

# ***Affordances of Intimacy: A Comparative Study of Platform Design and Relationship Practices among Chinese Young Adults on Soul and Momo***

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**Abstract:** Drawing on platform affordance theory, this study compares Soul and Momo to examine how stranger-socializing platforms shape young adults' intimate relationships through interface design, matching algorithms, and interaction rules. Based on semi-structured interviews with 25 young adults who had used both platforms and three-stage coding, it analyzes the links among technological design, interaction scripts, and relationship forms. The findings show that Momo, through geographical proximity, visual display, and instant connection, constructs an efficiency-oriented filtering script that makes intimacy momentary, shallow, and highly substitutable. By contrast, Soul, through de-visualization, interest-based matching, and narrative expression, constructs a meaning-oriented performative script in which relationships depend more on narrative prelude, sustained investment, and spiritual expectation. Young users move between platforms according to emotional needs, adjusting interaction rhythm, self-presentation, and relationship expectations to produce differentiated forms of the "platformed self." Yet these choices remain shaped by technological rules and commercial logic. Overall, platform affordances, interaction scripts, and relationship forms form a chain of effects that produces a paradox of platformized intimacy: expanded choice coexisting with emotional fatigue and constrained subjectivity. This study highlights the co-construction of technology and emotion and suggests that platform design should give greater attention to user autonomy, emotional well-being, and a healthy relational ecology.

## **1. Introduction**

The rise of mobile internet has embedded interactions among strangers within algorithmic matching, interface display, and location-based services, thereby reshaping how young adults' intimate relationships come into being. How others enter one's field of vision, how relationships unfold in temporal terms, and how individuals present themselves are all increasingly shaped by platform rules. Stranger-socializing platforms have therefore become an important site for observing how technology intervenes in the formation of intimacy.

Existing discussions often use labels such as "fast-food socializing" or "soul socializing" to describe different platforms, which tends to reduce differences to user preferences and platform

positioning. What deserves further interrogation is how technological design is translated into concrete forms of interaction and, through continued use, becomes a relatively stable relational script. Platform affordance offers an analytical entry point to this question, as it reveals how geographical location, visual presentation, interest-based matching, and anonymous expression jointly define the threshold, pace, and expectations of social interaction.

Soul and Momo, respectively, represent stranger-socializing modes oriented toward interest-based narrative and geographically and visually oriented interaction. Based on in-depth interviews with 25 young users who have experience with both platforms, this study compares how these two affordance structures shape different forms of intimate relationships and examines young users' choices, adaptations, and identity performance in cross-platform movement. In doing so, the study further illuminates how platform technologies, user agency, and commercial logics jointly participate in the production of digital intimacy.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Platform Affordances and Platformized Interaction**

Originating in Gibson's (1979) ecological psychology to describe environmental action possibilities, the concept of "affordance" was adapted into communication studies by Hutchby (2001) as a relational property between technology and actors [1]. Building on this, scholars proposed "imagined affordances," emphasizing that affordances are not merely objective but are constructed through users' perceptions and expectations [2].

In the mobile internet era, focus has shifted to "platform affordances." Van Dijck (2013) argues that platforms use algorithms and interfaces to construct social ecologies and discipline online connection practices [3]. These affordances are typically categorized into dimensions like editability, association, visibility, and persistence [4].

Specific technical architectures decisively impact social interactions. For instance, location-based services (LBS) create hybrid spaces blending digital and physical realms for on-the-move connections [5], whereas algorithmic matching preconfigures social encounters by filtering profiles [6]. Ultimately, these elements transcend information flow to deeply intervene in users' self-presentation and interpersonal perception.

### **2.2 Intimate Relationships in the Digital Era**

The digital transformation of intimacy is a key issue intersecting communication and sociology. Baym (2015) argues that digital media profoundly alter the formation, maintenance, and dissolution of relationships, emphasizing the need to consider both technological and socio-personal contexts. [7] This provides a critical theoretical basis for analyzing platform affordances and intimacy in this study.

