice, but as a systemic outcome produced through the interaction of platform affordances, emergent relational norms, and users' psychological adaptation in digital dating environments.

Using a qualitative System Dynamics approach, the study draws on in-depth interviews with 19 Chinese emerging adults recruited primarily through Soul, a values-based social platform, and integrates thematic analysis with behavior-over-time trajectories and causal loop diagram to identify the feedback structures shaping relationship formation and dissolution. Four interrelated themes organize the analysis. First, the algorithmic marketplace of intimacy captures how large user pools, filtering tools, and low accountability generate choice abundance and perceived partner replaceability, reinforcing norms of ghosting, casual commitment orientations, and re-engagement for casual use in a self-reinforcing marketplace loop (R2). Second, constructed closeness and expectation-reality mismatch describe how frequent communication can intensify the illusion of intimacy, increase perceived intimacy and relational investment, and further sustain continued interaction(R1). Yet when offline encounters or declining communication quality expose the fragility of this closeness and precipitate ambiguous dissolution.

Third, strategic and defensive non-commitment in relational gray zones reflects how repeated

ambiguity, unilateral control, and real-world constraints encourage users to avoid defining relationships, adopt slower or more guarded relational orientations, and become more skeptical of platform-mediated intimacy. This dynamic is represented as a balancing process in which norm of ghosting, platform skepticism, and adjusted relationship orientation temper serious relationship investment and support strategic non-commitment (B1). Fourth, de-socialized dissolution and low-cost exit show how digital settings remove many of the social anchors that traditionally constrained relationship endings. It makes ghosting and fading common modes of dissolution. Emotional distress following ambiguous endings can lead to disengagement from a specific relationship and, less frequently, temporary withdrawal from the platform. However, many users subsequently return to dating apps with lowered expectations, allowing the broader casual-orientation dynamic to persist (B2).

A key empirical contribution is the distinction between ghosting and relationship fading. Participants using Soul, where matching is shaped more by personality assessment and virtual avatars than by profile photographs, reported fading as more common than abrupt ghosting. It suggests that platform designs that defer appearance and foreground perceived value alignment may support more symmetrical emotional investment, even if they do not eliminate ambiguity. The findings suggest that platform design shapes not only interaction frequency, but also the tempo, symmetry, and fragility of relational development.

Theoretically, the analysis extends Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love by showing how platformized dating can amplify perceived intimacy through intensified communication while simultaneously constraining commitment through abundance, replaceability, and casualized norms. From a System Dynamics perspective, ghosting emerges as a recurrent structural outcome of interacting reinforcing and balancing loops rather than as a purely individual failure or isolated interpersonal event. More broadly, the findings indicate that platform-mediated distortions of intimacy may be cross-culturally robust, while their concrete expression depends on the interaction between app architecture, local dating norms, and users' adaptive coping strategies.

Keywords: Platformized intimacy, Ghosting, Dating apps, System dynamics, Algorithmic marketplace of intimacy, Relationship fading