

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



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Outline

1. Introduction

2. Problem Statement

3. Research Design

4. Results

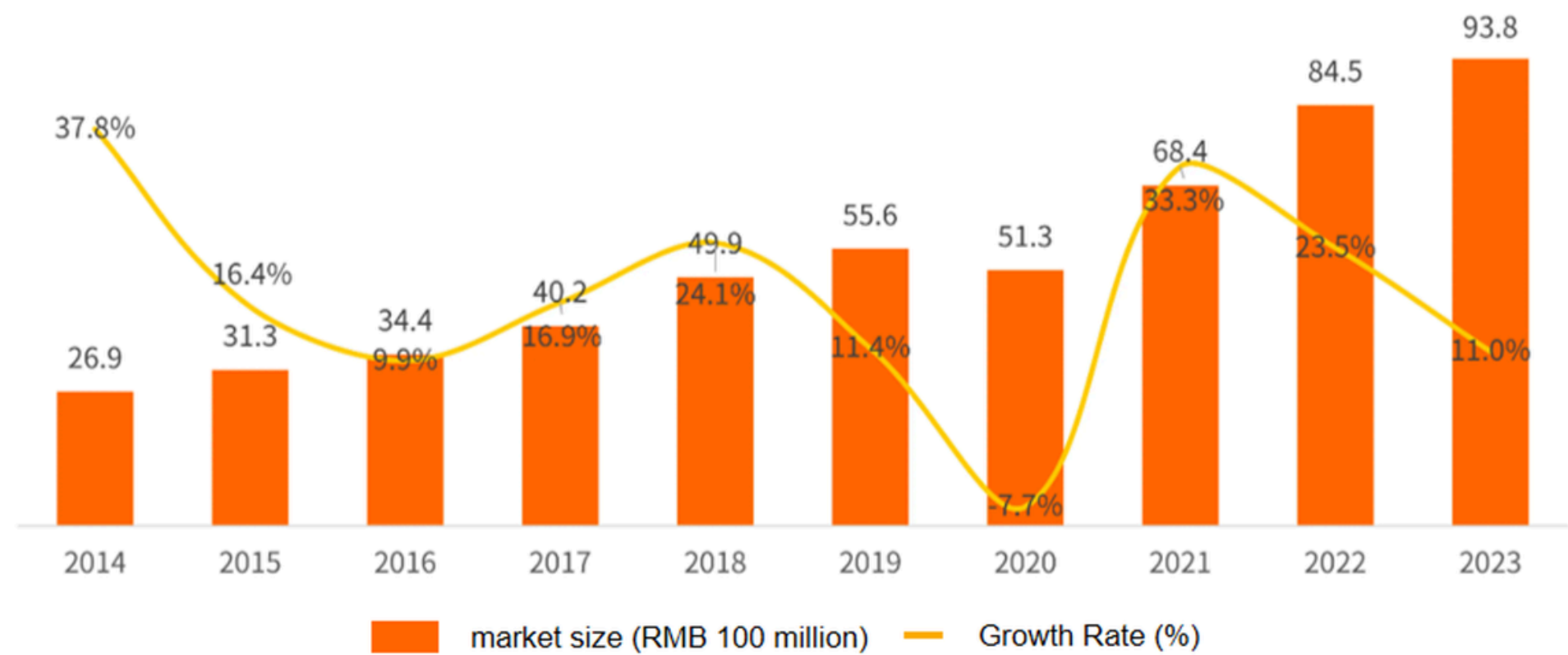
5. Recommendations

6. Reference



Introduction

2014-2023 China internet dating industry market size



1.

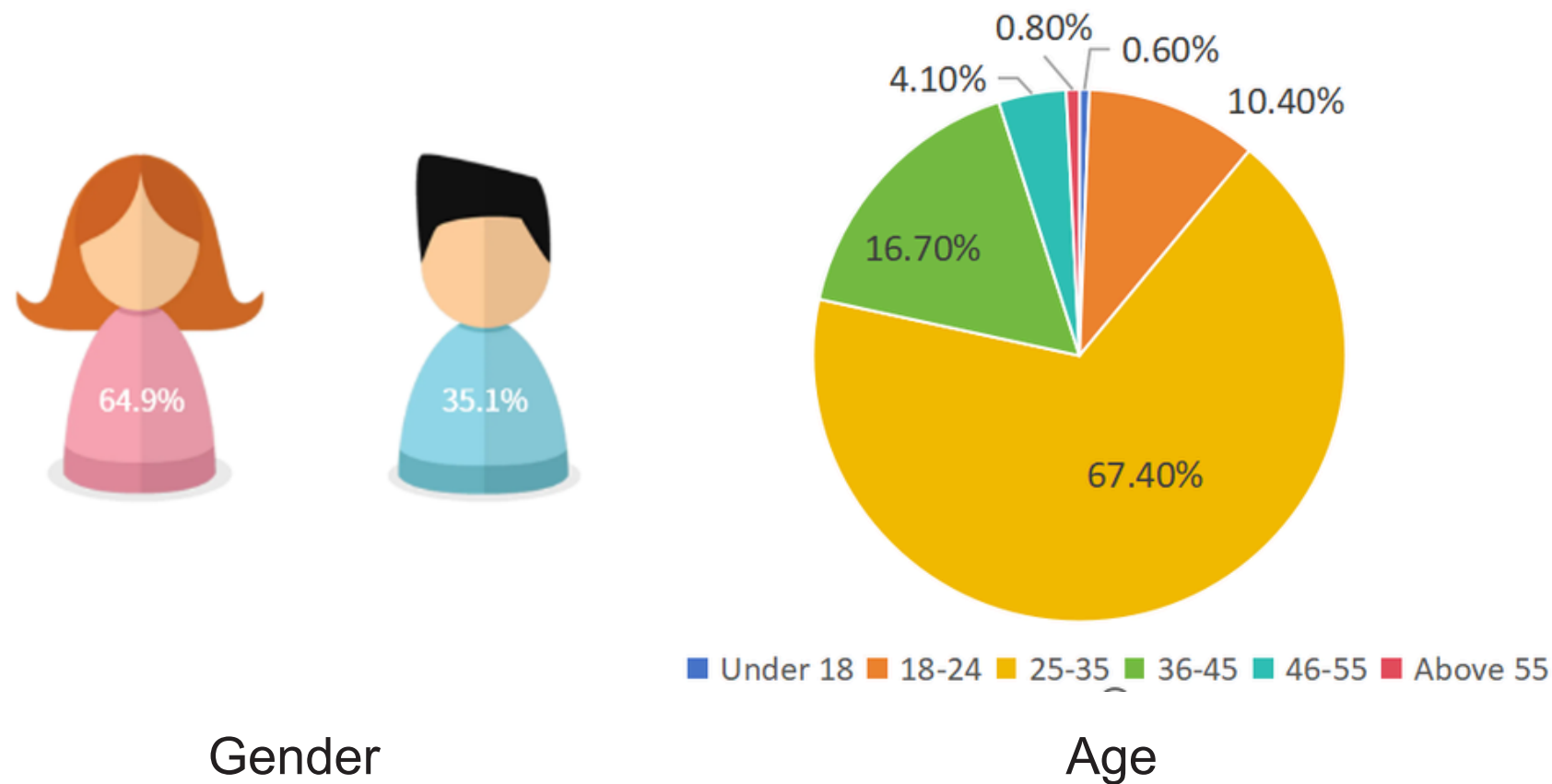
The market size of China's Internet dating industry showed a growing trend in 2014-2023, from 2.69 billion yuan to 9.38 billion yuan (iiMedia Research, 2024).