Sociologically, Illouz's (2007) concept of "emotional capitalism" highlights how emotions become exchangeable resources, with platforms constructing intimacy through ritualized signal exchanges. [8] Building on this, Cao and Sun (2025) reveal how monetization logics permeate the platformized rituals of digital dating.[9]

Chinese scholars also highlight this reshaping effect. Zhang Xuelin notes an "intimacy famine" driven by platform affordances and capital logics, where relationship overload coexists with emotional deficit. [10] Similarly, Zhang Zhonglei conceptualizes intimacy as a capitalizable resource, suggesting it is now deeply embedded in platform technologies and capital rather than remaining purely private.[11]

Finally, examining the commodification of intimacy, Szulc criticizes dating apps for

commodifying relationships and offering an illusory sense of choice. This directly informs the risk dimension of platformized intimacy addressed in this study.[12]

### 2.3 Stranger-Socializing Platforms and Youth Emotional Practices

Stranger-socializing platforms are crucial arenas for youth relationship-building. In Western contexts, research on apps like Tinder focuses on relationship commodification and the technological restructuring of emotional scripts. Scholars note that swiping interfaces accelerate Bauman's "liquid love," reducing potential partners to visual commodities and generating consumerist tendencies and choice anxiety [13].

Research on Chinese platforms is also growing. Ding et al. (2025) explore "platform migration," finding that youth initially match on stranger-socializing platforms based on appearance or talent before moving to acquaintance-based apps to deepen bonds [14]. Another study uses imagined affordances to examine bidirectional interactions between platforms and highly educated users on Qingteng Zhilian [15]. These works provide empirical foundations for this study's focus on cross-platform practices and emotional negotiations between Soul and Momo.

Despite substantial findings on platform affordances, digital intimacy, and youth practices, few studies systematically compare different stranger-socializing platforms. Specifically, there is a lack of research on how distinct affordances translate into specific forms of intimacy via interaction scripts. This study addresses this gap by comparing Soul and Momo.

Consequently, this study proposes three core questions: (1) What affordance structures do Soul and Momo construct, and how do they differentially shape intimacy production? (2) How do Chinese young users perceive, adapt to, and strategically respond to these constraints in cross-platform practices? (3) What tensions emerge between platforms' implicit domination of intimacy and users' autonomous choices?

## 3. Research Design

To examine in depth how platform affordances differentially shape young users' practices of intimacy with strangers, this study adopts a qualitative research approach. Soul and Momo are selected as comparative cases, and the study combines semi-structured in-depth interviews with thematic analysis.

### 3.1 Case Selection: The Comparative Logic of Soul and Momo

Soul and Momo were selected because they represent contrasting product paradigms in China's stranger-socializing market. Soul offers "soul-based socializing," using anonymity and interest graphs to construct a de-visualized, emotion-oriented environment. Conversely, Momo relies on location-based services (LBS), emphasizing geographical proximity, visual presentation, and potential offline encounters. This fundamental opposition in design provides an ideal case for examining how distinct technological environments differentially shape intimacy. The comparison of the core product logic and design features of Soul and Momo is shown in Table 1.

At the same time, both platforms are leading actors in China's stranger-socializing market, and their core users are primarily young adults aged 22–30. This high degree of user homogeneity helps minimize the influence of user-group differences on the findings and enhances the scientific rigor of the comparative analysis.

Table 1: Comparison of Core Product Logics and Design Features of Soul and Momo

| Dimension of Comparison | Soul                                                                                                | Momo                                                                                                        |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Core Positioning        | Anonymous stranger social platform focused on soul matching                                         | Open stranger social platform based on geographic location                                                  |
| Core Design             | De-visualization, interest tags, soul matching, asynchronous deep chat                              | Geolocation, visual profile pages, nearby people, instant matching                                          |
| Information Display     | De-emphasizes appearance and location; highlights interests, moods, and opinions                    | Emphasizes appearance and location; highlights avatars, photos, and distance                                |
| Interaction Logic       | Text-based deep chat; emphasizes emotional and spiritual connection                                 | Instant small talk, voice/video chat; emphasizes rapid connection and offline conversion                    |
| Community Atmosphere    | Emphasizes spiritual resonance and emotional companionship; community norms encourage deep exchange | Emphasizes efficient matching and offline encounters; community atmosphere leans toward shallow interaction |

### 3.2 Data Collection: Semi-Structured In-Depth Interviews

This study employs purposive sampling with the following inclusion criteria:

- (1) Participants must be between 22 and 30 years old, as this is the core user group of stranger-socializing platforms.
- (2) Participants must have substantial usage experience with both Soul and Momo, with continuous use of each platform for no less than three months, so that they can clearly perceive the differences in design and social practice between the two platforms.
- (3) Participants should come from diverse occupational backgrounds in order to avoid cognitive bias arising from a single social perspective.

