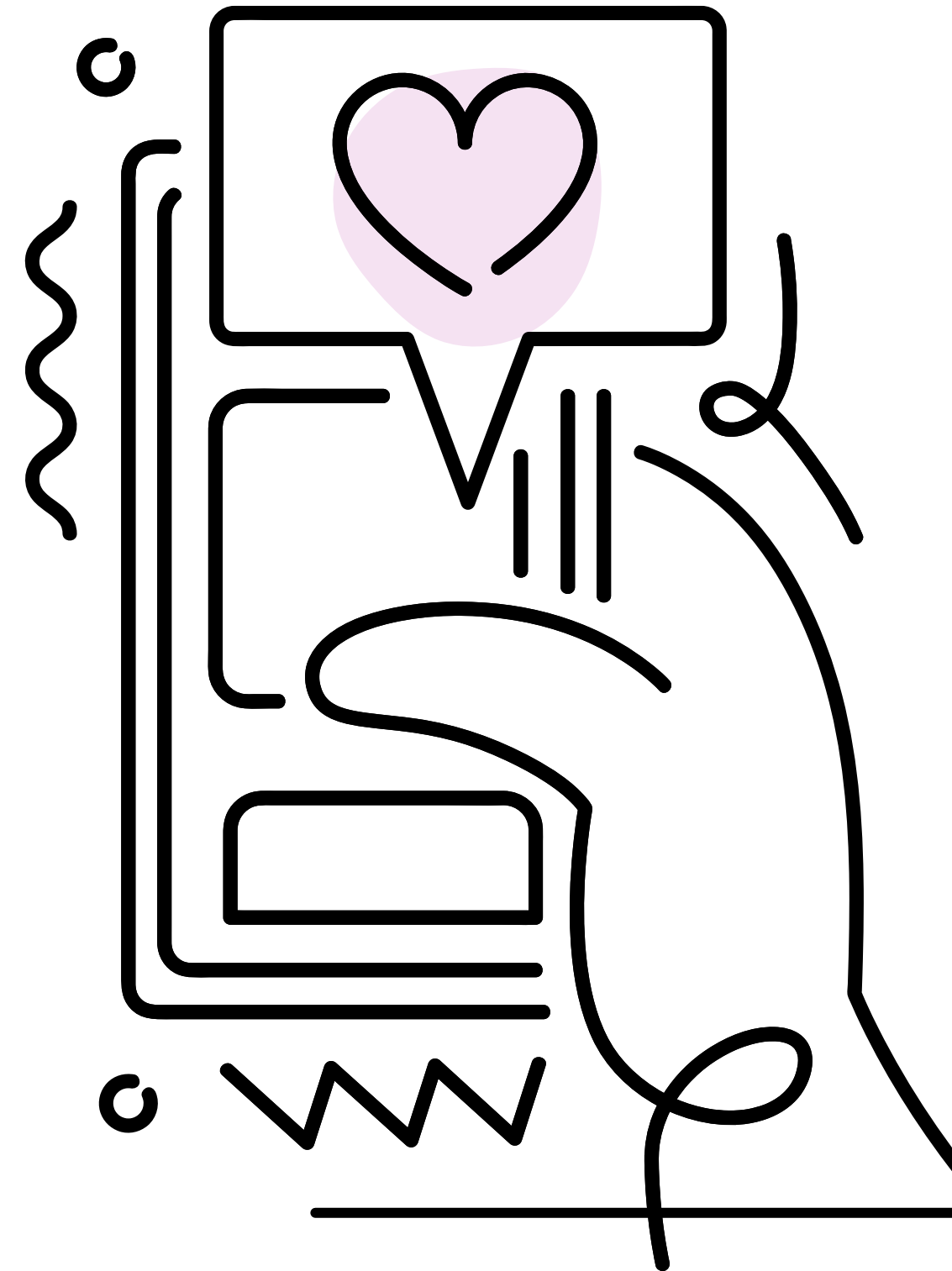




Dynamic Feedback Structures in Algorithmic Curation: **How Youth Interpret and Respond to Crisis Content on Weibo**

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INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the 21st century, **social media has increasingly compressed the distance of time and space**, allowing events become globally visible within minutes.

Algorithmically curated feeds on platforms such as X, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and Sina Weibo have become core socio-technical infrastructures through which young people now encounter, interpret, and emotionally process public issues and crises (Swart, 2021; Boulianne et al., 2024).

These feeds do not simply deliver information; they configure what becomes salient, credible, and actionable in everyday life, while young users develop contextual “folk theories” (DeVito et al., 2018) and algorithmic literacies that shape their trust, perceived relevance, and strategies for seeking or avoiding crisis-related content (Swart, 2021; Boulianne et al., 2024).

However, such experiential literacy is uneven and highly platform-specific, raising concerns about selective exposure, emotional strain, and unequal capacities to curate civic and crisis information.
For many young people, this digital environment may shape a new form of social awareness.

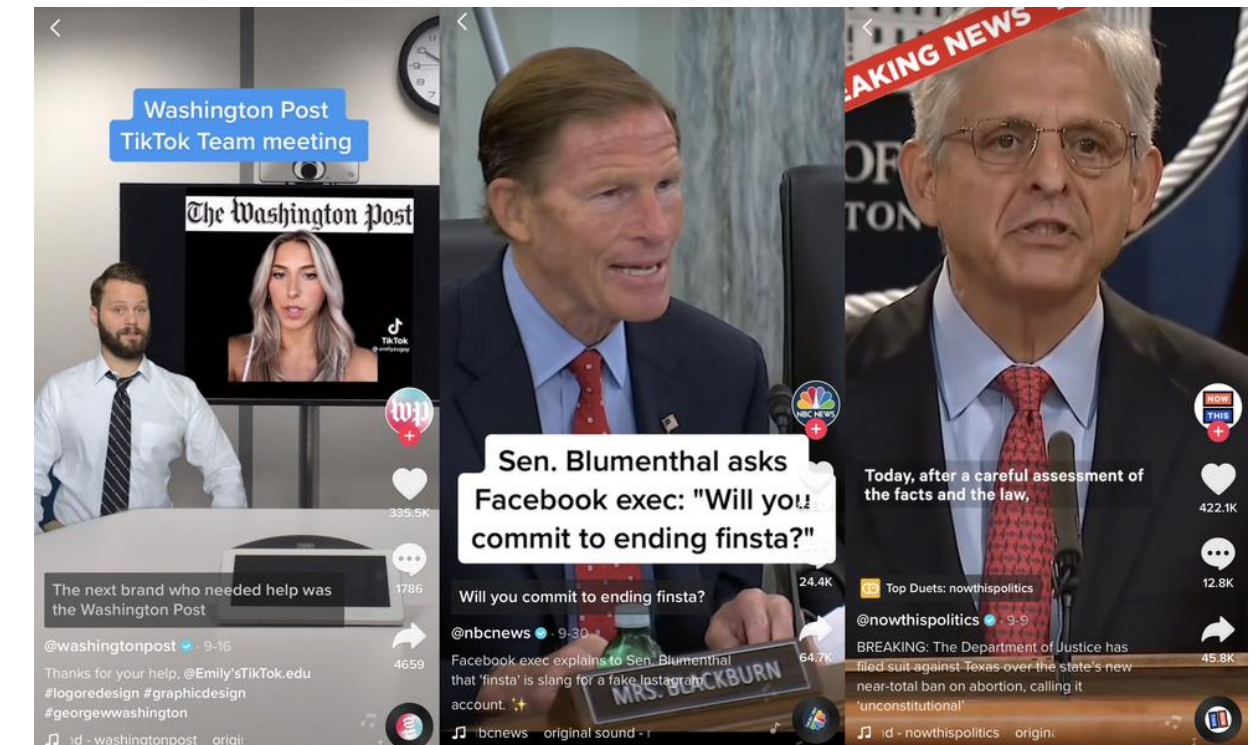
INTRODUCTION



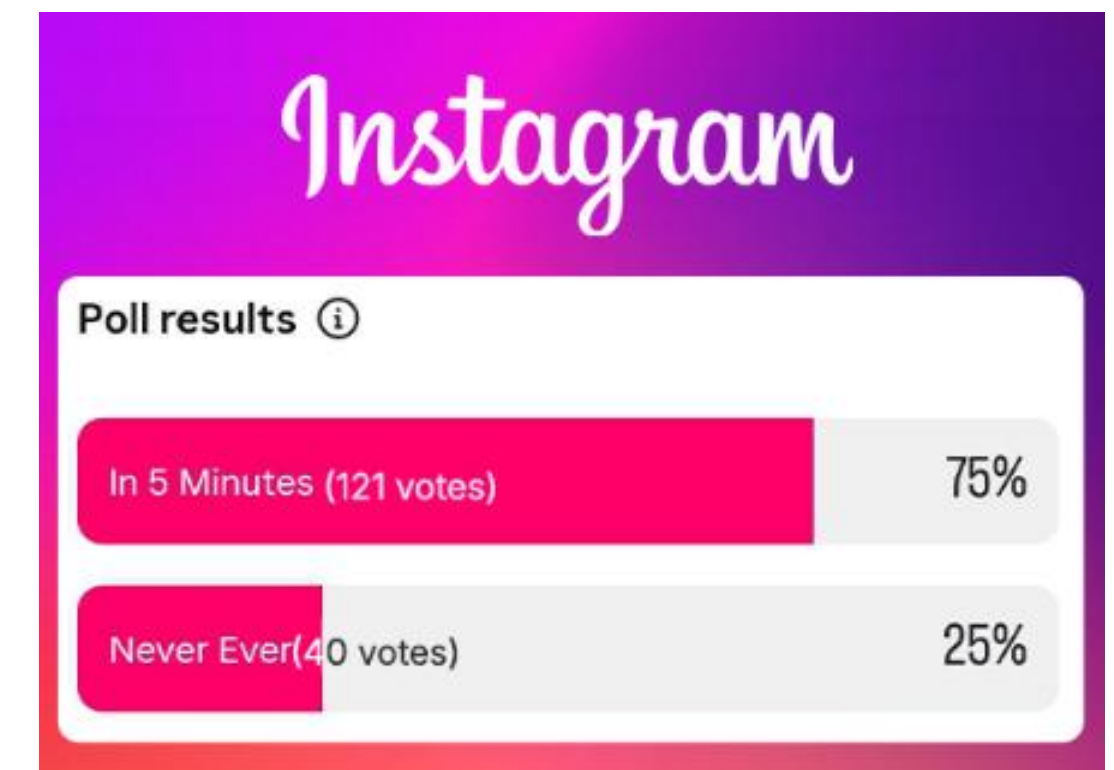
Social media has become an important channel through which people encounter global public issues. Through these platforms, users learn about events happening far beyond their immediate surroundings while also participating in public discussions through various forms of interaction. In this sense, digital platforms have expanded opportunities for people to access information and express their positions, enabling more individuals to engage with social problems. In the Chinese context, there is a platform named **Sina Weibo**, a **microblogging platform** similar to X. Users can publicly upload content via websites or mobile applications and interact with others through comments and reposts.

