

From Online Dating to Marriage: A Multi-Stage Model of Intimate Relationship Development among Generation Z in Nanjing

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how Generation Z in Nanjing, China, moves from online dating toward marriage. Unlike studies that focus only on matching efficiency, personal preferences, or platform algorithms, this study understands online dating as a relationship-development process embedded in family ethics, social evaluation, and digital platform structures. Based on data from thirty Generation Z participants in Nanjing, including semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, the paper analyzes how participants present themselves on platforms, screen potential partners, build trust, respond to parental opinions, and ultimately judge whether a relationship can enter marriage. The study finds that the transformation from online dating to marriage is not a simple linear process from matching to marriage, but a multi-stage, recursive, and continuously negotiated process. This process broadly includes five stages: online interaction, offline meeting, relationship deepening, family involvement, and marriage decision-making. Each stage is jointly shaped by three forces: intrapersonal drivers, socio-cultural drivers, and technological platform drivers. Intrapersonal drivers involve intimacy needs, identity exploration, self-presentation, and marriage preparation; socio-cultural drivers involve filial piety, parental approval, peer evaluation, age pressure, and economic compatibility; technological platform drivers include algorithmic recommendation, filtering functions, identity verification, platform labels, and interaction rules.

The main contribution of this paper is to combine relationship development theory, computer-mediated communication theory, and Chinese family sociology to propose a dynamic model explaining how Generation Z moves from online dating to marriage. The findings show that digital platforms do not simply replace traditional courtship structures; rather, they re-embed these structures into new interactional settings. In seemingly free online choices, Generation Z still faces multiple constraints from family expectations, social respectability, economic stability, and platform rules. Therefore, the key issue in contemporary Chinese digital intimacy is not the disappearance of tradition or individual liberation, but the continuous rebalancing among individual autonomy, family scripts, and technological mediation.

Keywords: Online dating; Generation Z; Marriage; Identity formation; Filial piety; Family expectations; Platform mechanisms; Nanjing

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, online dating has shifted from a marginal way of making friends to an important route through which young people form intimate relationships. Mobile internet, social media, and algorithmic recommendation systems have changed how people encounter potential partners and have also altered the rhythm through which intimate relationships move from initiation and testing to stable commitment (Wu & Trottier, 2022; Vogels & McClain, 2023). For Generation Z, using online platforms is not only a way to meet more people. It is also often a way to find a more efficient and controllable relational entry point within limited urban social circles, busy work schedules, and increasingly delayed marriage and childbearing timetables. However, online dating does not mean that relationship formation has become entirely a matter of individual choice. In the Chinese context in particular, marriage still has clear family and social attributes (Wang & Guo, 2024). When selecting partners, many young people consider not only emotional attraction, shared interests, and

communication comfort, but also whether parents will approve, whether the other party's family background is suitable, whether occupation and income are stable, and whether housing conditions can support long-term life. In other words, even when a relationship begins on a digital platform, marriage judgment still has to pass through the tests of family, economy, and social norms (Liu & Mu, 2023; Yu et al., 2026). Nanjing, as a city with a relatively high level of economic development, a fast urban rhythm, and concentrated educational resources and employment opportunities, provides a typical setting for understanding this phenomenon. On the one hand, Generation Z youth in Nanjing have strong digital media competence and are familiar with platform filtering, profile editing, migration to social media, and transitions between online and offline interaction (Zhang, 2026). On the other hand, they are also situated at the intersection of parental marriage pressure, age labels, housing-price pressure, occupational competition, and peer comparison. Online dating therefore becomes a complex practice: it provides freedom of choice while amplifying choice anxiety, and it reduces the cost of meeting while increasing the cost of trust (Gao et al., 2024; Thomas et al., 2023).

Existing studies have discussed self-presentation, algorithmic matching, communication patterns, and risk in online dating, yet many remain focused on a single link in the process (Dai & Xia, 2025; Degen & Kleeberg-Niepage, 2023; Wu & Trottier, 2022). Some studies examine how users package their profiles, some focus on how platforms influence matching outcomes, and others discuss how online interaction affects offline meetings. By contrast, research that traces the process from online acquaintance all the way to marriage decision-making remains insufficient, especially research that places Chinese family culture, intergenerational relations, and platform mechanisms within the same explanatory model (Liu et al., 2022; Liu & Lin, 2023; Liu & Mu, 2023). This paper responds to that gap. Following the writing logic of the reference article, which first proposes theoretical mechanisms and then verifies them through methods and findings, this paper does not treat online dating as a simple tool problem. Instead, it treats it as a process through which intimate relationships become institutionalized in the digital age. The paper asks: How do members of Generation Z transform relationships with strangers on platforms into stable relationships with marital possibility? In this process, what factors promote or hinder relational progress? How do family culture, individual desire, and platform mechanisms interact with one another?

Around these questions, this paper proposes three research objectives. First, it analyzes the main factors influencing Generation Z in Nanjing to use online dating in search of marriage. Second, it reveals the core challenges they encounter in using platforms (Gao et al., 2024; Thomas et al., 2023). Third, it constructs a multi-stage relationship development model that explains the transition from online dating to marriage. Through these three objectives, the paper argues that online dating is not the opposite of traditional courtship and marriage; rather, it is the reorganization of traditional courtship and marriage logic in a digital environment (Liu et al., 2022; Liu & Lin, 2023; Wu & Trottier, 2022).