Ultimately, 25 young users were recruited as interviewees, including 9 men and 16 women. Their occupations included corporate employees, freelancers, postgraduate students at universities, and educational training teachers. Their platform usage duration ranged from 4 to 36 months. The basic information of the participants is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Basic Information of Participants

| ID  | Age | Gender | Occupation              | Duration of Dual-Platform Use  |
|-----|-----|--------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|
| S1  | 22  | Female | Student                 | Soul 3 years / Momo 1 year     |
| S2  | 24  | Female | Student                 | Soul 1.5 years / Momo 3 months |
| S3  | 25  | Female | Training teacher        | Soul 2 years / Momo 1 year     |
| S4  | 26  | Female | Corporate employee      | Soul 2 years / Momo 2 years    |
| S5  | 27  | Female | Freelancer              | Soul 6 months / Momo 2 months  |
| S6  | 28  | Female | Self-employed           | Soul 1 year / Momo 1 year      |
| S7  | 28  | Male   | Unemployed              | Soul 6 months / Momo 1 year    |
| S8  | 29  | Female | Freelancer              | Soul 6 months / Momo 2 months  |
| S9  | 30  | Female | Training practitioner   | Soul 1 year / Momo 1 year      |
| S10 | 28  | Male   | Healthcare practitioner | Soul 2 years / Momo 1 year     |

|     |    |        |                        |                                |
|-----|----|--------|------------------------|--------------------------------|
| S11 | 20 | Female | Student                | Soul 1.5 years / Momo 3 months |
| S12 | 25 | Female | Training teacher       | Soul 2 years / Momo 1 year     |
| S13 | 26 | Female | Corporate employee     | Soul 2 years / Momo 7 months   |
| S14 | 27 | Female | Freelancer             | Soul 6 months / Momo 2 months  |
| S15 | 29 | Female | Freelancer             | Soul 6 months / Momo 2 months  |
| S16 | 24 | Male   | Graduate student       | Soul 2.5 years / Momo 6 months |
| S17 | 25 | Male   | Internet programmer    | Soul 1.5 years / Momo 1 year   |
| S18 | 30 | Female | State-owned admin      | Soul 1.2 years / Momo 4 months |
| S19 | 26 | Male   | Designer               | Soul 1.8 years / Momo 1 year   |
| S20 | 24 | Female | Advertising planner    | Soul 2.2 years / Momo 5 months |
| S21 | 30 | Male   | Sales                  | Soul 8 months / Momo 2 years   |
| S22 | 23 | Male   | Exam preparation       | Soul 1 year / Momo 3 months    |
| S23 | 29 | Male   | Architectural engineer | Soul 7 months / Momo 1.2 years |
| S24 | 30 | Female | Coffee shop owner      | Soul 9 months / Momo 8 months  |
| S25 | 25 | Male   | Logistics management   | Soul 1.5 years / Momo 1 year   |

Conducted in January 2026, interviews were primarily online (occasionally face-to-face) and lasted 45–60 minutes. With consent, sessions were recorded and transcribed, yielding approximately 56,000 Chinese characters. Participants were anonymized and coded from 1 to 25. The semi-structured interview guide covered five core dimensions: platform-use motivations, self-presentation strategies, everyday matching experiences, trust and conflict management, and cross-platform migration experiences, allowing for flexible follow-up questions to uncover deeper perceptions.

### 3.3 Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis

Data analysis utilized NVivo 12 for three-level coding: initial coding, thematic categorization, and core theme extraction. To ensure validity and robustness, the study employed data triangulation and intercoder reliability checks. Strict ethical protocols, including informed consent and data confidentiality, were maintained, with all data used exclusively for academic purposes. The coding results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Three-Level Thematic Coding Scheme Based on “Platform Affordances and Intimate Relationship Construction”

| Core Theme (Level 1)                             | Sub-Theme (Level 2)   | Initial Codes (Level 3) Examples                                                                                                                 | Representative Interview Excerpts                                                                                                                  |
|--------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Differences in Platform Affordance Structures | Presentation Logic    | Visual appearance presentation, de-visualized virtual identity, avatar creation system experience, real photo display, self-packaging strategies | “On Soul, you don’t need to upload photos; you can just use the avatar you created, which reduces a lot of appearance anxiety...” (Participant S5) |
|                                                  | Connection Mechanisms | Interest mapping matching, personality test mechanisms, topic-triggering mechanisms, LBS matching, dynamic feed browsing                         | “On Soul, people write about their thoughts or moods, so there are more ways to find conversation starters.” (Participant S12)                     |
|                                                  | Interaction Rhythm    | Platform rhythm perception, screening efficiency evaluation, connection threshold perception, expectation of instant replies                     | “On Momo, it’s very direct; the pace is faster. Once matched, you quickly start talking about meeting up.” (Participant S3)                        |