2. Timeline of establishment of Dating apps in China



Introduction

3. Profile of Dating Apps (DAs) Users in China



- Emerging adulthood, a transitional life course period from 18 to 29 years, is the life stage between adolescence and adulthood (Arnett, 2000, 2015).
- Approximately 78% of Chinese DAs users are belonged to emerging adults (EAs) (iiMedia Research, 2024).
- Most EAs have experienced a romantic relationship breakup with many experiencing multiple turnovers and instability (Reifman, 2011).

4. Ghosting Prevalence

- 9% Americans experienced at least one relationship breakup using mediated communication (Madden & Lenhart, 2006).
- 13% Americans reported have been ghosted by partners (Moore, 2014).
- 72% had been ghosted by a romantic partner among 18–35-year-old Americans (Koessler et al., 2019).
- 76% of respondents from Washington, D.C. admitted to ghosting someone within the last 12 months (Lopez, 2025).

Problem Statement

Ghosting has become a common feature of digitally mediated relationships, yet research on this phenomenon in China's rapidly growing dating-app ecosystem is still sparse. Despite the massive scale of Chinese digital dating platforms, we know little about how users experience, enact, or interpret ghosting in these contexts.

Existing international studies indicate that ghosting can produce substantial negative psychological effects, but many individuals still lack a clear understanding of why it happens or how platform dynamics contribute to it. This mismatch between the prevalence of ghosting and the limited, fragmented knowledge in the Chinese context underscores an important and underexplored problem for systematic investigation.

Research Design

This study applies System Dynamics to explain how ghosting behaviors emerge and evolve in digitally mediated dating relationships by developing dynamic hypotheses and causal loop diagrams (CLDs) to capture the feedback mechanisms underlying ghosting behaviors. This approach combines empirical evidence and theoretical triangulation to explain relationship dynamics within China's rapidly expanding dating app ecosystem.

Evidence-Based Foundations of BOT in China

Construct Behavior-over-Time (BOT) trajectories to represent the historical development of key variables in the Chinese context, including dating app users and ghosting prevalence. These trajectories help identify the dynamic patterns that require explanation.

Literature Review & Semi-Structure Interview

We conducted semi-structured interviews with Chinese emerging adults aged 19–25 to explore how dating app use influences intimacy formation and relationship experiences. A literature review was also undertaken to identify key mechanisms. Insights from both sources were integrated to identify recurring patterns and construct the system feedback structures shaping relationship dynamics in platform-mediated environments.

Causal Loop Diagrams (CLDs)

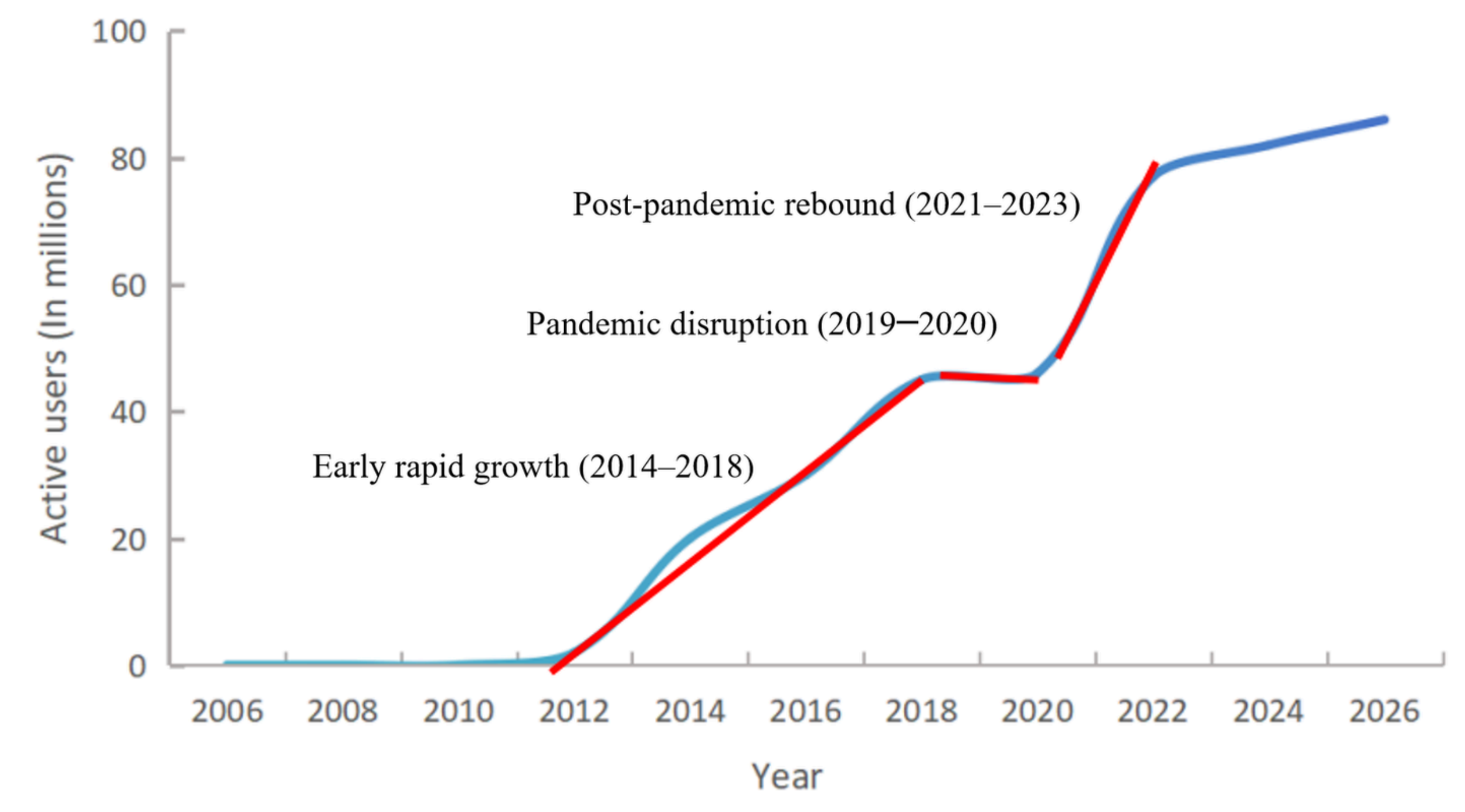
Based on insights from interviews and a literature review, we develop dynamic hypotheses and causal loop diagrams (CLDs) to identify feedback mechanisms underlying ghosting behaviors.