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Research on online dating first involves self-presentation in computer-mediated communication. Walther's hyperpersonal communication model points out that, in online environments, reduced nonverbal cues, editable information presentation, and controllable interaction rhythms make individuals more likely to engage in selective self-presentation and to form idealized impressions of interaction partners. On dating platforms, photos, occupation, education, interest tags, and a short self-introduction can all become the basis on which others decide whether to continue communicating (Dai & Xia, 2025; Degen & Kleeberg-Niepage, 2023). A profile page is therefore not a simple collection of objective information, but a strategically processed front stage. This front-stage presentation is closely related to Goffman's dramaturgical theory (O'Boyle, 2022). Online dating users need to arrange the image they want to display according to platform atmosphere, target audiences, and anticipated evaluation. For example, on marriage-oriented platforms, stable occupation, family values, responsibility, and long-term planning are more likely to be emphasized; on platforms with stronger social attributes, lifestyle, hobbies, humor, and physical attractiveness may receive greater attention. Users do not completely fabricate the self, but selectively combine authenticity, ideals, and social expectations (Degen & Kleeberg-Niepage, 2023; Zhao et al., 2022).

Relationship development theory provides a second perspective for understanding how online dating moves toward marriage. Knapp's relationship development model understands relational progress as a staged process from initiating and experimenting to intensifying, integrating, and bonding (O'Boyle, 2022). This model helps conceptualize intimate relationships as dynamic processes rather than static states. However, the traditional model is mainly based on face-to-face interaction and pays less attention to new elements such as platform algorithms, online profiles, asynchronous communication, video verification, and migration to social media. In online dating, the early stages of relationship development may be compressed: users may exchange substantial information, form preliminary emotional expectations, and complete a degree of value screening before meeting (Minei & Juvan, 2023). At the same time, online relationships are more likely to move backward. When offline meetings are inconsistent with online impressions, a relationship may end immediately; when parents object, an already deepened relationship may return to a stage of re-evaluation; when platforms continuously recommend new potential partners, users may continue comparing alternatives before an existing relationship becomes stable (Thomas et al., 2022; Wu & Trottier, 2022). Therefore, relationship development in online dating should not be understood as a one-way ladder, but rather as a cyclical process that is continually adjusted under multiple pressures (Liu & Mu, 2023; Xiong, 2023).

A third important perspective comes from Chinese family sociology. Fei Xiaotong's discussion of the differential mode of association reminds us that individuals in Chinese society are not isolated actors, but are embedded in networks ordered by relational distance and ethical responsibility. Marriage is especially so. It concerns not only individual happiness but also family respectability, intergenerational responsibility, and social recognition (Liu & Mu, 2023; Yu et al., 2026). For many participants, parental opinion is not an external intervention that appears only at the final stage of a relationship. Instead, it is already present as an implicit criterion from profile writing, partner screening, and chat evaluation onward. Filial piety appears in two forms in this process (Qiu, 2023). Explicit filial piety is expressed in listening to parental opinions and respecting parents' judgments about family background and economic conditions. Implicit filial piety is expressed when young people actively anticipate which partners their parents may accept or reject and adjust their choices accordingly (Chen, 2023). In other words, parents may not directly intervene in platform use every day, but their value standards are internalized in advance and become part of partner screening and self-presentation (Liu & Lin, 2023; Xiong, 2023).

The reference article's discussion of social identity and self-categorization is also illuminating for this study. That research suggests that niche dating websites activate users' identification with shared identities and affect dating intentions through in-group trust and normative fit (Cui et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2022). Although this paper is not an experimental study, the dissertation data show that Generation Z in Nanjing also judges whether potential partners are reliable according to certain social categories, such as whether education levels match, whether occupation is stable, whether the person demonstrates marital sincerity, and whether the person fits the family-approved image of a serious partner (Bates, 2022). This indicates that trust in online dating does not derive solely from personal charm, but also from judgments about social categories and normative fit (Liu & Mu, 2023; Yu et al., 2026).

Synthesizing the above literature, this paper adopts a threefold analytical framework. The first dimension is intrapersonal, focusing on users' emotional needs, identity exploration, self-presentation, marriage intention, and risk perception (O'Boyle, 2022). The second is socio-cultural, focusing on family expectations, filial pressure, peer evaluation, age labels, economic conditions, and marital respectability (Liu & Mu, 2023; Xiong, 2023; Yu et al., 2026). The third is technological-platform-related, focusing on algorithmic recommendation, filtering mechanisms, profile labels, verification functions, and platform atmosphere. This paper argues that the key to online dating's movement toward marriage lies not in any single dimension, but in how the three dimensions support, constrain, and regulate one another (Dai & Xia, 2025; Wu & Trottier, 2022).

METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a qualitative research design. The data come from interview materials in the larger dissertation project on online dating and marital relationships among Generation Z in Nanjing. A qualitative method is suitable because the study is not concerned with the statistical effect of a single variable on marriage intention,

but with how participants understand their platform use, explain family and social pressure, make judgments during relational progress, and transform digital interaction into real-life commitment. The participants were thirty Chinese members of Generation Z who live, study, or work in Nanjing and who have experience using online dating platforms for serious or marriage-oriented relationships. The sample includes participants of different genders, educational backgrounds, occupational types, and platform-use experiences. This sample structure helps identify common mechanisms of online dating across different social positions and shows how occupation, education, age, and family background influence individual practice.

Data collection included semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Semi-structured interviews were mainly used to gain an in-depth understanding of personal experiences, such as why participants began using online dating, how they edited profiles, how they judged whether the other person was sincere, when they were willing to meet offline, and how they introduced a partner to parents. Focus group discussions were more suitable for capturing shared standards among peers, such as which platforms are more reliable, which profile signals indicate seriousness, how risks are identified, and how friends' opinions influence choices. Interviews and discussions revolved around several themes: motivations for platform use, self-presentation strategies, partner-screening criteria, transitions between online and offline interaction, trust building, family involvement, economic conditions, age pressure, platform risks, and marriage decision-making. After organization, all materials were analyzed thematically. The analytical process included open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Open coding identified initial concepts such as identity presentation, authenticity negotiation, parental approval, peer comparison, property pressure, platform filtering, and privacy risk. Axial coding grouped these concepts into higher-level themes. Selective coding further integrated three types of drivers and a five-stage relationship path. To strengthen credibility, the presentation of findings combines individual interviews and focus group materials, and uses tables to display participant structure, thematic coding, and representative quotations. It should be noted that this paper does not claim that thirty participants can represent all Chinese Generation Z. Rather, through the Nanjing case, it proposes an explanatory analytical model as a basis for later comparative research and quantitative testing.