|                                                                |                                     |                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2.<br>Differentiation<br>of Intimate<br>Relationship<br>Forms  | Rapid-Match<br>Relationships        | Rapid physical connection,<br>instrumental interaction,<br>short-term orientation, low<br>commitment, fast-food romance                                             | “On Momo, it’s basically about speed.<br>Everyone understands that implicitly.”<br>(Participant S9)                                                                                                      |
|                                                                | Deep-Constructed Relations          | Spiritual resonance orientation,<br>confidant/confessional<br>relationships, long-term emotional<br>connection, high-viscosity<br>interaction, emotional dependence | “On Soul, you can find a soulmate to talk<br>to deeply. We started by venting about life,<br>sharing interests and worldviews. It feels<br>more like deep spiritual companionship.”<br>(Participant S17) |
| 3.<br>Cross-Platform<br>Mobility and<br>Strategic<br>Practices | Platform<br>Selection<br>Logic      | Complementary functions of dual<br>platforms, switching social needs,<br>scenario-based switching                                                                   | “When I’m bored and just want to chat<br>casually, I use Soul. If I travel to another<br>city and want to find someone nearby for a<br>meal, I open Momo.” (Participant S21)                             |
|                                                                | Identity<br>Adjustment<br>Practices | Cross-platform migration<br>strategies, masked<br>self-presentation,<br>front-stage/back-stage identity<br>switching                                                | “If we hit it off, we usually move the<br>conversation to WeChat. It feels like the<br>first step toward bringing the relationship<br>into real life.” (Participant S8)                                  |
|                                                                | Platformized<br>Paradox             | Reproduction of “social islands,”<br>emotional consumerist fatigue,<br>sense of nothingness, and<br>algorithmic disembedding                                        | “The more I swipe, the emptier I feel.<br>Although I matched with many people, it<br>seems no one can truly enter my heart. It’s<br>like being trapped by the algorithm.”<br>(Participant S14)           |

#### 4. “The Visible Body” and “The Speakable Soul”: Differences in Platform Affordances between Soul and Momo

The study finds that platform affordance is a relational configuration embedded in a platform’s commercial logic and social philosophy. Across three dimensions—presentation, connection, and temporal rhythm—Soul and Momo construct sharply different affordance structures, and this difference constitutes the technical precondition for the divergence of two forms of intimacy.

##### 4.1 Differences in Presentation: Geographical-Visual Exposure vs. Interest-Narrative Projection

Momo’s presentation logic centers on geographical visualization and body-image display. Through LBS technology, the platform anchors users in physical space, displays distances, and sorts users by proximity. Profiles are organized around real photographs, forming a visually centered mode of self-presentation. As Respondent 9 noted, self-presentation on Momo is highly dependent on visual screening: *“On Momo, people really pay more attention to what catches the eye at first glance. Whether it is the avatar profile or the photos and videos one uploads, there is a tendency to make oneself look better, more polished.”* In this way, users are reduced to visual objects in geographical space, and the possibility of a relationship is compressed into two variables: proximity and physical attractiveness.

By contrast, Soul constructs a de-visualized anonymous mechanism based on interest narratives. The platform adopts an avatar-free mode in which users create virtual identities and begin interaction through psychological tests and interest tags. Users’ moments, textual expressions, and tags together form a de-bodying, narrative mode of self-presentation. Respondent 20 expressed a clear preference for this anonymous design: *“Soul gives you a very mysterious feeling; everyone is*

quite mysterious. However, I actually prefer this thoroughly anonymous socializing... If I want to get to know people online, I want to recognize them through interest tags or viewpoint tags.” On Soul, the speakable soul replaces the visible body, shifting self-presentation from bodily appearance to textual narration and interest projection.

#### 4.2 Differences in Connection: Proximity-Based Rapid Matching vs. Spiritual Deep Connection

The difference in presentation logic further shapes how connections are formed on each platform.