A **distinctive feature** of Weibo is its **Hot Search ranking system**, which highlights trending topics and encourages users to browse discussions around popular events. Through this mechanism, chosen issues can rapidly gain widespread visibility.

From a systems perspective, these platforms operate as tightly coupled feedback systems in which **algorithmic ranking, user engagement, and users' perceptions of risk and agency co-evolve over time**. This dynamic interaction makes social media a critical and timely context for examining its reinforcing and balancing feedback loops in crisis communication, and youth well-being within contemporary digital societies.



Source: Clavijo (2021)



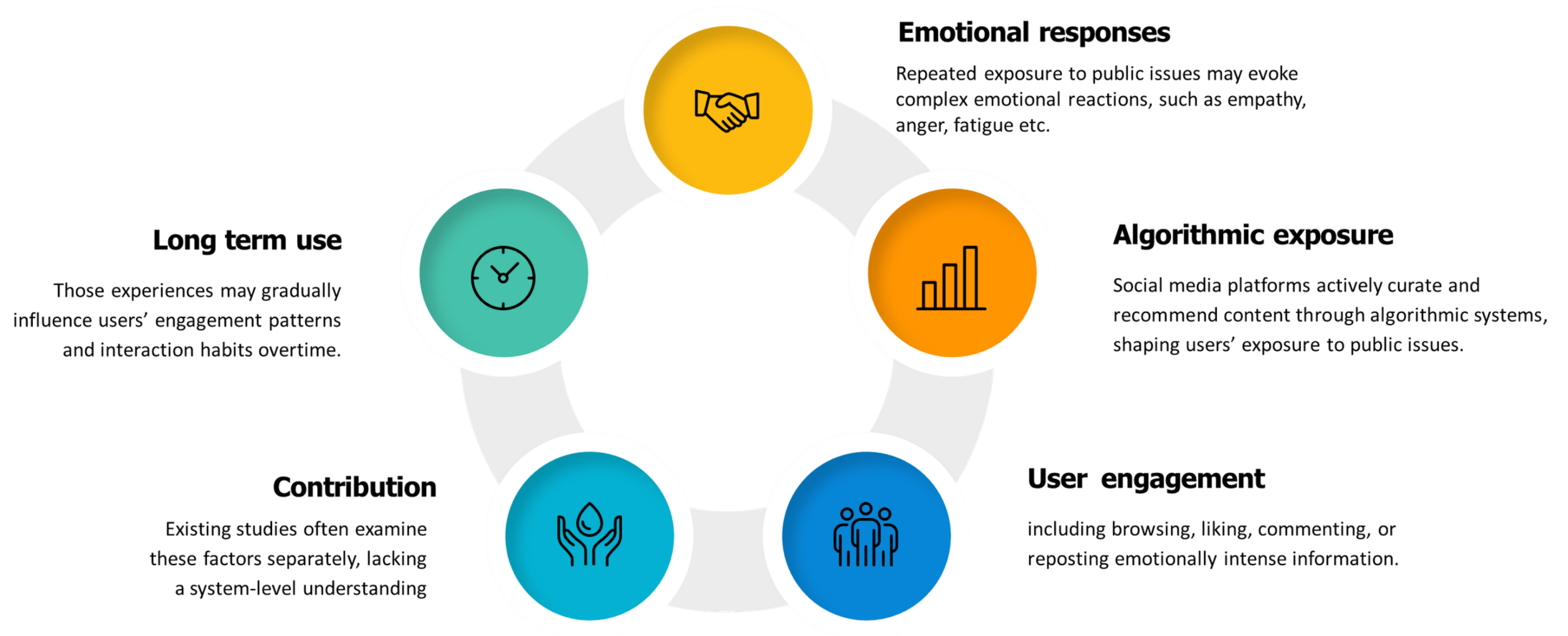
Source: Walker (2021)

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Imagine opening social media for a brief moment of casual browsing.

Within minutes, users may encounter images of war, disaster reports, or emotionally intense public debates. Although such interactions appear ordinary, repeated exposure may shape users' emotional experiences and engagement over time.

How do platform mechanisms and user behaviors interact to form recurring engagement patterns?



Synthesizing the Literature on System Feedbacks

01

Negative Content Amplification

Negative online articles are **1.9 times** more likely to be shared than non-negative content (Watson et al., 2024), reflecting negativity bias. Platforms may unintentionally amplify crisis-related visibility.

02

Information Overload & Infodemic

Xu & Liu (2021) inductae the concept of the **infodemic**, excessive social media exposure during major events leads to **information overload** and **vicarious traumatisation**, contributing to increased **emotional stress**.

03

Emotional Consequences of Repeated Exposure

Ata et al. (2026) found frequent earthquake-related social media exposure cause **secondary traumatic stress**, embodied as sleep disturbance, and concentration difficulties. Zhao & Zhou (2020) link Weibo use during COVID-19 to increased **depression and anxiety**.

04

Individual Differences in Emotional Response

Individual psychological characteristics may shape how users interpret emotionally charged information. Lea et al. (2025) show that adolescents with higher **emotional intelligence** experience stronger affective responses, amplifying rather than buffering reactions to online content.

RESEARCH DESIGN: Semi-Structured Interviews

18 Weibo users (age 20–22), recruited via snowball sampling. Engagement range: low-frequency browsers to active public discussants. Participants classified into: Passive Observers, Selective Consumers, Reflective Users, Critical Citizens.

Interview Structure

- Everyday Use: habits, routine attention patterns
- Content Interaction & Algorithmic Awareness: engagement behaviours, perceived platform priorities, changes over time
- Emotional Experience with Public Events: affective responses, sense of autonomy, psychological cost
- Reflective Overview: self-understanding of platform role, coping & disengagement strategies

Data Analysis

Three-stage thematic coding process:

1. Initial coding
2. Subcategory development
3. Main theme identification

Codes progressively linked participant narratives to feedback structures identified in BOT charts and CLD.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Behavior-Over-Time (BOT)

Three BOT charts trace algorithmic curation vs. user agency, active vs. passive engagement, and platform trust vs. critical awareness from Weibo's 2009 launch to present.

Semi-Structured Interviews

18 Weibo users (age 20–22, varying engagement intensity).
Four thematic areas: everyday use, content interaction & algorithmic awareness, emotional experience with public events, reflective overview.

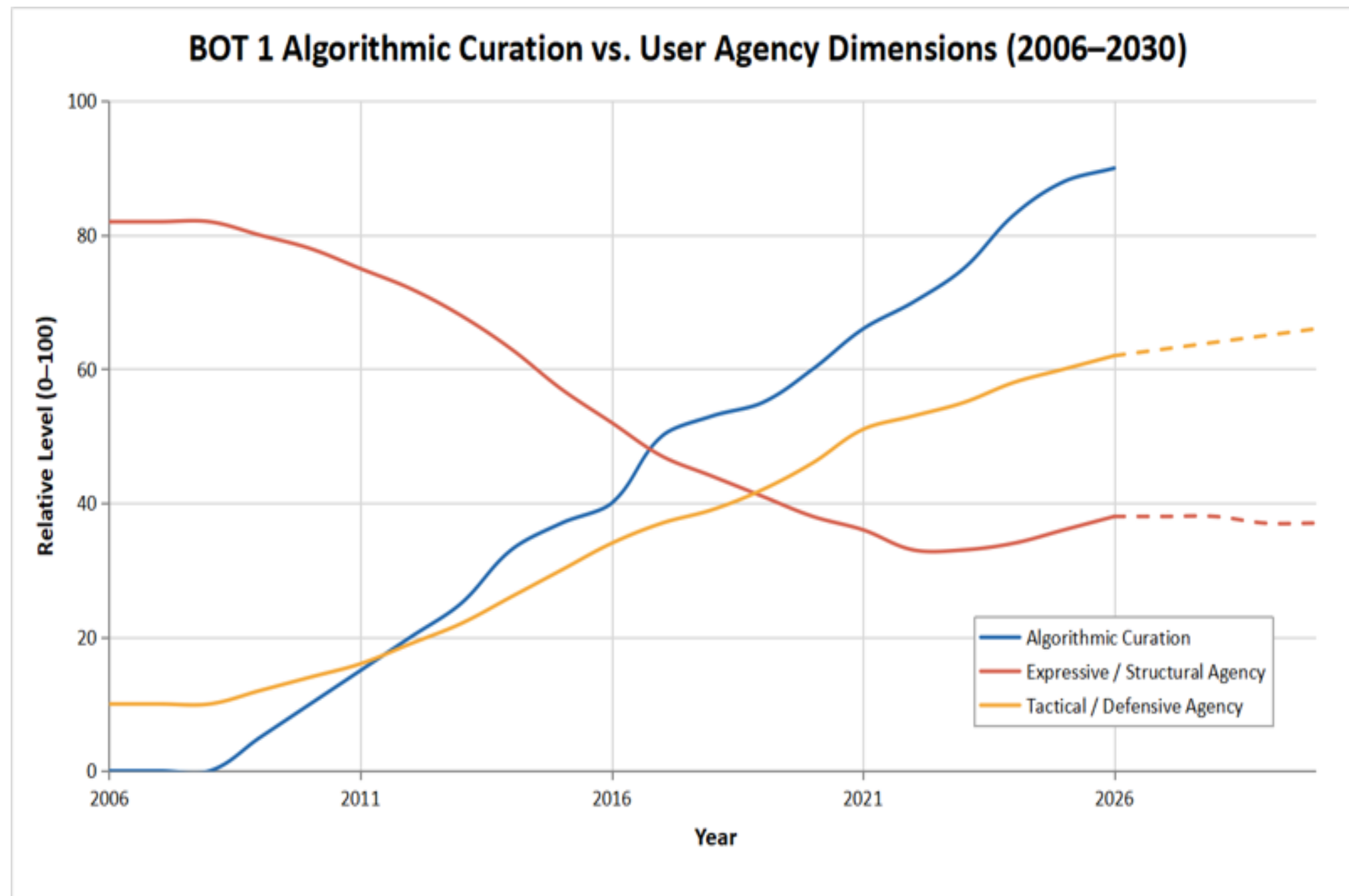
Causal Loop Diagram (CLD)

Emergent from interview findings and Chinese platform context. Maps structural feedback dynamics with two reinforcing (R1, R2) and three balancing loops (B1, B2, B3). Grounded in secondary governance data.