Table 1. Overview of Participant Sample (compiled from the participant information table in the larger dissertation)

Dimension	Sample Characteristics	Research Significance
Sample size	Thirty Generation Z online dating users in Nanjing	Ensures that the data cover different platform experiences and relationship stages
Age range	Mainly 25 to 30 years old	Corresponds to the key stage at which Generation Z enters serious relationships and marriage decision-making
Gender structure	Both men and women included	Helps observe gender differences in housing, age, safety, and family pressure
Educational background	Mainly bachelor's and master's degree holders	Reflects urban youths' awareness of educational compatibility in online dating and marriage
Occupational types	Education, IT, finance, marketing, public administration, research, and others	Shows how occupational stability enters partner-selection judgments
Platforms used	Baihe, Jiayuan, Tantan, and others	Shows different interaction scripts between marriage-oriented and social-oriented platforms
Use experience	Most participants had more than one year of platform-use experience	Ensures that participants can reflect on online-offline transition and trust building
Core behavioral features	Selective self-presentation, rational screening, internalization of family expectations, peer comparison, and risk verification	Forms the empirical basis for the three-driver model and five-stage process model

RESULTS

The findings show that Generation Z in Nanjing uses online dating to move toward marriage through a process that can be summarized as multi-stage progression and three-driver balance. Multi-stage progression means that relationships generally pass through five stages: online interaction, offline meeting, relationship deepening, family involvement, and marriage decision-making. Three-driver balance means that each stage is influenced by intrapersonal, socio-cultural, and technological-platform forces. Only when the three forces reach an acceptable balance to some extent can a relationship continue to develop toward marriage.

First, the online interaction stage is not simple chatting, but a highly strategic process of identity presentation and preliminary screening (Degen & Kleeberg-Niepage, 2023; Zhao et al., 2022). Participants adjust profile content according to platform attributes. On marriage-oriented platforms such as Baihe and Jiayuan, they are more willing to highlight work stability, educational background, family values, and future plans. On platforms with stronger social attributes, such as Tantan and Momo, they display more interests, lifestyles, and social attractiveness (Chen, 2024). This shows that platforms themselves provide different interaction scripts, and users adjust the self according to these scripts. Second, the offline meeting stage performs the function of reality testing. Many participants stated that online profiles only show what a person is willing to display, whereas offline meetings allow them to observe tone, behavior, punctuality, attitudes toward service workers, and whether communication feels natural (Derakhshan & Lalli, 2025). Offline meetings test not only the other person but also require participants to recalibrate their own online image. If online presentation is overly idealized, offline interaction may produce embarrassment and distrust. Third, the relationship-deepening stage brings emotional and practical issues to the surface at the same time (Guo & Peng, 2025). Participants no longer focus only on whether they can chat comfortably, but begin to discuss work plans, housing arrangements, family division of labor, whether to have children, financial views, and relations with both sets of parents. This stage reflects the duality of Generation Z's views on love and marriage: they value emotional comfort and shared growth, while also acknowledging that marriage requires practical conditions and long-term cooperation (Mostafapour & Asgari, 2025). Fourth, family involvement is a key node in the Chinese context when online dating moves toward marriage. Even if the relationship begins on a platform, marital legitimacy still requires family approval. Participants often adopt gradual strategies, such as first showing parents the other person's occupation, education, and family background before arranging a formal meeting; or, when parents may object, first emphasizing the other person's stability and sense of responsibility to reduce conflict (Revheim & Heggdalsvik, 2025). Fifth, marriage decision-making is a comprehensive evaluation based on multiple standards. Participants ask not only whether they like the other person, but also whether both families can accept the relationship, whether economic plans are feasible, whether long-term life is compatible, and whether trust built on the platform can withstand the test of reality. Marriage decision-making is therefore not the natural maturation of love, but the result of the combined effects of emotion, responsibility, family, economy, and social evaluation (Liu & Mu, 2023; Yu et al., 2026).

Factors Influencing the Maritalization of Online Dating

The first factor is identity formation and self-presentation. Almost all participants realized that the platform profile is the first entrance through which others come to know them (Dai & Xia, 2025; Degen & Kleeberg-Niepage, 2023). Photos, occupation, education, interest tags, and written self-introductions are all given relational meaning. Participants avoid appearing overly casual, but also avoid seeming too utilitarian. They hope to present a self that is real but better: not completely false, yet sufficiently aligned with the expectations of potential partners and families. This self-presentation has an obvious multiple-audience character. Users do not display themselves only to potential partners; they also consider whether friends may see the profile, whether parents may evaluate it, and whether a future partner may forward it to others. One participant mentioned that on marriage-oriented platforms, they would emphasize career stability and family values because these contents make the other person and the other person's parents feel that they are reliable; on more relaxed social platforms, they would emphasize travel, films, and sports to appear more lively. Identity formation is also accompanied by authenticity negotiation. Participants generally do not want to admit that they fabricate themselves, but they do admit that they select information, such as choosing more formal photos, reducing interests that may cause

misunderstanding, emphasizing positive personality traits, and downplaying unstable factors. This strategy is not simple deception, but a response to platform competition, social evaluation, and marriage expectations (Degen & Kleeberg-Niepage, 2023; Zhao et al., 2022). The problem is that maintaining such an image over time can create emotional burden, making users feel that they are always being watched and judged.