Momo primarily relies on spatial proximity for instant matching. Users browse the “people nearby” list, swipe quickly, and initiate conversations immediately. Connection is triggered by dual screening based on proximity and acceptable appearance, reflecting a clear efficiency orientation. As Respondent 7 explained: *“Because the threshold for initiating contact on Momo is so low, it is very easy to say hello, but the quality of connections is generally very poor. Sometimes I swipe through more than a dozen people at once, but in the end, only one or two can actually hold a few exchanges. Moreover, most opening lines are asking ‘Where are you?’ or ‘Want to meet up?’ It is hard to really build any deep connection.”* This mechanism reduces encounters to a linear process of screening, matching, and contact: low in threshold but unstable in quality, and oriented toward the rapid consumption of nearby social resources.

By contrast, Soul is built on algorithm-driven spiritual matching. Rather than depending on proximity or visual screening, it connects users through interest matching, soul tests, and shared tags. The starting point of connection is not where one is or what one looks like, but shared interests and ways of thinking. As Respondent 2 said: *“The person I’m talking to the most right now was actually someone the platform recommended to me. I saw that he had posted something about a historical film, and I’m pretty interested in that period too, so I just used that to start chatting with him. Then we ended up talking for a long time about whether the film was true to history and the logic behind that period. I feel like when you keep talking with someone around a shared topic, you can kind of tell whether your values click. That feels a lot more trustworthy than getting to know someone just through photos or location.”* This shows that Soul builds initial bonds through shared topics, accumulates trust through narrative exchange, and gradually moves toward deeper relationships. Its algorithmic mechanism also weakens the importance of physical distance and places greater emphasis on spiritual resonance.

#### 4.3 Differences in Temporal Rhythm: Instant Consumerist Browsing vs. Delayed Narrative Writing

Together, the logics of presentation and connection shape the temporal rhythm of interaction. Momo’s interface encourages instant consumerist browsing. Because information is disclosed in a highly direct manner, users’ screening process becomes characterized by frequent, rapid, consumer-like behavior. As Respondent 25 said: *“Swiping on Momo feels like shopping in an online supermarket. If a photo does not appeal to the person or is too far away, I swipe past in a second. Even chat openers have to be direct enough. If the other person does not state their purpose clearly in two messages, or replies too slowly, everyone will immediately look for the next target.”* This is a typical fast-paced, short-cycle rhythm in which relationship-building remains within a high-turnover, fast-consumption mode.

By contrast, Soul, through its Square and Moments features, cultivates a slower rhythm of delayed narrative writing. Users often post long texts, voice cards, or emotional fragments in the Square section with the intention of confession or self-disclosure. As Respondent 9 noted:

*“Chatting on Soul often starts by looking through the other person’s Moments. Since there are no real photos, you have to read their posts or look at their interest tags to piece together this person’s character bit by bit. This kind of communication rhythm is relatively slow, and it requires patience to build up through text.”* Through this design of delayed gratification, Soul stretches the feedback cycle of interaction and creates a buffer for deeper textual and emotional exchange. However, this slowness is also a strong form of platform shaping: the more time users invest in Soul, the higher their sunk costs become, and the more costly it is to exit.

## **5. How Platform Affordances Shape Intimate Relationships: The Differentiation of Two Relationship Forms**

The differences in platform affordance do not stop at the level of user experience. Through the embedded interaction scripts, they are translated into concrete forms of intimate relationships. Momo and Soul, respectively, give rise to two sharply different relationship types: “rapid-match” intimacy and “deep-construct” intimacy.

### **5.1 “Rapid-Match” Intimacy: Temporality and Substitutability**

The intimate relationships constructed on Momo exhibit a pronounced rapid-match character. This form of relationship is marked by instantaneity, superficiality, and substitutability as its core features.

Instantaneity is reflected in the extreme compression of the relationship lifecycle. On Momo, a relationship can be established and broken within a matter of hours or even minutes. As Respondent 6 put it: *“Relationships formed on Momo are actually very fragile, because the threshold and cost of getting to know a new person are really low. If my conversation with someone is awkward, or if I feel that the other person replies too slowly, I can leave the chat box and match with the next person, without even needing to explain anything.”* This instantaneity stems from the platform’s low threshold for connection: users bear no exit cost, and the end of a relationship can be accomplished simply by “not replying.”

At the same time, this relationship form is accompanied by a shallow level of emotional investment, reflected in the scarcity of emotional commitment and the absence of deep self-disclosure. Conversations on Momo often remain at the level of information exchange, lacking the motivation to move toward deeper interaction. As Respondent 11 noted: *“The people who initiate conversations with me on Momo are basically those nearby people recommended by the system, but their opening lines are usually very simple and direct, like asking how old you are, which district you are in, or whether you are free tonight.”* This superficiality is both the result of user choice and the consequence of platform design. When relationship formation depends entirely on the instantaneous matching of appearance and location, there is neither a need nor a space for deep self-disclosure.