Literature Review

Informs system structure: negativity bias, infodemic effects, emotional consequences of repeated exposure, individual differences in emotional response. Positions the paper within a critical realism framework.

BOT 1 : Algorithmic Curation vs. User Agency Dimensions



*Solid lines = 2006–2026 (data-grounded). Dashed lines = 2026–2030 (projected).

*Expressive/Structural Agency: ability to shape content, agenda, visibility.

*Tactical/Defensive Agency: ability to manage boundaries, filter, cope, and reconfigure use.

2009–2012: Chronological feed; user agency high.

Content exposure via following networks.

Early 2010s: Hot Search rankings & recommendation introduced. **Expressive agency begins to erode:** reduced temporal/cognitive autonomy, diminished expressive freedom.

From approximately 2016: machine-learning-based profiling enables deep behavioural targeting (Weibo Corp., 2021). Algorithmic suppression, for instance traffic throttling, search exclusion, constrains autonomous access (King, Pan & Roberts, 2014).

From approximately 2021: Tactical/defensive agency rises: users develop platform-switching, content compartmentalisation, and purposive-only access patterns. Yet this recovered agency remains structurally constrained, interviewees consistently reported being unable to permanently exit the platform, reflecting the monopolistic conditions of China's social media ecology (Zuboff, 2019; van Dijck et al., 2018).

BOT 1 : Reconfigured User Agency in 2 dimensions

Expressive / Structural Agency:

DECLINING

Perceived ability to shape content, agenda, and visibility.

Interview evidence: reduced temporal & cognitive autonomy, diminished expressive freedom, increased emotional powerlessness and political depression. Participants describe feeling unable to influence what others see or shape public discourse. Posting intent frequently disrupted; interaction has evolved from emotional commentary to silent observation.

Tactical / Defensive Agency:

RISING

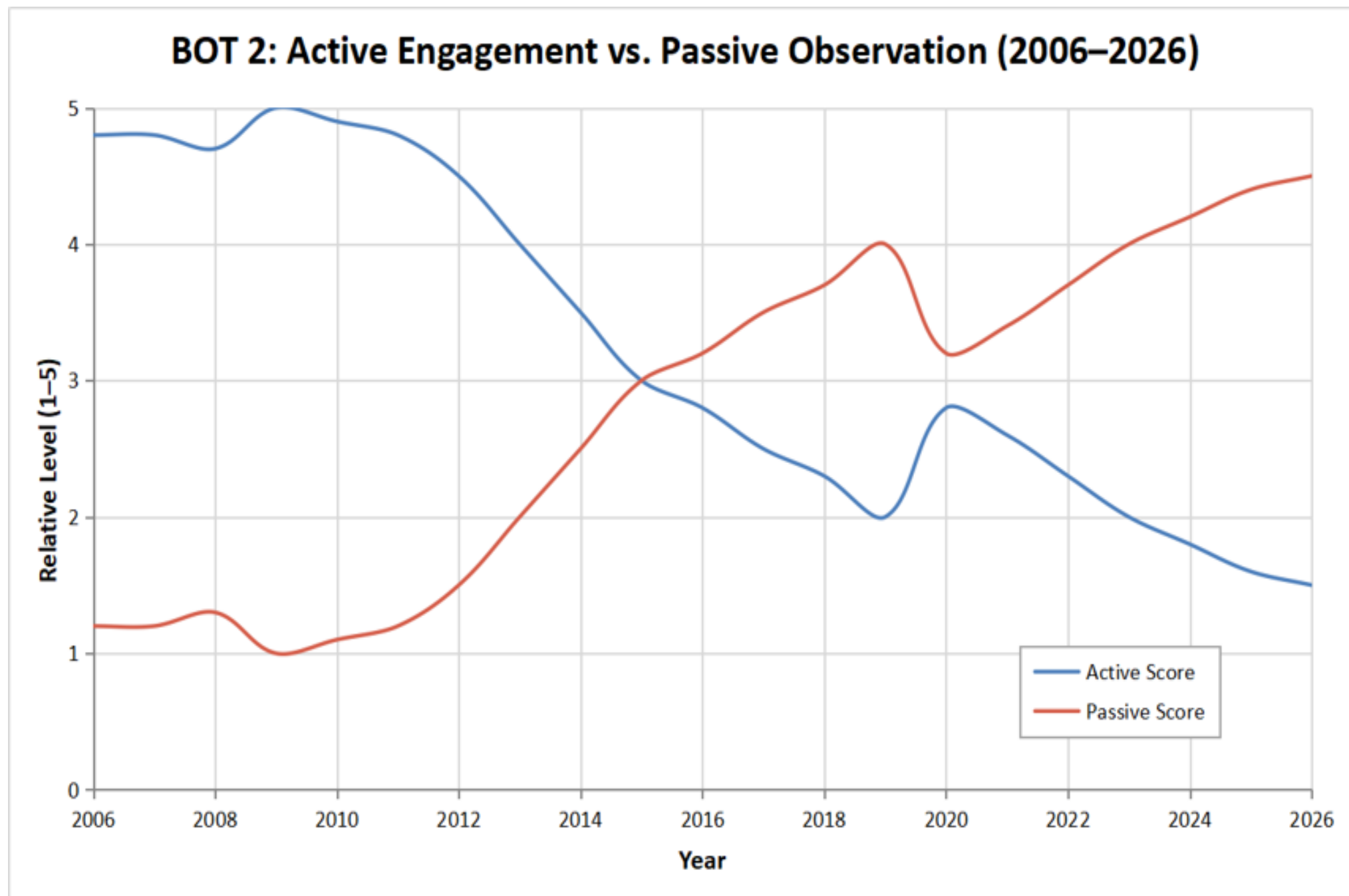
Ability to manage information boundaries, filter content, cope, and reconfigure platform use.

Interview evidence: content grouping, selective following, Weibo Lite switching, purposive-only access, digital detox. Conscious re-framing of self-position ("observer," "small user," "bystander"). These are forms of reflexive agency even where they resemble withdrawal.

Dynamic Hypothesis

As stronger algorithms integrate into the platform, they generate targeted content, engagement data, thus richer profiling. Simultaneously, as feeds become opaque, **expressive agency erodes**. Yet the same algorithmic pressure drives user learning, in this sense **tactical agency rises** as users develop coping strategies. The dataset reflects **reconfigured and defensive agency under intensifying algorithmic control**, not a simple overall decline. Projections suggests that algorithmic curation continues intensifying; expressive agency remains constrained; tactical agency likely continues rising as users adapt further.

BOT 2: Active Engagement vs. Passive Observation



*Relative Level (1–5): specific values and turning points are interpretive, modelled from published user type distributions (Zhou & Yang, 2024) and qualitative interview data.

*Active Score = public expressive behaviours (commenting, reposting)

*Passive Score = lurkers, silent observers

2009–2012: Open participation: large-scale commenting, reposting, public expression (Zhang et al., 2020; Huang & Sun, 2014). Active engagement the dominant mode.

2012–2015: Real-name registration (CAC, 2015) and network information protection law (NPC, 2012) led to rising expression risk and **self-censorship**, gradually eroding active engagement.

2016–2019: Social media fatigue reduces active interaction (Zhong, 2024). *10 of 18* interviewees described reducing commenting/reposting while continuing to browse.

2019–2021: COVID-19 temporarily spikes emotional participation (Chu et al., 2021), but interviews confirm this was short-lived, returning to **passive dominance** as regulatory pressures resumed.

Post-2021: Self-labels as "transparent minor user," "detached observer," "small user," "bystander", suggesting passive modes as deliberate **self-positioning strategy**, instead of mere disengagement.

BOT 2: Micro-Mechanisms from interview evidence

Dynamic Hypothesis

In Weibo's early period (2009–2012), **low perceived risk** fostered active engagement. As governance intensified, **perceived expression risk and self-censorship** eroded active participation. Crisis events (COVID-19) temporarily spiked engagement via heightened information needs and emotional urgency, but as regulatory crackdowns and self-censorship pressures resumed, the system returned to passive-observation dominance.

Fear of Conflict

Hostile comment environments and long-term digital traces deter public expression. Therefore users tend to anticipate reputational and political consequences before posting.

Privacy & Self-Censorship

Real-name registration pushes users from open posting to “lurking”, coded or private expression, also moving to private diaries or smaller friend circles.

Limited Perceived Efficacy

Users may feel their voice cannot help shaping public discourse. Thus, reduced belief in value of active participation despite continued consumption of public-event content.