The second factor is family cultural expectations and filial pressure. In the dissertation data, many participants repeatedly mentioned that whether parents would accept a partner affects their choices in advance (Liu & Mu, 2023; Yu et al., 2026). The other person's education, job, family background, housing status, and urban household registration may all be considered early in the relationship. Even when participants themselves value emotional compatibility more, it is difficult to completely ignore parental standards, because marriage eventually enters a family relationship network. Filial pressure does not always appear as direct command. More often, it works through daily reminders, comparisons with relatives, age anxiety, and a sense of family honor. Parents may not explicitly demand that their children choose a certain type of person, but they repeatedly emphasize stable work, matched family status, housing pressure, and marriageable age. To avoid future conflict, young people often exclude those who may fail family evaluation already at the platform-screening stage (Liu & Mu, 2023; Xiong, 2023).

The third factor is peer influence. Although Generation Z emphasizes personal choice, friendship groups play an important role in platform use (Gao et al., 2024; Wu & Trottier, 2022). Participants discuss with friends whether a platform is reliable, whether a person's profile is trustworthy, and whether a certain chatting style appears serious. Friends who successfully enter stable relationships through platforms encourage others to continue using them; friends who experience deception or awkward encounters increase group vigilance. Peer evaluation thus becomes an informal but powerful screening mechanism. Peer influence also affects self-presentation. Some participants refer to friends' photo styles, personal introductions, and partner-selection standards, and revise their own profiles according to friends' feedback. This practice shows that online dating is not a purely private act, but a social practice that is collectively observed, discussed, and normalized by peers (Degen & Kleeberg-Niepage, 2023; Wu & Trottier, 2022). Users hope to gain recognition from potential partners, but also want their choices to be understood and supported by friends.

The fourth factor is economic and structural conditions. As a large city, Nanjing gives housing, income, occupational stability, and educational background prominent importance in marriage judgments (Liu & Mu, 2023; Xiong, 2023; Yu et al., 2026). Many participants admitted that, when screening potential partners, they pay attention to whether the other person has stable work, the ability to buy a home, and whether family economic pressure is excessive. These standards sometimes seem utilitarian, but in participants' view they concern post-marital life risks and parental approval and therefore cannot be avoided. Platform mechanisms further amplify these economic indicators. Many platforms allow users to filter partners by education, occupation, income, property ownership, and region, turning originally vague social standards into technical options that can be checked and sorted. In this way, platforms improve screening efficiency while also giving relationships a strongly marketized and conditional character from the beginning (Dai & Xia, 2025; Wu & Trottier, 2022).

Table 2. Themes, Sub-themes and Codes

Thematic Analysis Table

Parent Theme	Sub-theme	Codes
Factors Influencing the Use of Online Dating for Marriage	Identity Formation and Self-Presentation	Strategic self-presentation
		Platform-specific presentation strategies
		Authenticity negotiation
		Emotional regulation

	Family Cultural Expectations and Filial Piety	Filial piety pressure
		Family expectations for marriage
		'Leftover age' pressure
	Social and Peer Influences	Peer influence
		Urban lifestyle and changing social circles
		Peer comparison in partner selection
	Economic and Structural Factors	Property ownership expectations
		Occupational stability
		Educational compatibility
		Betrothal gifts and marriage costs
		Platform matching mechanisms
Challenges in Using Online Dating for Marriage	Stigma and Social Judgment	Negative labeling of online dating
		Moral judgment
		Privacy concerns
		Social image management
	Identity Negotiation and Emotional Labor	Balancing real and ideal selves
		Emotional management in interaction
		Conflict avoidance strategies
	Trust and Safety Concerns	Authenticity verification
		Scam risks
		Information cross-verification
		Offline meeting for trust building
	Cultural and Generational Tensions	Generational differences in marriage values
		Autonomy in partner choice
		Parental intervention
		Digital-Traditional Marriage Tensions
Transition from Online Dating to Marriage	Drivers of the Transition	Intrapersonal drivers
		Socio-cultural drivers
		Technological drivers
	Stages of Relationship Development	Online interaction
		Offline meeting

		Relationship deepening
		Family involvement
		Marriage decision

Challenges in the Transition from Online Dating to Marriage

The first type of challenge is stigma and social evaluation. Although online dating has become increasingly common, many participants still worry about being seen as unable to find a partner in real life, taking a shortcut, or being insufficiently serious. Such evaluation does not necessarily come from strangers; it often appears in jokes made by relatives, colleagues, or even friends. These jokes seem light, but they affect participants' willingness to talk openly about platform use. Stigma makes participants more cautious in self-disclosure. Some are unwilling to publicly state on social media that they use marriage-oriented platforms, and some are unwilling to tell parents too early that they met a partner online. They worry that this mode of acquaintance will reduce the relationship's social recognition and even affect parents' initial impression of the partner. Therefore, online daters often need to provide additional proof of their own seriousness and the other person's reliability (Liu et al., 2022; Liu & Lin, 2023; Wu & Trottier, 2022).

The second challenge is privacy and social image management. Platform profiles may be screenshotted, forwarded, or seen by acquaintances, and chat content may also become risky after conflict. Participants therefore control visible information, avoid revealing too much about family, income, and specific address, and remain restrained when expressing emotion. Privacy management is both a safety strategy and a strategy for maintaining social image (Qu et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2022).