Behavior Over Time (BOT1): Dating App Penetration in China

2014-2018: The initial development of dating apps such as MOMO and Tantan drove rapid user growth and expansion of the online dating market.

2019-2020: Impact of COVID-19 on offline social interactions and user spending lead decrease of aDAs users.

2021-2023: The industry experienced a strong recovery, Lockdown policy during the COVID-19 led the increase of users (Wiederhold, 2021).

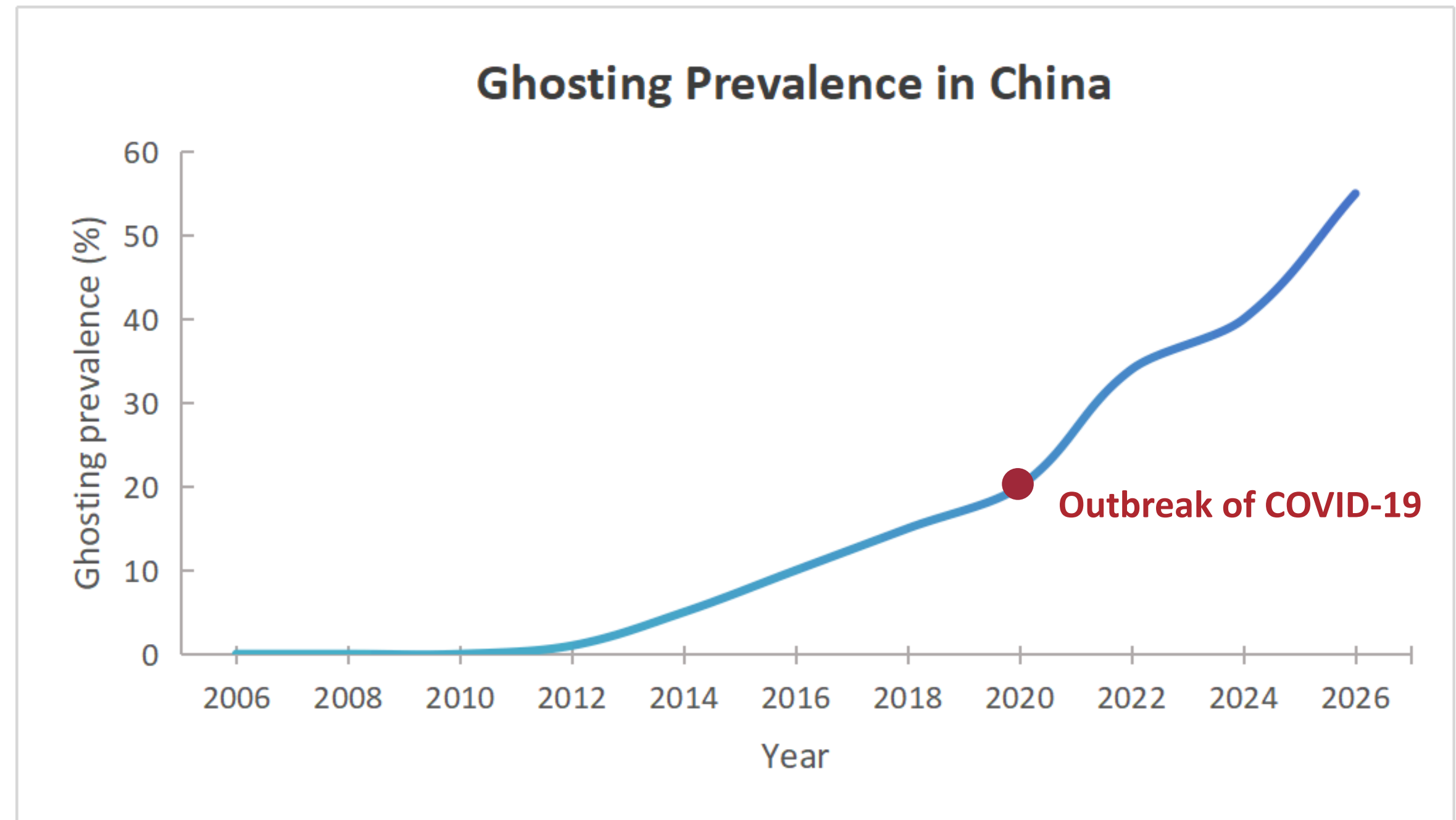


Source: iiMedia Research, China Online Dating Market Report (2024); Statista, Digital Market Outlook (2023)

Behavior Over Time (BOT2): Ghosting Prevalence in China

Academic research on ghosting in China has increased mainly since the 2020s, while earlier empirical data remain limited. Since 2024, discussions of situationships and ghosting have surged on Rednote and Douyin, attracting high engagement. Soul App downloads also rose after the pandemic, consistent with the rebound in dating-app penetration shown in BOT1 (Qimai.com). Although early statistical data are lacking, this study's interview coding shows that the mechanisms of ghosting in China are similar to those found in Western research.