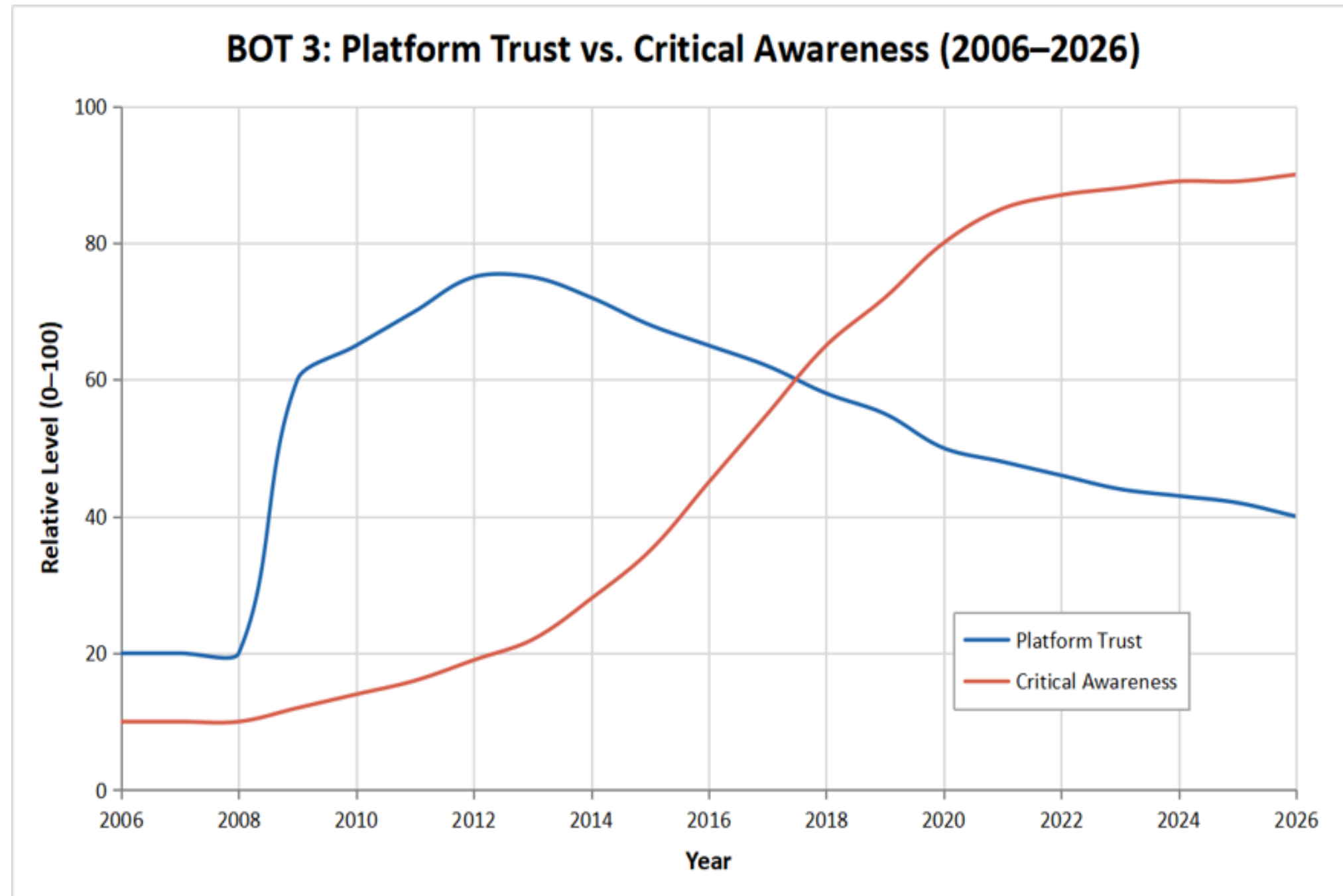
Algorithmic Default to Recommendation

Shift from follow-based to recommendation-based feeds reduces intentional seeking. Users passively receive rather than actively curate. In this situation, feeds experienced as inescapable.

Affective Dissonance & Emotional Fatigue

Empathy overdraft, political depression, cognitive overload from crisis content push users into observational, protective modes. Emotional numbing and powerlessness accumulate.

BOT 3: Platform Trust vs. Critical Awareness



*Relative Level (0–100). Platform Trust begins at ~20 in 2006 (early positive expectations + existing awareness of media control). Critical Awareness begins at ~10 (pre-existing awareness of governance structures). *Platform Trust intensity: perceived belief information is reliable, neutral, and not strategically manipulated. *Critical Awareness intensity: reflective evaluation & scepticism toward recommendation mechanisms (Livingstone, 2004; Eslami et al., 2015).

Based on the interviews, there are 3 dimensions of distrust:

(1) Content authenticity:

Fabricated trending topics, manufactured Hot Search, paid commentators, information reversals. Users may doubt data integrity and authenticity.

(2) Platform neutrality:

Algorithmic amplification of conflict and commercially driven agenda-setting. Hot Search is dominated by entertainment; social/political topics subject to selective visibility (Sina.com.cn, 2026; Xu, 2022).

(3) Platform legitimacy:

Monopolistic power and asymmetric conferral/deprivation of expression rights. Users reframe Weibo as "just an information tool" or "a controlled public square", there seems no viable alternatives (King, Pan & Roberts, 2014).

BOT 3: Scepticism but Continued Dependence

Dynamic Hypothesis

User perception of Weibo has shifted from viewing it as an *open public space* to recognising it as a ***managed, algorithmically curated environment***. The rise of engagement-driven algorithms (post-2013) and structured communication strategies during and after COVID-19 (2020–2024) have cultivated users' critical awareness of how content is prioritised and constrained. This may lead to declining trust in platform neutrality, thus stronger critical awareness accumulated with experience, with emotional engagement reduced and selective engagement strategies emerge, partially stabilising the system around **cautious, self-protective user behaviour**.

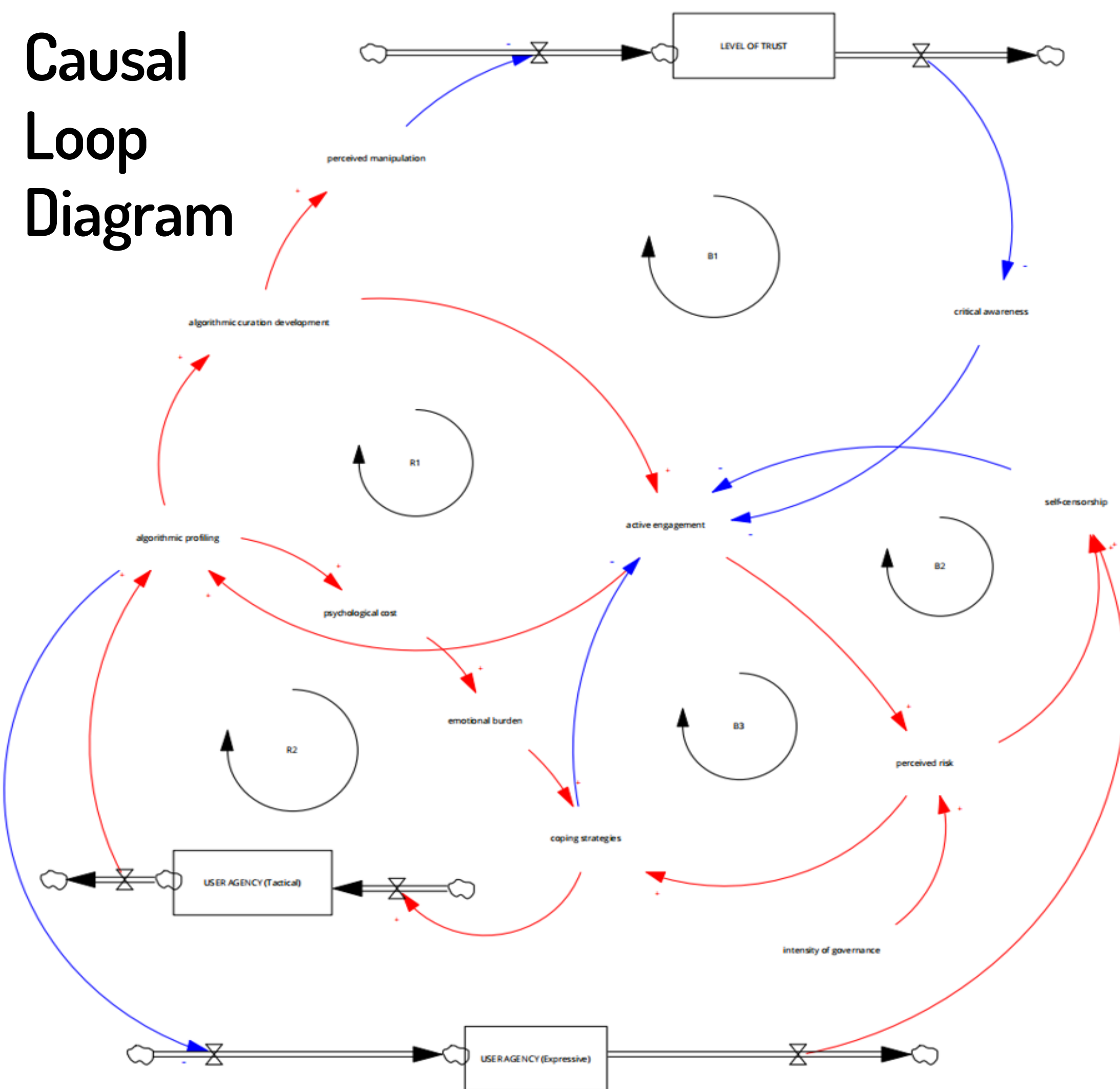
Growing Critical Awareness

- Users developed detailed vocabulary for platform logic, recognised algorithmic prioritisation of high-engagement content and also the shift from follow-based to recommendation-based feeds.
- Participants also reframe Weibo as an actor with its own agency, not a neutral tool. Censorship regimes and structural power shape what appears in feeds. Critical Citizens articulate structural critiques about state-platform co-governance and absence of viable exit options (consistent with critical media literacy development: Livingstone, 2004; Eslami et al., 2015).