The third challenge is identity negotiation and emotional labor. Online interaction requires users to continuously maintain a positive, reliable, and attractive image. Even when tired, disappointed, or impatient, they often need to remain polite and patient to prevent the relationship from ending too early. Marriage-oriented users must also display maturity, responsibility, sincerity, and life planning. This long-term performance can create psychological exhaustion (Degen & Kleeberg-Niepage, 2023; Thomas et al., 2023).

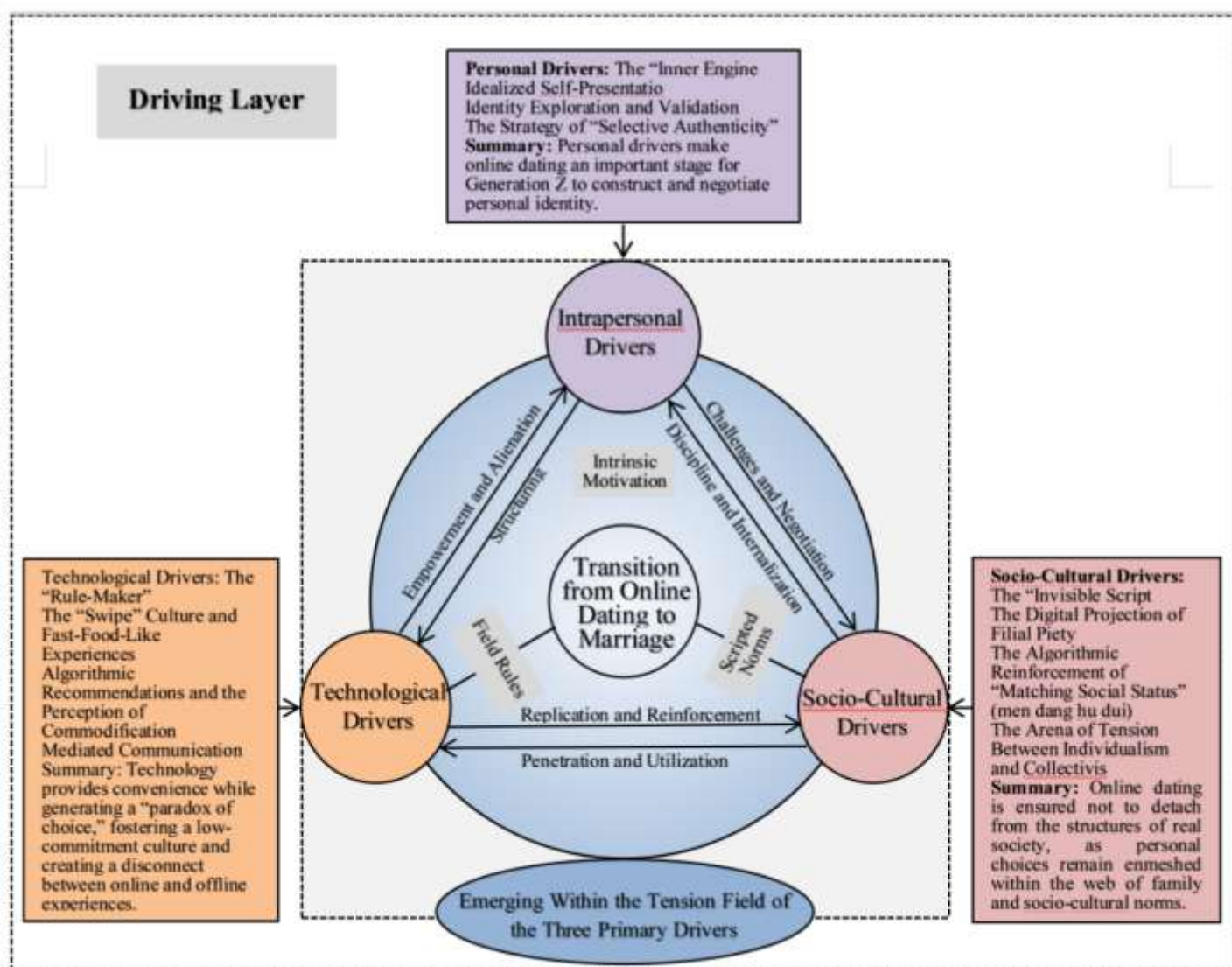
The fourth challenge is trust and safety. Participants generally recognize that online profiles may exaggerate, conceal, or even falsify information. To reduce risk, they observe whether the other person's answers are consistent, whether the person is willing to video chat, whether social media content matches, whether the person asks for money too early, and whether key questions are avoided. Trust does not emerge naturally after one conversation; it is gradually built through repeated interaction, cross-verification, and offline meetings. Safety issues include not only property risk, but also emotional risk and reputational risk. Some worry about fraud, some worry about being treated as a backup option, and some worry that after emotional investment they will discover that the other person has no intention to marry. Although platforms provide verification and reporting mechanisms, participants still believe that final judgment depends on personal experience, friends' advice, and the test of time (Bilz et al., 2023; Filice et al., 2022).

The fifth challenge is cultural and intergenerational tension. Generation Z places more emphasis on emotional comfort, shared values, and personal choice, whereas the parental generation often emphasizes stability, matched family status, and practical conditions. This does not mean that the two generations are completely opposed; rather, they prioritize different criteria when evaluating marriage (Liu & Mu, 2023; Yu et al., 2026). Young people need to find a balance between respecting parents and insisting on the self, and this process is often accompanied by anxiety, explanation, and compromise. Intergenerational tension is especially evident when relationships move from online to offline settings. Online, relaxed chatting, joking interaction, and gradual testing are common. Once the relationship enters the family field of vision, however, these interactions must be translated into traditional language, such as whether the person is reliable, serious, and suitable for marriage. Young people in effect take on the role of translators, converting digital intimacy into a marital narrative that parents can understand (Liu & Lin, 2023; Xiong, 2023).