Together, public discourse, platform growth, and interview evidence suggest that ghosting likely increased alongside dating-app use and accelerated during COVID-19, when digital silence carried a lower social cost.



Ghosting Prevalence in China = estimated proportion of online DAs users likely to have experienced ghosting in a given year

Synthesizing the Literature on System Feedbacks

Prior research on ghosting has advanced our understanding of what ghosting is, why people do it, and how it affects those involved, but it tells us little about how ghosting unfolds as a dynamic process in digitally mediated relationships.

Existing studies have clarified the conceptual boundaries of ghosting, examined individual-level motivations such as conflict avoidance, convenience, and documented psychological impacts and coping responses. However, this literature largely treats ghosting as a discrete outcome rather than as the emergent result of interacting feedbacks among expectations, communication patterns, platform affordances over time.

This gap motivates a system dynamics approach that can endogenize ghosting as a behavioral pattern arising from the co-evolution of user motivations, platform signals, and relational trajectories in DA environments.

- Conceptualization of ghosting (LeFebvre et al., 2019; Yap et al., 2021)
- Motivations behind ghosting (Freedman et al., 2019; LeFebvre et al., 2019; Park & Klein, 2024; Timmermans et al., 2021;)
- Psychological impacts and coping strategies (Konings et al., 2023; LeFebvre et al., 2020; Timmermans et al., 2021; Wu & Bamishigbin, 2024)

Synthesizing the Literature on System Feedbacks

Mechanism	Literature Support
Lower investment → Ghosting prevalence	When individuals perceive relationships as low-commitment or easily replaceable, they are more likely to adopt avoidance strategies such as ghosting to terminate interactions (LeFebvre et al., 2019; Koessler et al., 2019b).
Ghosting prevalence → Emotional distress	Freedman et al., 2016; Koessler et al., 2019a; LeFebvre et al., 2019; Timmermans et al., 2021; Powell et al., 2021; Wu & Bamishigbin, 2024
Emotional distress → Disengagement	Ghosting-related emotional distress may contribute to disengagement or withdrawal responses (Timmermans et al., 2021; Wu & Bamishigbin, 2024; Freedman et al., 2016).
Technological affordances → Ghosting prevalence	Digital communication technologies and dating apps enable users to terminate interactions simply by ignoring messages or blocking others, which makes ghosting an easy and convenient relationship dissolution strategy(LeFebvre et al., 2019; Timmermans et al., 2021; Konings et al., 2023).
Ghosting prevalence → Uncertainty → Attribution	Because ghosting involves abruptly ceasing communication without explanation, those who are ghosted often experience uncertainty and attempt to rationalize the situation. The rationalization process could result in a mind set of internal attributions, where individuals come to internalize and believe that something is fundamentally wrong with them (LeFebvre et al., 2020; Wu & Bamishigbin, 2024).
Ghosting prevalence → Re-engagement	Experiencing ghosting does not necessarily lead to disengagement from dating platforms; instead, individuals often cope by pursuing new romantic opportunities and continuing to engage with dating apps (Timmermans et al., 2021; LeFebvre et al., 2020; Wu & Bamishigbin, 2024).

Analysis of Semi-Structure Interview

Theme	Examples
Choice Abundance	"I think if I wanted to, I could definitely find new matches on the platform... but whether the conversation goes well is another matter. Because he and I are very compatible, I don't feel the need to switch to someone else... I'm also willing to invest more in him."
	"When using it, especially after activating membership, there are swipe and mutual-selection mechanisms, so during the matching process there are definitely plenty of choices."
	"Every day when I open the app there are new matches, and strangers also message me first. I've set my own filters, which aren't that strict, so there are always people who meet my criteria. So the sense of having lots of potential choices is quite strong."
Perceived Partner Replaceability	"At the time I was also chatting with someone else on a different app... honestly, if I'm talking about real feelings of liking someone, I think my feelings for that other person were actually deeper."
Casual Platform Attitude	"Dating apps aren't as formal as meeting someone offline, so I feel more relaxed with people I meet online. Dating apps come with a built-in label of short-term, casual socializing with many people, so sometimes I feel I don't need to invest too much emotion. Besides, I wasn't even using the app with the goal of finding a partner in the first place."
	"Using a dating app makes me feel like I don't need to be taken too seriously. After all, people on there... aren't exactly a great catch!"
	"...it's like we all share a stereotype that these apps are a bit disreputable, so when we talk and interact, we're actually not that sincere with each other."
Online Communication Constraints	"On the platform you can only communicate through text, and with no face-to-face contact, no way to see the other person's expressions... there's a lag in receiving messages... On these apps you don't have to worry about anything. If you want to end it, you just stop replying, and everyone assumes the relationship is over by default, so people are less willing to resolve conflicts. In real life, because there are real bonds, people are more likely to actively work things out rather than end things the way it happens online."
	"Because you meet through an online platform, you tend to focus more on the appealing parts of a person, the parts they choose to reveal to you... even after moving offline later, a lot of the communication still happens over WeChat or social media, and you rarely go deep, so you never really get to know the person well."