Constrained Equilibrium

- Critical awareness does NOT increase indefinitely. Users develop stable understandings and awareness might plateau.
- Platform trust remains persistently low but does NOT collapse. users rely on Weibo for real-time crisis info, social monitoring, and public discourse access.
- Some trust Weibo pragmatically for specific functions (news, celebrities) while distrusting structural fairness. Others continue through habit or necessity, thus platform dependence persisting despite critical awareness. Produces the enduring pattern of scepticism combined with continued dependence.

Causal Loop Diagram



R1

REINFORCING

Algorithmic Dependency

Profiling → targeted content → engagement → more data → richer profiling. Self-reinforcing cycle driving content amplification and platform dependence.

R2

REINFORCING

Adaptive Capture

Psychological cost → coping strategies → more tactical agency. But coping behaviours generate new data (switching, filtering) captured by algorithmic systems. Resistance becomes data resource (Zuboff, 2019).

B1

BALANCING

Critical Awareness

Curation → perceived manipulation → trust erodes → critical awareness increases → active engagement declines → less profiling data.

B2

BALANCING

Governance Backfire

Governance intensity → perceived expression risk increases → self-censorship → less active engagement. This is shaped by CAC regulatory architecture and Weibo Community Convention (Weibo Corp., 2021).

B3

BALANCING

Coping Stabilisation

Emotional burden → coping strategies → reduced engagement → lower exposure pressure → reduced urgency of coping. Stabilises constrained equilibrium.

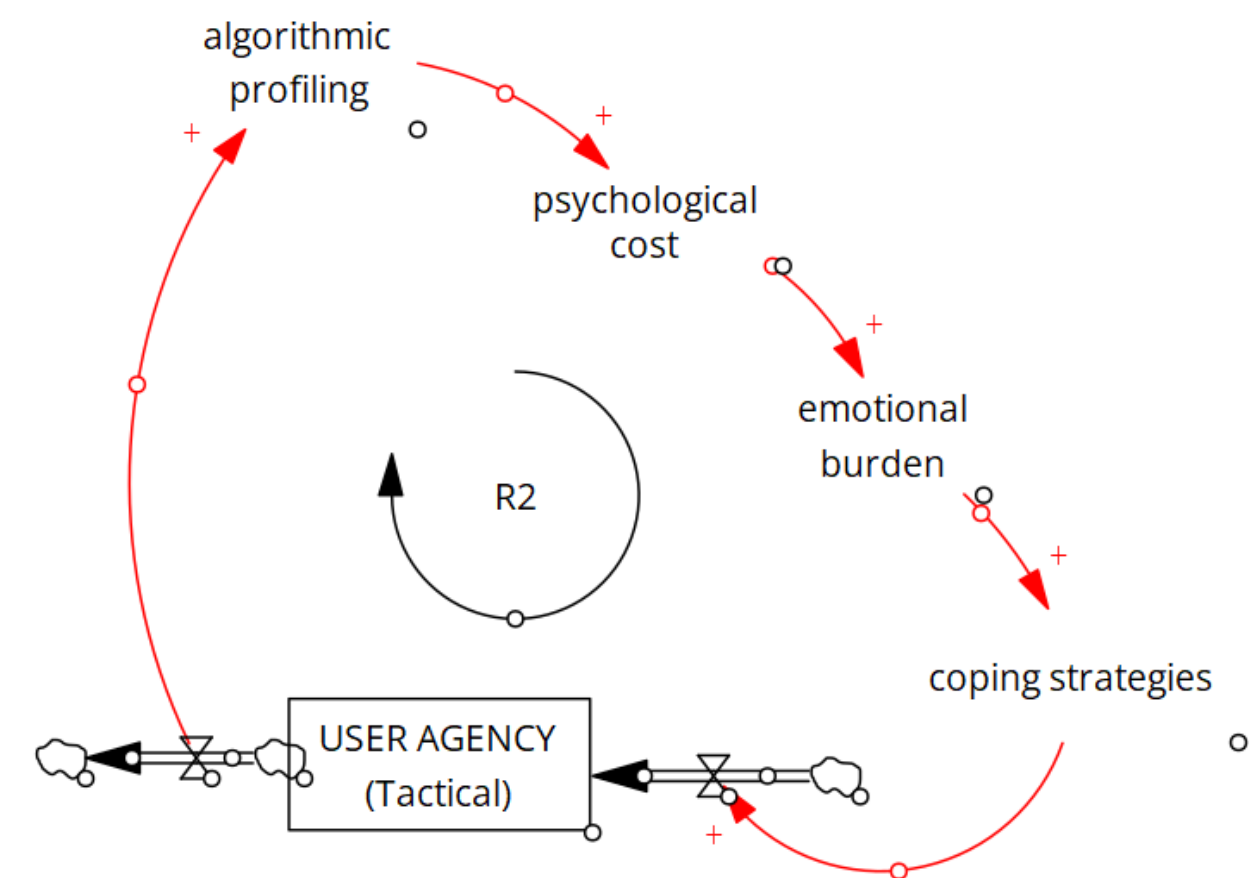
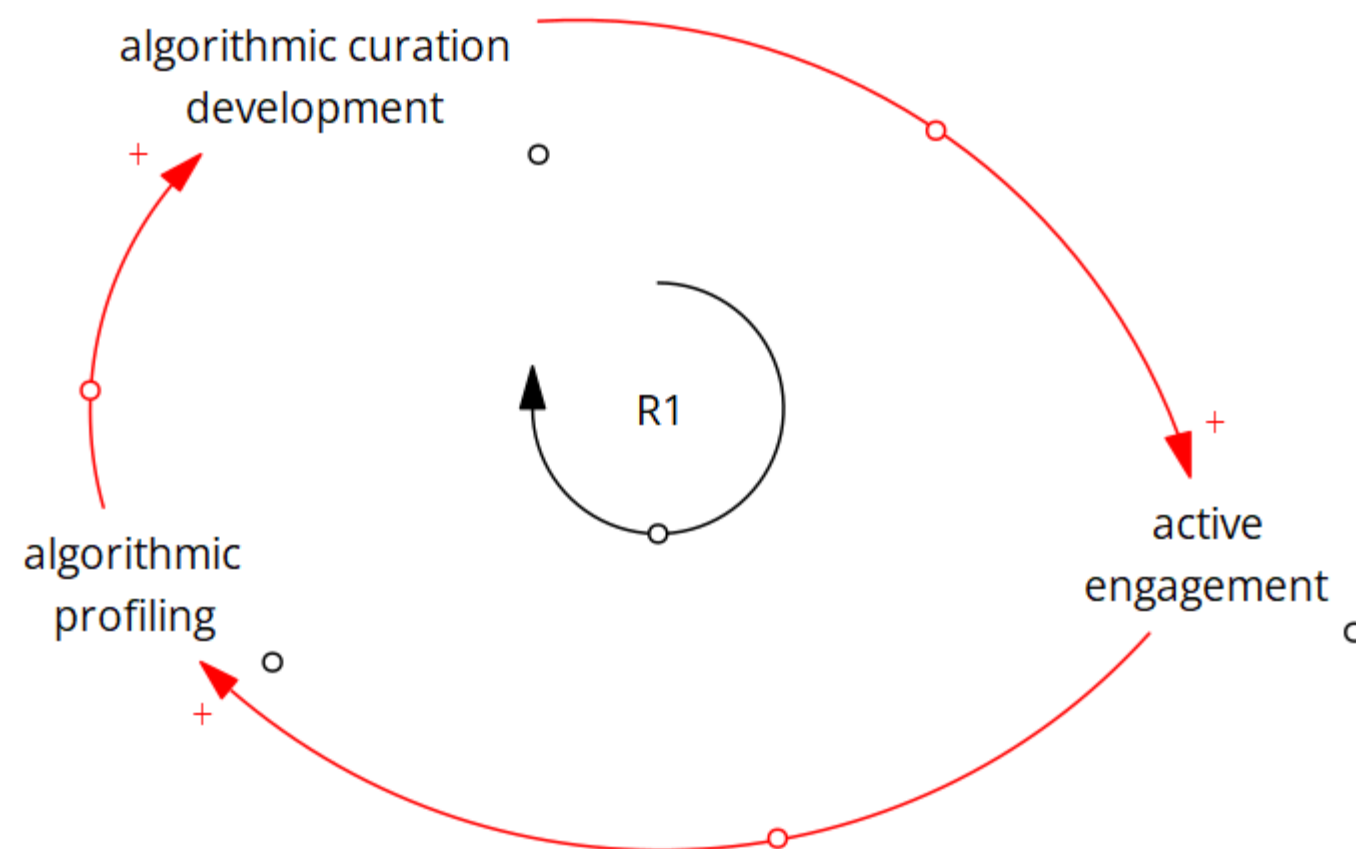
Reinforcing Loops R1 & R2

R1

Algorithmic Dependency

Algorithmic curation development enables increasingly accurate user profiling → generates highly targeted content → stimulates active engagement → users' engagement behaviours provide additional behavioural data → further improves profiling accuracy — a **self-reinforcing cycle** driving content amplification and platform dependence.

Interview evidence: Participants describe Weibo "watching every minor behavior," pushing content not followed, and prioritising controversial or high-heat material to maximise engagement. The algorithm's feed "traps" users and creates inescapable information environments (Zhong, 2024).