Substitutability is the most central feature of rapid-match relationships. Under Momo’s logic of unlimited supply, any relationship can be quickly replaced by the next one. Respondent 21 described a similar experience: *“Sometimes on social platforms, you just really do not know what to say... neither side is that interested, so it just fizzles out; there are quite a lot of people like that.”* This substitutability turns intimate relationships into an endlessly consumable emotional commodity. Users remain in the expectation that “the next one might be better.” However, in doing so, they lose patience and the capacity to cultivate any single relationship in depth. The interaction model constructed by Momo is essentially an emotional consumption chain composed of screening, matching, consumption, and discarding. In this chain, users’ autonomy is dramatically amplified: they can freely choose who enters their social world, when, and in what way. However, this very

freedom of choice simultaneously confines intimacy to a predesigned track of efficient, rapid matching. Each choice the user makes is merely a selection among platform-defined options, and the platform's implicit domination of relationship form is quietly accomplished in this process.

## 5.2 “Deep-Construct” Intimacy: Narrativity and Anticipation

By contrast, Soul's de-visualized interest-based recommendation mechanism cultivates a deep-construct form of intimate relationship characterized by weak selection and deep construction. Its core features are a narrative prelude, delayed gratification, and deep anticipation.

Narrative prelude means that sufficient information accumulation has already taken place before the relationship is formed. On Soul, users do not appear as minimalist profiles of “photo + distance,” but rather as narrative texts composed of “Moments + tags + test results.” As Respondent 22 explained: *“On Soul, people write down thoughts or moods, which means there are more places to find conversation topics. Even though you cannot see the other person's face, through the language they use, you feel that they are a more three-dimensional person.”* This narrative prelude enables users to form a relatively complete cognitive image of the other person before entering a private conversation.

Delayed gratification is reflected in the slow pace of relationship formation and the relatively high sunk costs involved. Soul's design deliberately slows down the process from matching to deep connection; users must sustain interaction and build trust before the relationship can move forward gradually. As Respondent 9 remarked: *“Matching on Soul lasts longer, and that really filters out some people effectively, truly making it what I think is useful and effective socializing.”* This delayed gratification causes relationships to carry more emotional investment: once users have spent time and energy, they are more likely to maintain the relationship rather than abandon it easily.

Deep-construct relationships often carry a profound expectation of soul resonance. Relationships formed on Soul tend to be infused with an imagination that transcends immediate connection. What users desire is not merely fleeting companionship or instant gratification, but a stable bond akin to “soul resonance.” As Respondent 16 stated: *“On Soul, people usually just chat. Even if they have known each other for a long time, both sides may still not know what the other looks like or where the other is. However, this kind of interaction can provide a very pure form of emotional companionship. Especially when you are under work pressure or feeling low and want someone to talk to, you can always receive very gentle comfort here. This gives me an expectation that if the relationship eventually moves offline, it will also be very solid.”*

## 5.3 From Platform Mechanisms to Relationship Forms: The Pathway of Intimate Relationship Construction

The above analysis reveals the transformation pathway from platform affordances to forms of intimate relationships. Through the internalization of interaction scripts and the stabilization of relational practice, platform technical design ultimately leads to the differentiation of intimacy.

Momo's geographical-visual exposure affordance embeds an efficiency-oriented screening script, encouraging users to browse quickly, judge quickly, and decide quickly. This script is repeatedly enacted and continuously reinforced in practice, eventually solidifying into a rapid-match relationship model: relationship formation depends on instant judgment, relationship maintenance lacks deeper motivation, and relationship termination incurs no cost. Users are not passive recipients in this process; they may freely choose whether to swipe or not, whether to chat or not. However, every one of their choices takes place within a preconfigured platform framework.

Soul's interest-narrative projection affordance, by contrast, embeds a meaning-oriented

performative script, encouraging users to post content, accumulate a profile, and proceed gradually. This script is likewise internalized and repeatedly enacted by users, eventually stabilizing into a deep-construct relationship model: relationship formation requires a narrative prelude, relationship maintenance depends on emotional investment, and relationship termination is accompanied by sunk costs. Users similarly retain a degree of choice: they can decide what content to post, whom to match with, and how much time to invest. However, these choices are also constrained within the platform's predesigned slow-socializing trajectory.