Analysis of Semi-Structure Interview

Theme	Examples
Norm of Ghosting	"When conflicts came up, I mostly just stopped replying to messages... that kind of cold treatment is really a form of avoidance; I didn't want to deal with his emotions... eventually I gradually cut off contact with him, without ever explaining why." "Since we met online, there are no mutual friends and nothing to worry about. if there's a conflict I don't want to deal with, deleting the contact solves everything." "One day I just suddenly didn't feel like replying anymore... over the next few days he sent a few tentative messages and I don't remember what exactly, but I never replied."
Illusion of Intimacy	"I felt like it was quite intimate. There was a period when we talked about everything... We messaged so often that it gave me the illusion we were very close." "I sometimes even felt he understood me better than my friends or family... the anonymity of the internet made it easier for me to tell him what I really thought." "From the very start it was attraction that made me swipe right on him, such as his looks, the way he talked, his interests, it all made him feel close to my ideal type... At first it was pretty one-sided, focused on his good qualities... once the novelty wore off, the attraction faded as his flaws showed, and conflicts increased."
Investment in Relationship	"Spending time getting to know someone and working out how to get along with them actually takes real effort... not replying to messages, or giving someone the cold shoulder, is actually pretty irresponsible and it would mean I was being careless about the relationship."
Relationship Definition Avoidance	"I could sense some things weren't quite a good fit, but I still found him interesting... it was like we tacitly reached an understanding, without either of us being ready to commit to a real relationship." "How I'd define this relationship was itself unclear, since we met through a dating app to begin with, and there was no obvious moment that established it as a formal relationship."

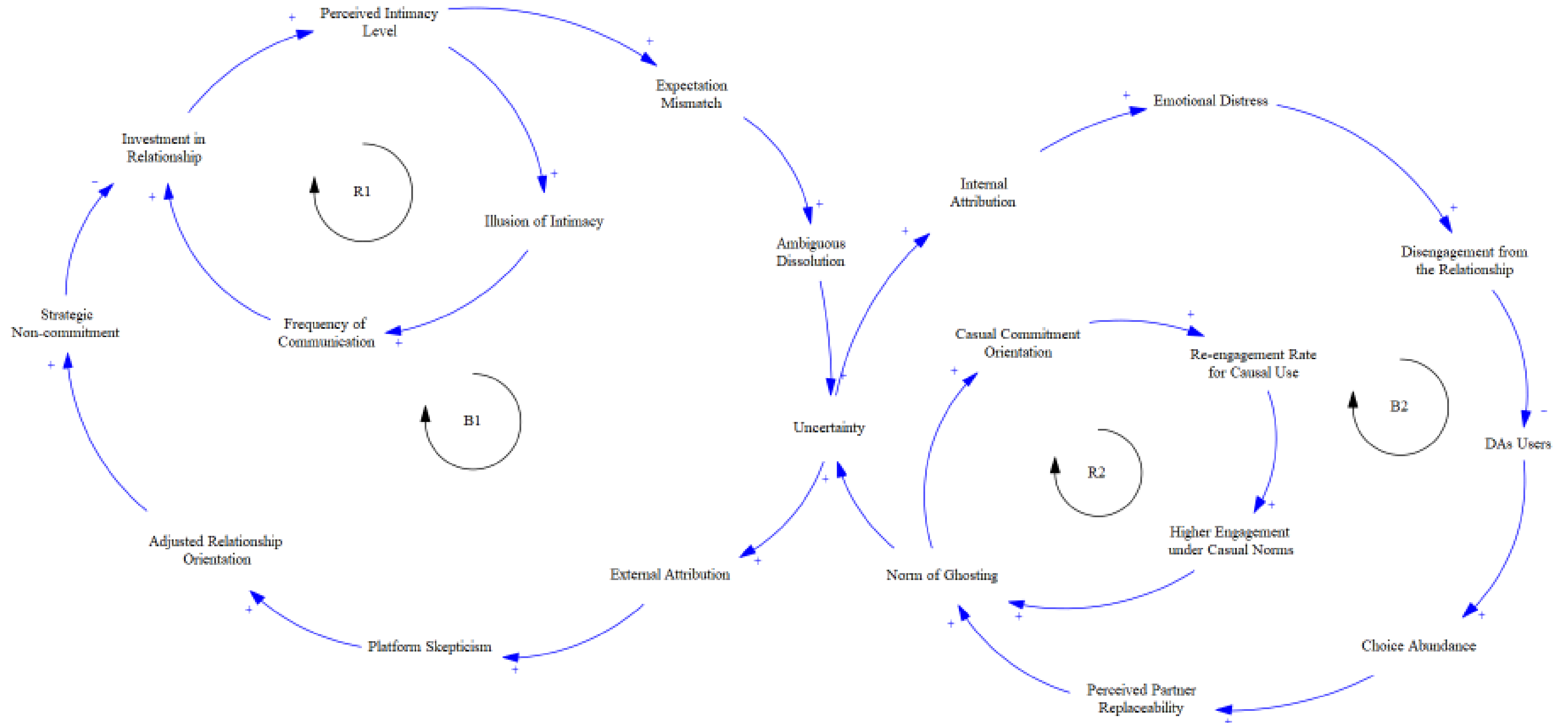
Analysis of Semi-Structure Interview

Thems	Examples
Expectation Mismatch	"When it came to meeting up in person, I mostly just thought of it as meeting a friend, but the other person may have understood it as a sign the relationship was moving forward."
	"At the time I was especially afraid he'd ask why I was going out with other people, and that would have gone beyond what I expected."
Ambiguous Dissolution	"It's almost a defining feature of dating apps. The outcome seems predetermined from the moment you choose to use one. The purpose of using it is fairly clear, and everyone shares this kind of unspoken, adult understanding, so a lot of endings just seem destined to stay vague and unresolved."
Platform Skepticism	"I think the platform itself matters a lot, because deep down everyone knows the score, meeting someone through a matchmaking introduction from your parents feels completely different from meeting someone on a dating app. If it's an introduction from an elder, you wouldn't dare cross certain lines or say anything too much, because in the end you don't want to lose face... basically 100% of people take a much more casual attitude toward dating apps."
Internal Attribution	"I used to doubt myself and wondering if I hadn't done something well enough, or if I shared too much and made him feel pressured, or if I was just bad at reading people... I'd think about whether, if I'd been a bit more proactive and understanding back then, the relationship might have lasted. Reflecting on it like that, it just wore me down."
	"I'd think, well, if he swiped onto me on Tantan, couldn't he also be swiping onto other people at the same time?... anyway I ended up doubting myself, and it wore me down."
Emotional Distress	"I mostly just felt like maybe something was wrong with me?... it left me feeling a bit exhausted, a bit lost too... I felt like I didn't know how to meet people going forward, or how to approach socializing in general. There was this vague sense of timidity, and I felt confused about dating apps overall."
Relationship Fading	"There wasn't a clear moment when it ended. Replies just gradually got slower, or maybe after I sent an emoji he wouldn't reply for a long time.. .you could clearly feel the relationship fading."
	"Later on, the topics we talked about kept shrinking, and how often we talked dropped too, even the tone of the replies felt flatter."