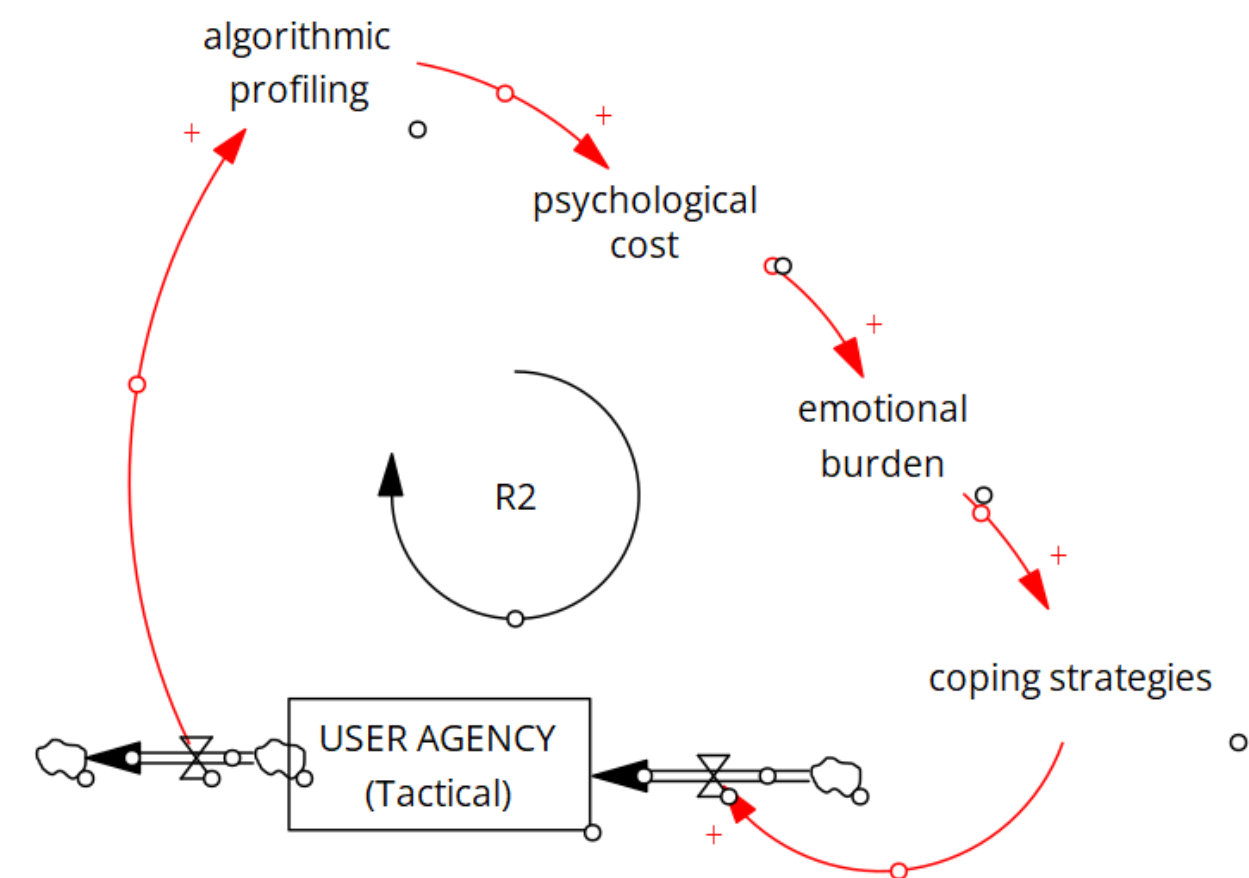
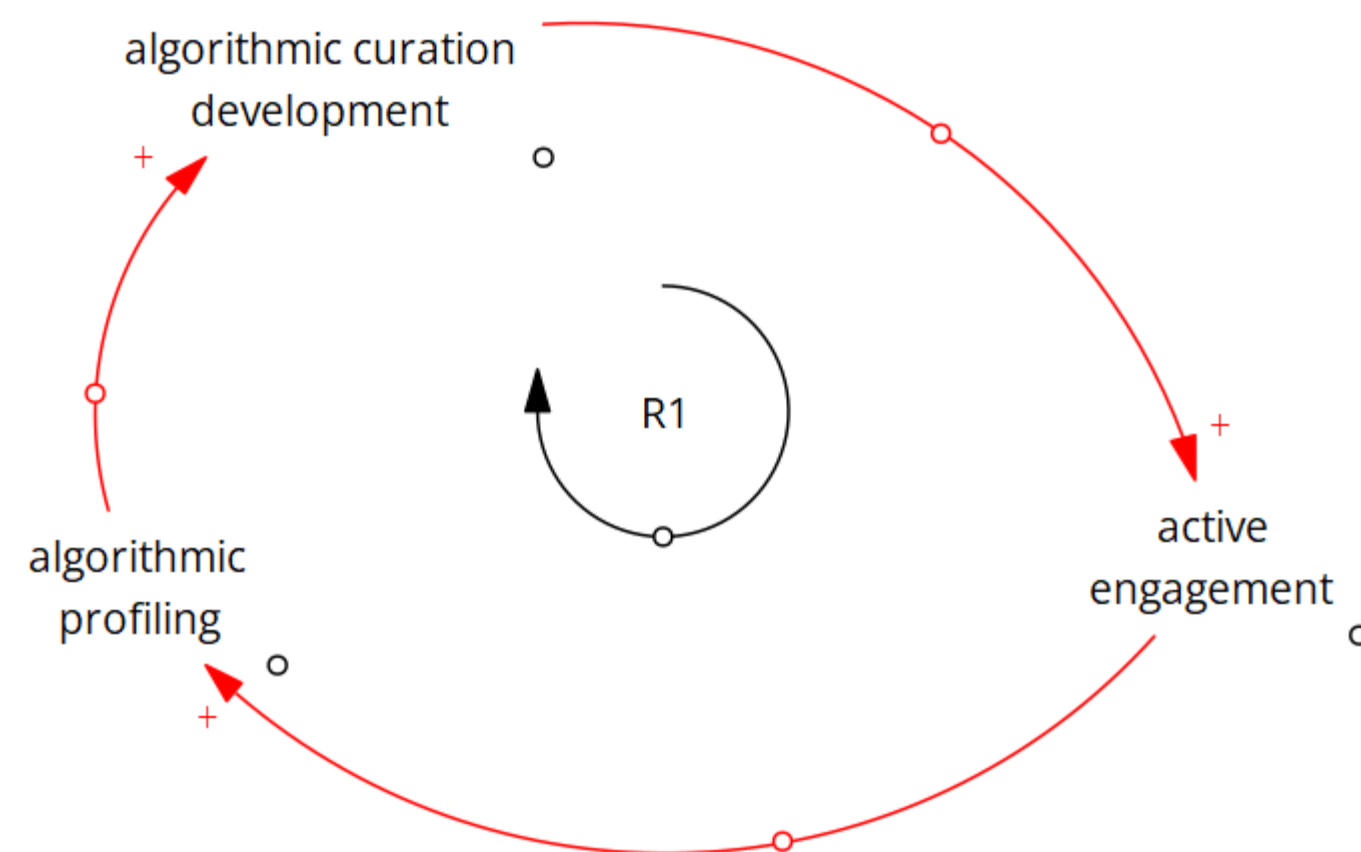
Reinforcing Loops R1 & R2

R2

Adaptive Capture

As algorithmic profiling intensifies, **psychological costs accumulate** — emotional exhaustion, political depression, empathy overdraft, cognitive overload — driving users to develop coping strategies (boundary management, filtering, grouping, blocking, platform switching, digital detox). These coping behaviours constitute growing **tactical or defensive agency**.

Critically, however, the behavioural data generated through these adaptive practices — switching patterns, filtering preferences, selective engagement choices — are **themselves captured by algorithmic systems** and used to refine profiling further. R2 thus formalises the **surveillance capitalism dynamic (Zuboff, 2019)**: user resistance itself becomes a data resource. User adaptation, while genuinely protective, **paradoxically sustains the algorithmic profiling it seeks to resist**.