The Five-Stage Model from Online Interaction to Marriage Decision-Making

The first stage is online interaction. The core task of this stage is to establish initial attraction and preliminary trust. Users form first impressions of others through profile browsing, algorithmic recommendation, text chat, and extension to social media (Dai & Xia, 2025; Degen & Kleeberg-Niepage, 2023). At this point, the relationship remains highly fragile. Any inconsistency in profile information, cold replies, or value mismatch may lead to termination. The main strategies are selective disclosure and low-cost testing. In online interaction, algorithms and filtering functions play important roles. Platforms determine who can be seen, while users decide who is worth further communication. Seemingly personalized choices are in fact pre-structured by platform ranking, label systems, and filtering conditions (Reich et al., 2023; Wu & Trottier, 2022). While enjoying efficiency, users are also guided to understand the partner market in a more conditional way.

Figure 1. The Three-Driver Conceptual Model of the Transition from Online Dating to Marriage among Chinese Generation Z



The second stage is offline meeting. Offline meeting is the reality test of online impressions. Participants observe whether the other person is consistent with the profile, whether expression is natural, whether behavior is appropriate, whether the person respects others, and whether long-term interaction seems possible. This stage often determines whether a relationship can move from virtual possibility to real relationship. Offline meetings also bring identity recalibration. Users may discover that they presented themselves online as too formal, too casual, or too idealized, and need to adjust their expression offline. The other person may also lose trust because

real behavior is inconsistent with the online profile. Therefore, offline meeting is not a simple continuation of the online relationship, but a renewed judgment (Degen & Kleeberg-Niepage, 2023; Wu & Trottier, 2022).

The third stage is relationship deepening. After offline confirmation, both parties interact more frequently and discuss issues related to future life. At this point, emotional connection and practical planning proceed simultaneously. Participants talk about work cities, consumption views, family division of labor, relationships with parents, whether to have children, and post-marital life rhythms (Liu & Mu, 2023; Yu et al., 2026). Whether the relationship can continue depends on whether both parties can transform romantic attraction into an executable plan for shared life. The relationship-deepening stage is also the stage where conflicts begin to emerge. Differences that were ignored early on, such as consumption habits, work pressure, family responsibilities, and expectations about marriage timing, gradually become important. Participants need to maintain the relationship through communication, compromise, and emotional management. If differences cannot be coordinated, the relationship may remain at the dating stage and fail to enter marriage discussion.

The fourth stage is family involvement. Family involvement is not only the formal meeting with parents, but a gradually unfolding process. Participants may first tell parents about the other person's occupation and education, then show photos and social media, and finally arrange a meeting. This process reflects the family's role as a social gatekeeper. Parental approval can accelerate relational stability, whereas parental opposition may force both parties to renegotiate. Family involvement changes the individual's identity. Participants are no longer only lovers; they are also children, family members, and coordinators of a future marital relationship (Liu & Lin, 2023; Xiong, 2023). They need to prove to parents that their choice is reasonable and explain family opinions to their partner. Emotional labor is especially evident at this stage, because misunderstanding on either side may affect the direction of the relationship.

The fifth stage is marriage decision-making. Marriage decision-making integrates information from all previous stages: whether the online profile is credible, whether offline interaction is consistent, whether the emotional relationship is stable, whether the family approves, whether economic conditions are bearable, and whether future plans are aligned. Participants conduct multi-level evaluation at this stage rather than making decisions solely on romantic impulse (Liu & Mu, 2023; Yu et al., 2026). This model emphasizes that relational progress is not irreversible. Family opposition may return the relationship to a negotiation stage, economic pressure may lead both parties to postpone marriage plans, and new platform options may unsettle an existing relationship. The success of online dating's movement toward marriage depends on whether participants can maintain the relationship's explainability, trustworthiness, and sustainability amid changing information and pressure (Thomas et al., 2022; Wu & Trottier, 2022).

Table 3. Five-Stage Process Model from Online Dating to Marriage

Stage	Core Task	Main Risks	Conditions for Progression
Online interaction	Profile presentation, preliminary screening, and first impressions	Information exaggeration, unclear motivation, low-commitment interaction	Profile consistency, smooth communication, preliminary value compatibility
Offline meeting	Reality testing, identity recalibration, and observation of behavior	Online-offline gaps, safety concerns, awkward termination	Behavioral consistency, safe meeting, increased trust
Relationship deepening	Emotional investment, future planning, and negotiation of life arrangements	Different expectations, emotional exhaustion, practical pressure	Stable communication, shared goals, negotiable differences
Family involvement	Parental awareness, family evaluation, and confirmation of social legitimacy	Parental opposition, intergenerational conflict, amplified economic conditions	Gradual introduction, effective communication, basic family approval

Stage	Core Task	Main Risks	Conditions for Progression
Marriage decision	Integration of emotion, economy, family, and future plans	Commitment hesitation, conflicting expectations, long-term risks	Emotional security, practical feasibility, family support