Analysis of Semi-Structure Interview

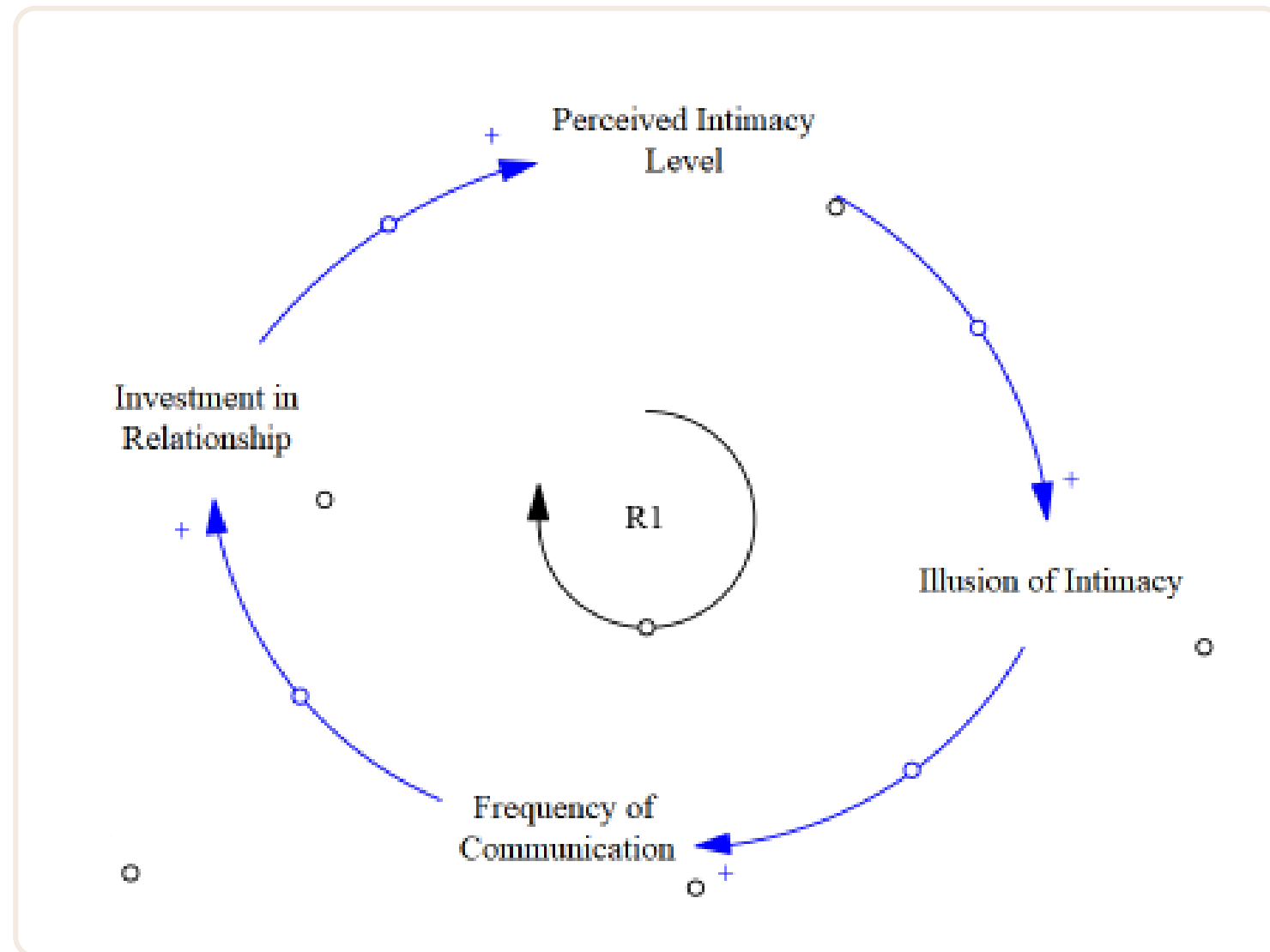
Theme	Examples
Strategic Non-commitment	"I don't think I'll try to develop a relationship online again, or at least I'll be much more cautious about it... I feel like even through this kind of method, the people you meet can at most stay at an ambiguous stage and I won't enter a formal relationship through it again."
Casual Commitment Orientation	"Now I'm more willing to accept a short-term intimate relationship... I won't throw myself in completely so easily anymore... a short relationship feels more relaxed to me, kind of like finding a casual companion." "I used to think dating had to come with a clear status, or that once you were together you had to plan for the future... but after going through it myself, I found I naturally end up choosing this kind of more ambiguous relationship too."
Disengagement	"After that I stopped using dating apps much, because in my most recent relationship both of us were genuine with each other, but even a relationship that sincere never got formally established. So I feel a bit disappointed in dating apps, and I don't think they're really a good way to build a formal relationship." "I want to find someone more stable and long-term, and that's also why I don't want to use dating apps recently — they're too unpredictable, and I've also been feeling emotionally worn out lately, so I don't really want to keep meeting different people."

Casual Loop Diagram



1 Constructed Closeness & Expectation-Reality Mismatch

R1 Reinforcing loop



Mechanism

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. Yet when offline encounters or declining communication quality expose the fragility of this closeness and precipitate ambiguous dissolution.