The difference between these two scripts reveals a deeper mechanism: through the inscription of interaction scripts, platforms fundamentally define what kinds of relationships are possible. Every interaction on the platform quietly accepts and reproduces the platform's pre-set logic of social engagement. Moreover, this pre-set logic itself is a manifestation of the platform's business model: Momo requires rapid matching to maintain user activity, while Soul requires long-term retention and sustained engagement to enhance stickiness. The differentiation of intimate relationship forms ultimately serves the platform's economic logic.

It is therefore clear that platform affordance does not directly determine relationship forms. Rather, through the mediating role of interaction scripts, it completes the transformation from technological mechanism to relational form. Platform technical architecture implicitly writes social interaction rules into the system, thereby shaping the intimate relationship patterns of young users.

## **6. Young Users' Choices in Cross-Platform Movement: Strategic Trade-offs among Platform Affordances**

At the same time, young users do not passively remain confined to a single platform; rather, they engage in strategic circulation between Soul and Momo, as well as across the broader social media ecosystem. This mobility is both an agentic attempt to break free from the constraints of any single platform's affordance structure and, at the same time, a revelation of the deeper paradox of platformized intimacy.

### **6.1 Platform Choice under Different Intimate Needs**

Young users' platform choices display a clear pattern of need differentiation: different emotional needs are directed toward different platforms, and each platform occupies a distinct functional position in users' minds. For those seeking immediate companionship and rapid social interaction, Momo offers the most direct entry point. Respondent 2 frankly stated: *"Momo is simpler, more direct, and more straightforward. As long as you want to chat, you can talk to people nearby. For example, if I am bored at home right now and really need someone to chat with, I might choose Momo."* In this context, Momo is positioned as an "emotional convenience store," where users seek immediate emotional replenishment rather than long-term relational commitment.

For those pursuing deep connection and spiritual resonance, Soul becomes the preferred choice. Respondent 17 described it this way: *"On Soul, people can keep talking because of a topic... relationships built through that are more stable than those based simply on matching location. Soul feels more privacy-oriented. Although its matching efficiency is lower, it can still bring surprises."* It is precisely this element of "surprise" that makes a deep connection possible. Notably, many users do not make a binary choice between Momo and Soul; instead, they switch between platforms according to their emotional state at different times. Respondent 2 used stranger-socializing platforms while single to meet new friends, but stopped once in a relationship. Respondent 8 also re-downloaded stranger-socializing apps after a breakup in order to distract herself and redirect her attention.

## 6.2 Relational Practices and Identity Adjustments in Cross-Platform Use

Cross-platform mobility involves not only strategic switching between platforms, but also adjustments in relational practice and identity presentation. Many young users develop a pathway of cross-platform migration that begins with screening and matching on an initial platform, moves to acquaintance-based social tools for everyday consolidation, and ultimately shifts toward embodied offline interaction. However, in this process, the relational imprint of the initial platform continues to shape subsequent relationship trajectories.

At the level of relational practice, users must continually adjust their interaction rhythm and expectation management under the technical norms of different platforms. On Momo, relationship development follows a highly compressed and minimalist route: rapid matching, brief probing, and then an immediate decision about whether to meet or end contact. There is almost no room for detour, and visual attractiveness becomes the most important threshold. By contrast, relationship progression on Soul is much longer. It typically involves successful matching, sustained conversation, gradual accumulation of trust, exchange of additional contact information, and only then, perhaps, an offline meeting; failure at any point along this chain may cause the relationship to collapse. As Respondent 5 explained when comparing the two platforms: *“On Momo, I mainly browse nearby people’s updates. If I see photos or posts that interest me, I can send a direct private message. If the other person replies, then we start talking. If, after a few exchanges, there is no intention to meet, I will not keep chatting. On Soul, I prefer using the matching function. For people the system recommends, I first look at their profiles and what they have written, then use one of their Moments or interest tags to start a topic. That way, even if there is no strong visual attraction at the beginning, we can still keep talking slowly because of shared topics.”* This strategic shift from rapid matching to slow chatting requires users to adjust their communication habits across platforms repeatedly: on Momo, they must become accustomed to fast rejection or fast responses; on Soul, they must tolerate initial uncertainty and a gradual process of building familiarity.