Table 4. Themes, Key Codes and Representative Interview Excerpts

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Key Codes	Representative Interview Excerpt
Demographics and Background	Participant Profile	Age, gender, occupation, education level, marital status, platform-use experience	I am 28 years old and work as a university lecturer in Nanjing. I met my husband through an online dating platform.
Factors Influencing the Use of Online Dating for Marriage	Identity Formation and Self-Presentation	Strategic self-presentation, platform-specific presentation, authenticity negotiation, emotional regulation	I carefully select photos that make me appear mature and reliable so that others will have a good impression of me.
Factors Influencing the Use of Online Dating for Marriage	Family Cultural Expectations and Filial Piety	Filial piety pressure, marriage timing expectations, 'leftover' age pressure	My parents hope that I can get married soon, so I started using dating apps more seriously.
Factors Influencing the Use of Online Dating for Marriage	Social and Peer Influences	Peer influence, changing social circles, urban lifestyle	Many of my friends are using dating apps, so I decided to try them as well.
Factors Influencing the Use of Online Dating for Marriage	Economic and Structural Factors	Property expectations, occupational stability, educational compatibility, betrothal gifts, platform matching mechanisms	Whether someone owns a house is often considered an important factor when looking for a marriage partner.
Challenges in Using Online Dating for Marriage	Stigma and Social Judgment	Negative labeling, moral judgment, privacy concerns, social image management	Some people still think meeting someone online for marriage is unreliable, so I was hesitant to tell others at first.
Challenges in Using Online Dating for Marriage	Identity Negotiation and Emotional Labor	Balancing real and ideal selves, emotional management, conflict avoidance	During conversations, I try to express myself carefully to avoid misunderstandings.
Challenges in Using Online Dating for Marriage	Trust and Safety Concerns	Authenticity evaluation, scam risks, information verification, offline meetings for validation	I usually check the person's social media to verify their identity before meeting them.
Challenges in Using Online Dating for Marriage	Cultural and Generational Tensions	Generational differences in marriage values, autonomy in partner choice, parental intervention	My parents did not really understand why I wanted to find a partner online.
Transition from Online Dating to Marriage	Drivers of the Transition	Intrapersonal drivers, socio-cultural drivers, technological drivers	The platform helps me filter potential partners efficiently, which makes it easier to consider a serious relationship.
Transition from Online Dating to Marriage	Stages of Relationship Development	Online interaction, offline meeting, relationship deepening, family involvement, marriage decision	We first talked online, then met in person, and eventually introduced each other to our parents.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study further extend the explanatory power of Relationship Development Theory in the context of digital intimacy. Traditional relationship development theory usually emphasizes how individuals

gradually build intimacy through interaction, with core attention to communication frequency, emotional investment, self-disclosure, and relational commitment. However, the findings on Generation Z's online courtship and marriage experiences in Nanjing show that relationship development does not occur only within the dyadic relationship, but is embedded in broader platform structures, family systems, and peer social networks (Liu et al., 2022; Liu & Mu, 2023; Wu & Trottier, 2022). Platforms not only provide contact opportunities, but also influence the possibility of relationship initiation through algorithmic recommendation, identity labels, and filtering mechanisms. Family is not merely an external background, but directly participates in judging relational legitimacy. Peer networks shape users' understanding and expectations of online dating through experience sharing, evaluation, and comparison. Therefore, in China's digital dating context, intimate relationship development has taken on the feature of platformized social relations: relationships are not only the result of person-to-person interaction, but also the outcome of the joint operation of social and technological structures (Dai & Xia, 2025; Gao et al., 2024).

Second, this study reconsiders the issue of personal choice in online dating. Existing studies often regard online dating platforms as tools that enhance individual autonomy, arguing that digital platforms expand the range of partner choice and weaken the geographical, family, and social restrictions of traditional matchmaking (Vogels & McClain, 2023; Wu & Trottier, 2022). However, this study finds that so-called free choice is not a purely individual act detached from social structure, but a limited practice within structural constraints. Although Generation Z in Nanjing can actively screen partners through platforms, control the rhythm of interaction, and express personal preferences, their choice logic remains deeply influenced by family expectations, economic reality, and systems of social evaluation (Liu & Mu, 2023; Yu et al., 2026). Traditional marriage criteria, such as education, occupational stability, housing conditions, family background, and marriage intention, do not disappear because of digitalization; rather, they become further institutionalized and visualized through platform labels, profile displays, and matching conditions. In other words, platforms appear to provide more choices, but in practice they also strengthen the ways in which social structures enter intimate relationships. Individual autonomy is not a complete departure from traditional structures, but the result of continual negotiation and adjustment among familial, classed, and platformized logics.

Third, this study further shows that technology is not a neutral medium, but an active social actor participating in relationship formation. Different types of platforms shape users' understanding of a suitable relationship through different functional designs and interaction logics (Dai & Xia, 2025; Wu & Trottier, 2022). Marriage-oriented platforms place more emphasis on stability, identity authenticity, and long-term relationship goals, so users tend to highlight occupation, education, and marriage intention. Platforms with stronger social attributes emphasize interest display, lifestyle expression, and relaxed interaction, making users value emotional support and personality attraction more. This means that technology does not merely provide communication space; through algorithmic recommendation, identity verification, interaction mechanisms, and platform culture, it continually shapes users' behavioral strategies and emotional judgments (Gao et al., 2024; Liu & Lin, 2023). Platforms in fact participate in the social process of deciding what kind of person deserves visibility and what kind of relationship deserves continuation. Thus, while technology expands relational opportunities, it also defines the forms and conditions through which opportunities appear.

Fourth, this study emphasizes the multilayered structure of trust mechanisms in online dating. Trust in traditional intimate relationships is often built on long-term contact and real social relations, whereas online dating requires preliminary trust to be formed quickly in a highly uncertain environment (Bilz et al., 2023; Wu & Trottier, 2022). Generation Z in Nanjing reduces risk through multiple social signals, such as stable occupation, high education, real-name verification, mutual friends, consistency across social media, and stable interaction behavior. This indicates that online trust does not derive simply from individual interaction, but also relies on platform mechanisms, social identity categories, and social network endorsement. In a sense, trust has shifted from

emotional judgment to a combination of informational judgment and social judgment. At the same time, while these trust mechanisms help reduce uncertainty, they may also strengthen conditional screening and class boundaries, causing emotional relationships to be affected by socio-economic standards at an early stage (Liu & Mu, 2023; Yu et al., 2026). Digital intimacy is therefore open, but it does not necessarily imply genuine social openness.