Theme 1

Theme 2

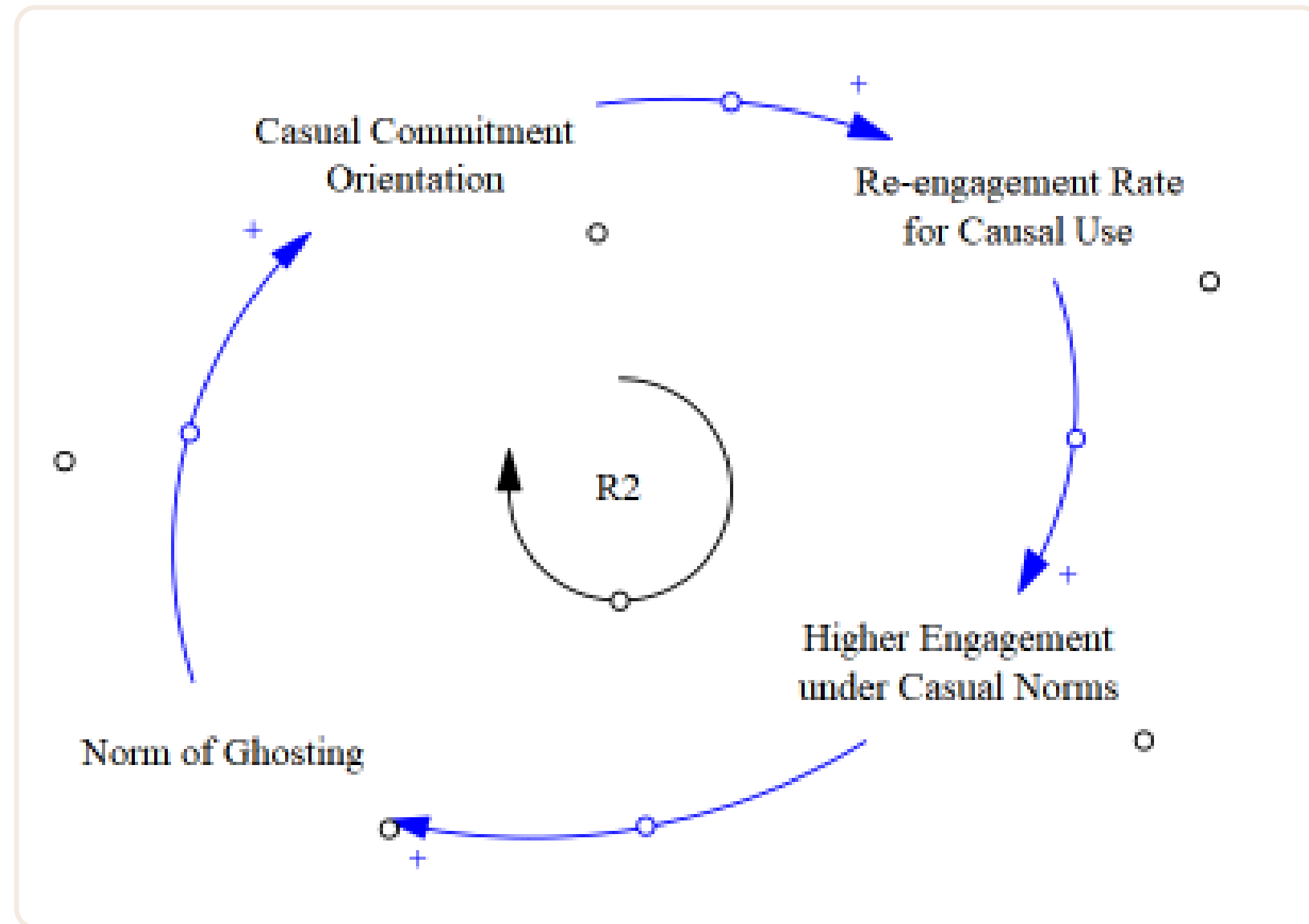
Theme 3

Theme 4

2

The Algorithmic Marketplace of Intimacy

R2 Reinforcing loop



Mechanism

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

Theme 1

Theme 2

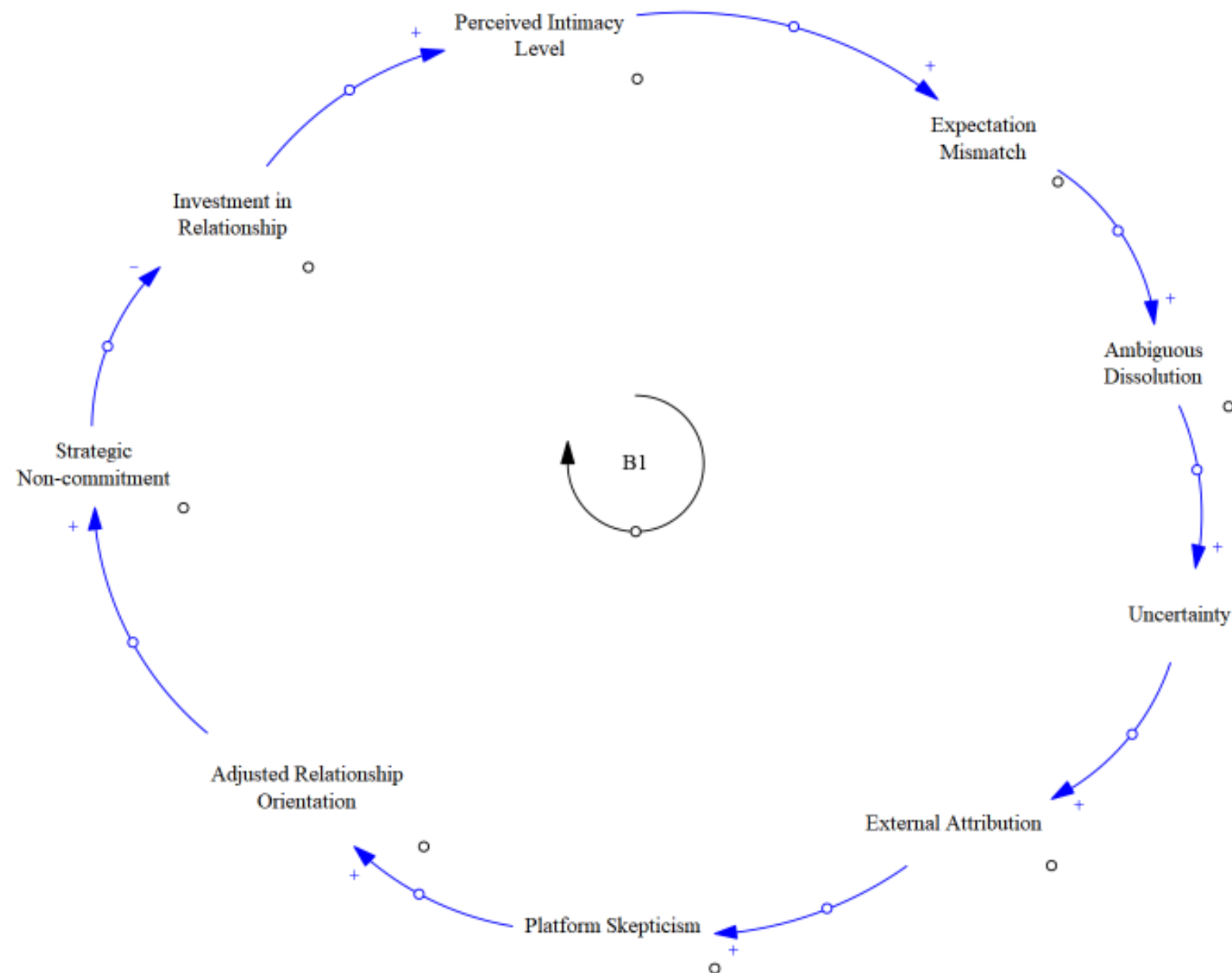
Theme 3

Theme 4

3

Strategic & Defensive Non-commitment in Relational Gray Zones

B1 Balancing loop



Mechanism

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.

Theme 1

Theme 2

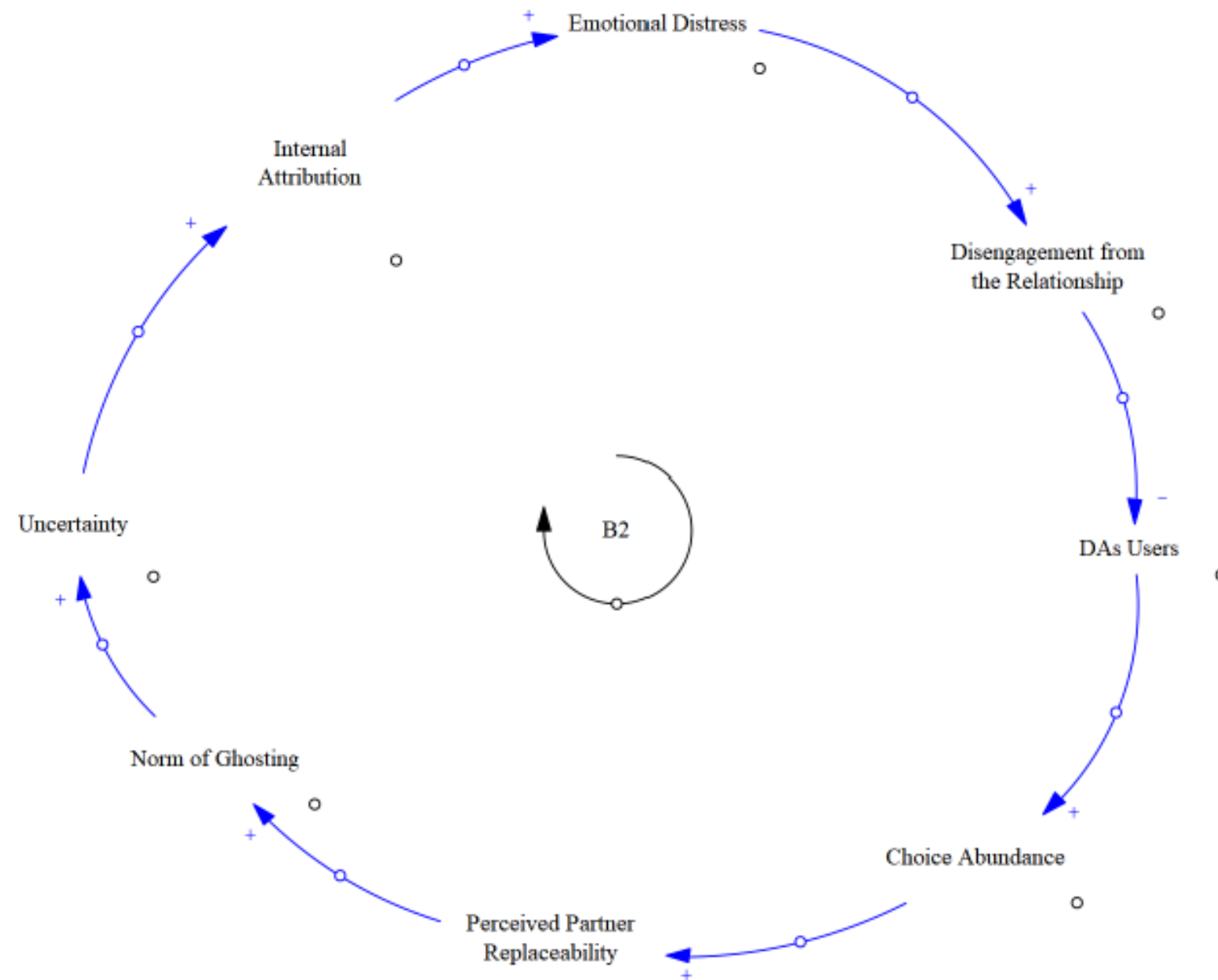
Theme 3

Theme 4

4

De-socialized Dissolution & Low-cost Exit

B2 Balancing loop



Mechanism

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.

Theme 1

Theme 2

Theme 3

Theme 4

Recommendations

1 Limits of Intention-signalling Features

Hinge's "Dating Intentions" and Tinder's "Relationship Goals" lower the cost of early screening, but once a casual norm already dominates a platform, a self-declared intention badge is a weak signal that is costless to produce and impossible to verify.

2 A Progressive Photo-reveal Model

Building on Soul's personality-based, avatar-first design, where fading was more common than ghosting, platforms could unlock profile photos only after a sustained interaction period (e.g., 3 days of continuous conversation), deterring ghosting structurally.

3 Optional Geographic Proximity

Soul's complete decoupling from geographic proximity keeps many relationships permanently online and blocks the offline transition, contributing to fading. Personality-matching platforms should offer proximity as an accessible, optional preference.

4 Governance of Gendered Interaction

To address asymmetries in attention and exposure to unwanted interactions, platforms could add stricter initiation controls plus cumulative behavioral governance, where verified reports trigger graduated restrictions on interaction privileges.

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