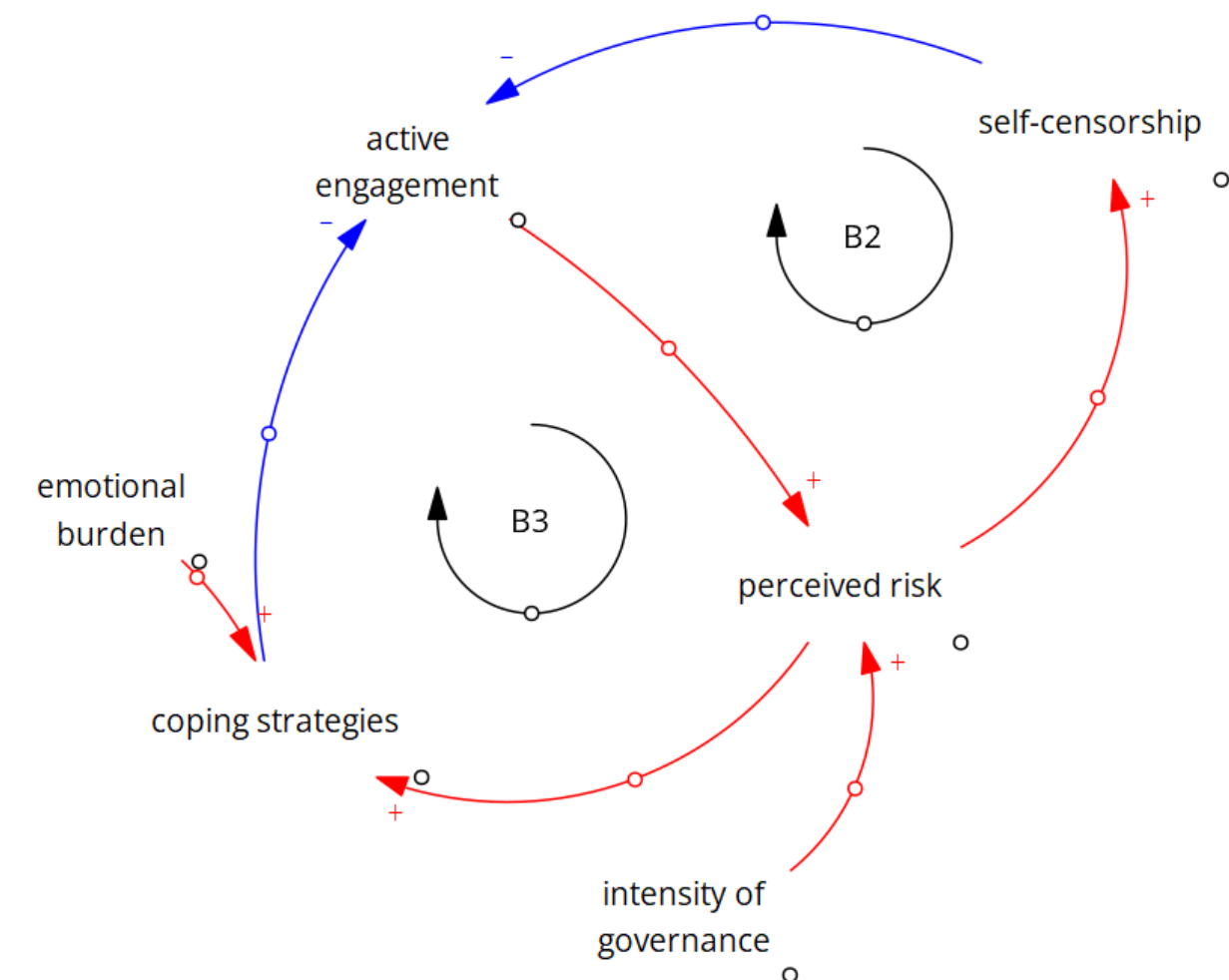
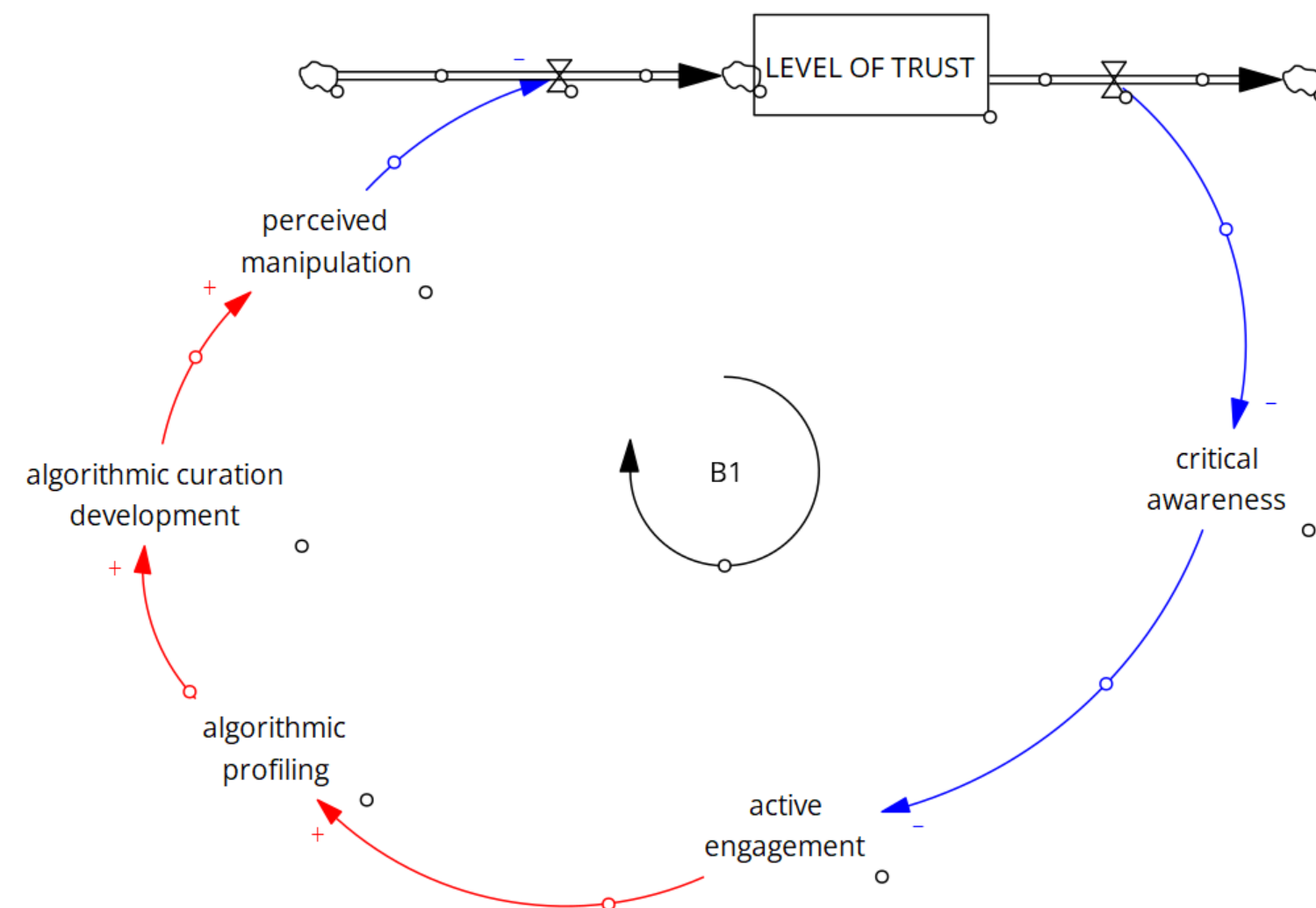
Balancing Loops B1 & B2

B1

Critical Awareness

Sustained exposure to algorithmically curated content → **users' awareness of how visibility, attention, and participation are shaped by platform mechanisms** → more selective and cautious interactions → reduced active engagement → weakening behavioural dynamics that sustain algorithmic amplification. This moderates R1's growth.

Interview evidence: Participants articulated growing awareness of platform governance, noticing algorithmic prioritisation, content suppression, and commercialised trending, which would further reduce reflexive engagement and encouraged selective, protective participation. Corresponds to BOT 3: declining trust / rising critical awareness (Livingstone, 2004; Eslami et al., 2015)



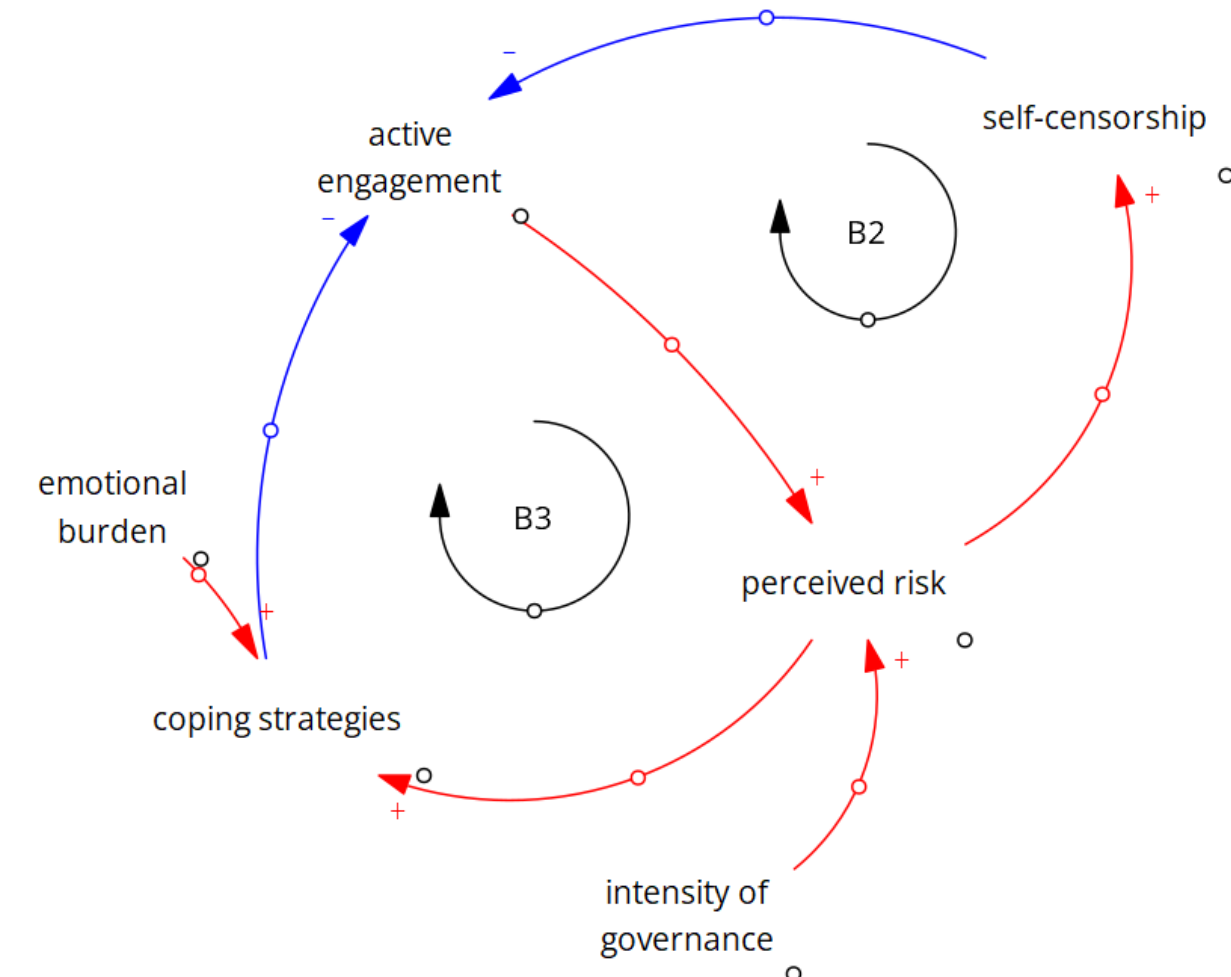
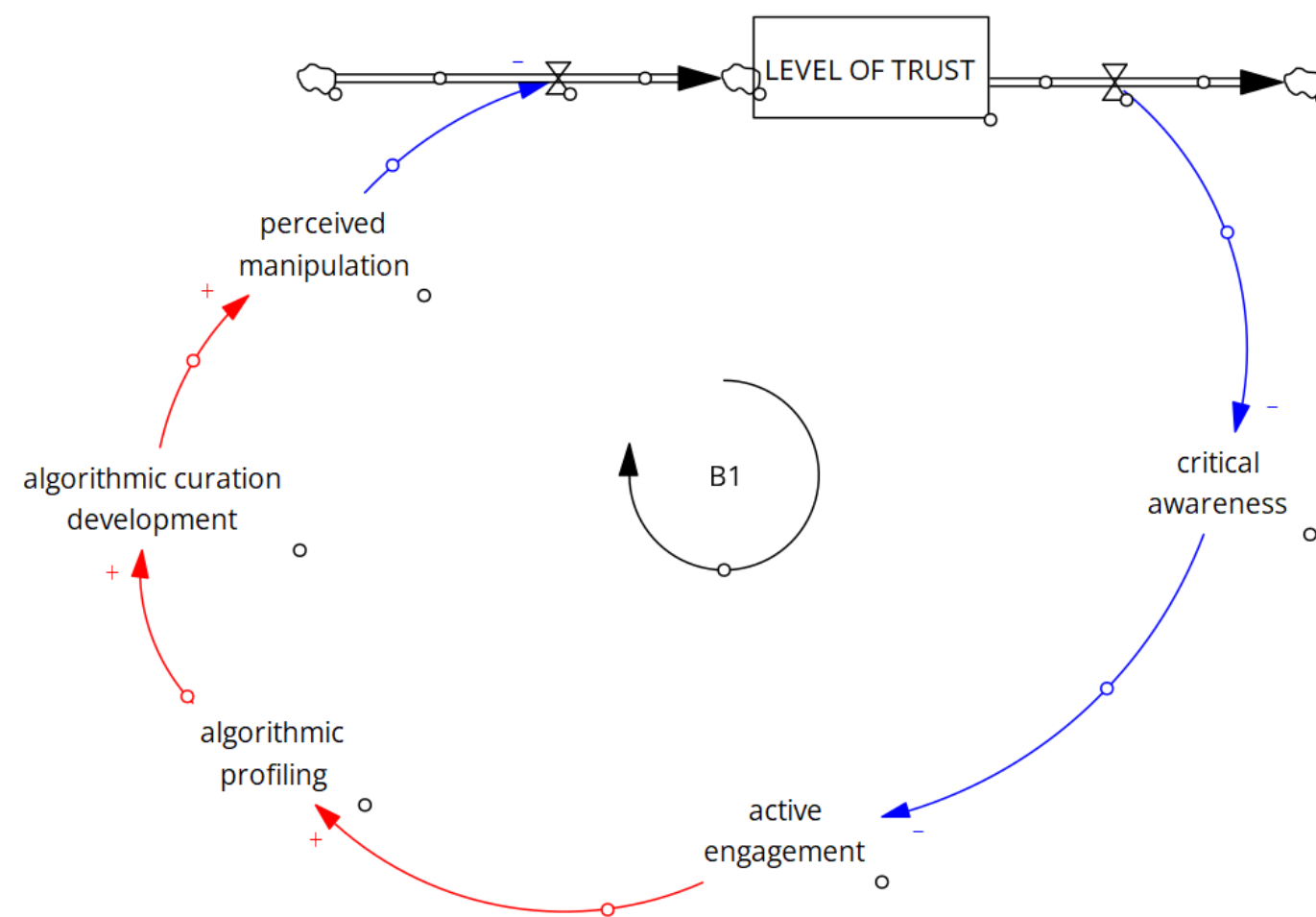
Balancing Loops B1 & B2