Fifth, this study reveals the hybridity and negotiability of digital intimacy in the Chinese context. Generation Z in Nanjing neither simply rejects traditional courtship and marriage values nor completely submits to traditional structures. Instead, they continually translate and coordinate between individualized emotional needs and family-oriented marriage logic (Liu et al., 2022; Liu & Mu, 2023). On the one hand, they pursue emotional experience, self-expression, and personal matching through platforms. On the other hand, they need to translate these relationships back into marital language that parents can understand and accept, such as stability, suitability, reliability, and having a future. This phenomenon shows that changes in contemporary Chinese love and marriage are not a linear movement from collectivism to individualism in the Western sense, but rather a continuously reorganized hybrid structure. Young people have not left the family; instead, they redefine ways of negotiating with the family in a new digital environment (Liu & Lin, 2023; Xiong, 2023). The development of digital intimacy is therefore also a process in which traditional culture, intergenerational relations, and individualized values continue to interact.

The findings of this study can also converse with Social Identity Theory. Existing studies suggest that niche dating platforms often enhance trust and willingness to interact through shared identity, such as religious, ethnic, or interest-based identities that reduce uncertainty (Cui et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2022). Although this study did not find that Generation Z in Nanjing clearly relies on political or religious niche dating websites, they also judge potential partners through certain social identity categories, such as people with stable jobs, people with strong family values, people who are serious about marriage, and people with similar educational backgrounds. These categories in fact constitute a social identity framework that helps users quickly make risk judgments and manage relational expectations. Theoretically, this shows that social identity has not weakened because of digital platforms, but has been transformed into a more everyday, classed, and lifestyle-oriented logic of identity classification (Liu & Mu, 2023; Yu et al., 2026). At the same time, while this identity screening improves relational efficiency, it may also reduce opportunities for contact across class and background.

Based on the above findings, this study proposes a three-driver model of the maritalization of online dating. First, intrapersonal drivers explain why Generation Z is willing to enter online dating platforms and continue investing, including emotional needs, marriage anxiety, self-expression needs, and insufficient offline social opportunities. Second, socio-cultural drivers explain why online relationships still must obtain recognition from family, social norms, and marriage values, especially in the Chinese family-oriented cultural context where marriage is never only an individual matter. Finally, technological platform drivers explain how platform structures influence the beginning of relationships, interaction rhythms, screening logic, and relationship maintenance. The three forces are not independent of one another, but are continuously intertwined in the digital courtship and marriage process, together forming the field of forces through which online relationships move toward marriage (Dai & Xia, 2025; Liu et al., 2022; Wu & Trottier, 2022). This model further shows that digital courtship and marriage cannot be understood only from individual psychology or technological function; it must be explained within a framework of joint socio-cultural and platform-structural effects (Liu & Mu, 2023; Yu et al., 2026).

In practical terms, this study has implications for platforms, families, and young users. For platform designers, dating and marriage platforms should not focus only on the number of matches and user activity, but should pay more attention to users' needs for long-term relationships, privacy protection, authenticity verification, and trust-building mechanisms (Bilz et al., 2023; Dai & Xia, 2025; Wu & Trottier, 2022). Especially in the Chinese context where marriage orientation is clear, users pay greater attention to safety, relational stability, and real-life sustainability. For families, understanding the real operation of online dating can help reduce simple stigmatization of online courtship and marriage. In fact, many young people are not dating casually, but practicing serious relationships in new ways in digital environments (Gao et al., 2024; Liu & Lin, 2023). For

Generation Z itself, the study shows that the key issue is not complete submission to platform logic or family expectations, but establishing clearer boundaries and agency among self-expression, risk management, and family communication, so that more stable and mature relationship practices can be formed in complex digital dating environments.

Table 5. Three-Driver Model and Its Explanatory Role

Driver Type	Specific Contents	Role in Relationship Progression	Possible Tensions
Intrapersonal drivers	Intimacy needs, identity exploration, self-presentation, marriage preparation, risk perception	Motivate users to enter platforms and continue investing in relationships	Conflict between the real self and the ideal self
Socio-cultural drivers	Filial piety, parental approval, peer evaluation, age pressure, economic conditions, matched family status	Provide or restrict social legitimacy for relationships	Conflict between personal choice and family expectations
Technological platform drivers	Algorithmic recommendation, filtering functions, profile labels, verification mechanisms, interaction rules	Shape who is seen and how relationships begin	Tension between increased efficiency and marketization of relationships

Limitations and Future Research

This study still has several limitations. First, it is based on qualitative data from thirty Generation Z participants in Nanjing. Although it can deeply present online dating experiences and processes of meaning construction, it is difficult to make statistically generalizable claims (Wu & Trottier, 2022). At the same time, Nanjing is a city where economic and educational resources are relatively concentrated, and its dating and marriage environment has certain particularities; other regions may show different patterns. Second, this paper mainly focuses on participants with serious relationship or marriage-oriented experience, and gives insufficient attention to failed relationships, short-term relationships, and groups that reject online dating. These experiences could also reveal how trust breakdown, platform fatigue, family conflict, and economic pressure affect relationship development. In addition, differences among platforms in user structure, interaction logic, and relationship atmosphere have not been sufficiently compared, and gender differences in housing pressure, age anxiety, safety risks, and family expectations still require further exploration. Future research may combine longitudinal methods to continuously trace the development of online relationships from matching to marriage, so as to observe dynamic changes in trust, identity, and commitment in greater detail. Larger-sample quantitative research may also be used to further test the three-driver model proposed in this paper (Gao et al., 2024; Thomas et al., 2023).

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