At the level of identity presentation, users’ self-performance also differs systematically across the two platforms. On Momo, users generally place visual presentation first, carefully selecting the most attractive photographs, because the platform’s interaction logic depends heavily on instant impressions. On Soul, by contrast, users pay more attention to the crafting of textual introductions, interest tags, and daily “Moments” updates, shaping a more layered virtual persona through the sustained production of readable content. As Respondent 7 said: *“I spent a lot of time writing a long personal bio, listing my hobbies, what books and movies I like, and what I expect from relationships. My purpose was actually not to attract more people to chat with me, but to screen out those who immediately ask ‘Are you up for it?’ or who speak very casually. Because the text was written so specifically, the people who actually read it carefully before messaging me were usually more patient and more willing to communicate on a spiritual level, which saved me a lot of useless screening.”* This identity adjustment shows that users do not present a single authentic or unified self across all platforms. Rather, they construct different platformed selves according to the affordance requirements of each platform.

## 6.3 The Paradox and Tensions of Platformized Intimacy

This apparently high-agency cross-platform mobility reveals a common paradox of platformized intimacy in China’s stranger-socializing ecosystem: the more strategically users move between platforms to satisfy diverse emotional needs, the more intimacy itself is broken down into functional modules that different platforms can separately fulfill; intimacy is thereby platformized.

The first dimension of this paradox is the coexistence of choice overload and depth scarcity. Under this logic, users must not only endure the rejection and interpersonal coldness produced by

rapid filtering on Momo but also bear the fantasy collapse and substantial relational barriers that emerge when de-visualized conversations on Soul move toward offline reality. Platforms offer users near-infinite matching possibilities. Respondent 18 admitted that she had hundreds of matches on Soul, yet this abundance of supply instead eroded the possibility of a deep connection. *“At the beginning, maybe you chat with many people in one day, but later you start to feel that it is all just meaningless socializing. The more you chat, the more... after that lively atmosphere, I feel it brings everyone even greater emptiness,”* said Respondent 14. The expansion of choice does not improve relationship quality; instead, it generates widespread emotional fatigue.

The second dimension of this paradox is the dialectical unity of agency and domination. Users' strategic mobility across platforms appears to be an active breakthrough against platform constraints; they refuse to be fully captured by any single platform's logic of interaction. However, this mobility itself is another expression of platformized logic. Every choice users make—such as which platform to use, which relational mode to adopt, and when to enter or exit—takes place within the range of options preconfigured by the platform. As Respondent 22 observed: *“As long as you want to keep using it, you have to stay under the control of the algorithm. These social platforms... if you look at them too much, you get tired, but after a while, you still feel lonely, so you start using them again.”* Users' choices continue to circulate within platform-defined trajectories. Their agency does not escape platform domination; rather, it is reabsorbed into the operational logic of the platform itself.

## 7. Conclusion and Discussion

This study demonstrates that stranger-socializing platforms' technical architectures act as interaction scripts, directly producing distinct forms of intimacy. Specifically, Momo's affordances of geographical proximity and visual exposure construct an efficiency-oriented screening script, reducing bodies and physical distance to quantifiable, consumable data.

Theoretically, the reconstruction of digital intimacy entails profound "digital folding" and technological alienation. Beyond viewing these apps merely as havens of individualization or consumerism, this study reveals how platforms discipline emotional labor, turning intimacy into an algorithmic product. Both Momo's visually optimized avatars and Soul's tag-assembled "personas" constitute self-commodification under emotional capitalism. To secure connections, individuals perform intensive digital emotional labor, which exhausts their energy and "folds" spontaneous romance into platform-prescribed matching formulas.

Furthermore, platformized intimacy intensifies the youth's paradox of "intimacy famine" [10]. Momo offers the illusion of endless choice but deepens interpersonal indifference, whereas Soul's spiritual refuge often shatters upon offline embodiment. Users' exhausting cross-platform mobility does not alleviate loneliness; rather, it fragments emotional experiences into two extremes—rapid physical matching and purely spiritual chatter—revealing deep algorithmic and commercial manipulation of human emotion.

Ultimately, intimate interactions emerge from a dynamic negotiation between user agency and platforms' material architectures. Understanding digital love requires examining the media ecology of codes, interfaces, and algorithms. Platforms must therefore transcend mere traffic optimization, assuming social responsibility to cultivate healthy, humanistic relational ecologies.

Limitations include a female-skewed sample, which may bias perspectives despite reflecting usage patterns. Additionally, focusing only on Soul and Momo excludes platforms like Tinder. Future research should expand platform cases and introduce variables like gender and generation to further explore the differentiated effects of affordances on intimacy construction.

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