B2

Governance Backfire

Platform governance intensity increases — post deletion, comment restrictions, sensitive topic suppression, gendered censorship standards → **perceived expression risk rises** → users anticipate potential consequences of public participation → **self-censorship and protective behaviours**: shifts from open posting to "silent browsing," "transparent minor user" positioning, coded or private expression → reduced active engagement → limits behavioural activity sustaining algorithmic amplification.

Context: Shaped by the regulatory architecture of the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC, 2015) and formalised through Weibo's Community Convention (Weibo Corp., 2021), both of which influence how users evaluate the risks of participation. Corresponds to BOT 2: the governance-driven shift from active expression to passive observation. Theme: **Performative Silence**.

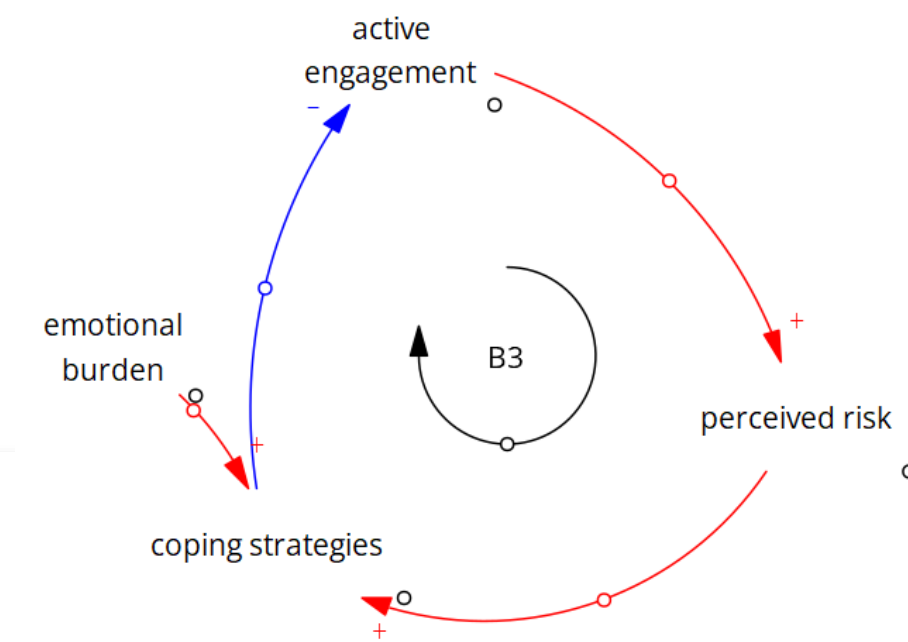


Balancing Loops B3

B3

Coping Stabilisation

Emotional strain + distrust + self-protective vigilance (accumulated through B1 & B2) → elevated psychological costs → **emotional burden and, in more severe cases, political depression** → coping strategies (selective avoidance, content filtering, reduced participation, purposive-only platform use) = growth of tactical/defensive agency → reduced active engagement → lower exposure intensity and perceived risk → **reduced urgency of further coping** → draws users back toward limited forms of participation. Rather than restoring expressive agency, this stabilises users within a **constrained equilibrium: selective participation, ongoing dependence, moderated psychological burden**. The persistence of emotional burden as an intermediate variable reflects the chronic nature of affective exhaustion documented across the interview dataset. Theme: **Affective Dissonance & Agentic Resistance**.



USER AGENCY (Expressive)

Perceived ability to influence discussion through visible posting, commenting, and advocacy. Declines as R1 intensifies, then reduced expressive freedom and cognitive autonomy (See BOT 1).

USER AGENCY (Tactical)

Boundary management, filtering, platform switching, and coping skills. Increases as B3 drives coping repertoire growth, then reflexive agency within algorithmic constraint (See BOT 1).

KEY RESULTS AND INSIGHTS

Core finding from CLD

Growing critical awareness and tactical adaptation do NOT restore expressive freedom. Instead they produce a **reconfigured form of agency within continued algorithmic dominance**. Users can identify algorithmic amplification and broader platform power — yet still report difficulty disengaging from emotionally demanding content. Critical awareness stabilises rather than accumulates into durable behavioural change. The system produces a state in which users understand their situation but cannot fully escape it. **Structural conditions that sustain re-entry must be addressed** — not just transparency or awareness campaigns.

CLD Summary

- R1** Drives expansion of engagement and algorithmic influence — content amplification and platform dependence.
- R2** User adaptation is captured and recursively incorporated into profiling — resistance itself becomes a data resource (Zuboff, 2019).
- B1** Progressively constrains participation through growing critical awareness of platform mechanisms — moderates R1.
- B2** Constrains participation through governance-induced self-censorship and perceived expression risk — Performative Silence.
- B3** Stabilises the system by transforming psychological costs into coping behaviours — selective engagement without complete exit.

KEY RESULTS AND INSIGHTS

01

Youth agency on Weibo is not simply eroded but reconfigured

Expressive agency declines while tactical and defensive agency grows through filtering, avoidance, and boundary management."



02

A shift from active expression to passive observation has become the dominant mode of participation.

Growing expression risks, emotional fatigue, and self-censorship gradually normalise cautious and selective engagement.



03

User-side balancing loops stabilise behaviour around defensive participation.

Critical awareness, perceived risk, emotional burden, and coping strategies work together to reduce active engagement without enabling complete disengagement.



04

Trust erosion operates across multiple dimensions of platform experience.

Weibo's combination of engagement-driven recommendation, opaque censorship, and tightening cybersecurity policy pushes many users toward self-censorship, silence on sensitive topics



05

Users become increasingly sceptical of platform power while remaining dependent on Weibo for information and public monitoring.

In highly governed media environment, the erosion of trust is closely intertwined with the strength of platform governance.



06

Platform-side reinforcing loops (e.g. targeting, engagement, profiling) **shape perceived agency, trust,** and expression norms through interacting feedback dynamics. Even user coping and adaptation may be incorporated into ongoing processes of algorithmic optimisation.



Future Research and Practical Implication



Governance designs that protect safety and order without fully suppressing non-confrontational forms of youth expression will sustain agency and civic learning.

Exploring **longitudinal, process-tracing** studies of how **algorithm awareness** and coping strategies evolve with **repeated crises** and **regulatory shifts**

Clearer algorithmic cues and user-controlled filters could preserve perceived agency. Design interventions should support users' capacity to **manage information exposure**, not merely increase transparency.

Examining **transition dynamics** between active and passive modes of use under censorship and risk

Heavier algorithmic steering and over-governed content management can backfire by undermining trust and pushing users into protective behaviours, which may weaken genuine public deliberation.



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