Journal of Computer Science and Frontier Technologies
ISSN Print: 3104-4204
ISSN Online: 3104-4212
CD ISSN: 3104-4220
https://doi.org/10.63313/JCSFT.9109

Refusal as Defense: Thematic Structure and Rhetorical Strategies of Not-Dating Discourse on Zhihu

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How to cite this paper: Ni, H., Guo, H., & Zhang, Y. (2026). Refusal as defense: Thematic structure and rhetorical strategies of not-dating discourse on Zhihu. Journal of Computer Science and Frontier Technologies, 4(3), 72–83. ISSN Print: 3104-4204, ISSN Online: 3104-4212.
https://doi.org/10.63313/JCSFT.9109
Published: 2026-10-30

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Abstract

Grounded in the core proposition of "refusal as defense," this study analyzes 10,000 Zhihu answers related to "not-dating." A dual-model LDA approach identifies three themes—subjective refusal (30.6%), emotional-cognitive anxiety (52.1%), and institutional pressure (17.3%)—forming a progressive explanatory chain of "subjective will—emotional cognition—institutional pressure." Manual annotation of 200 texts identifies four rhetorical forms: literal statement (43.5%), irony (21.0%), meme usage (18.5%), and self-mockery (17.0%). The study proposes "defensive emotional communication" as an operational concept under the proposition of "refusal as defense," and shows how young users construct collective emotional boundaries through refusal narratives and rhetorical framing.

Keywords

Not-Dating Discourse; Refusal As Defense; Defensive Emotional Communication; Dis-Course Analysis; Rhetorical Strategies; Zhihu

1. Introduction

China's marriage rate declined continuously from 9.9 per 1,000 in 2013 to 4.9 per 1,000 in 2023 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024; Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2024). Behind this macro trend, a discourse of "voluntarily not dating" has spread and resonated widely on Zhihu; topics such as "Why don't young people want to date anymore?" have accumulated billions of views. Unlike the traditional narrative of "can't find a partner," this discourse is highly proactive, rationalized, and theorized: users are not merely discussing "why not date" but constructing a discursive system of "why not dating is better."

Existing research has emphasized economic pressure, social mobility, and gender norms, but rarely analyzes the content structure and communicative logic of

micro-level emotional discourse. Drawing on 10,000 Zhihu answers on "not-dating," this study proposes the core proposition of "refusal as defense": the discourse is a discursive practice in which young users, facing risks in intimate relationships, adopt "active refusal" as a surface posture and "emotional defense" as a deeper mechanism. Four questions guide the analysis: the thematic structure of the discourse; the internal logical chain of the three major themes; the rhetorical complexity it exhibits; and how themes and rhetorical strategies jointly realize "refusal as defense."

2. Literature Review and Analytical Framework

2.1. Social Transformation of Intimate Relationships

Classic accounts trace the modern transformation of intimacy to Giddens' (1992) "pure relationship," in which intimate bonds become emotionally centered, variable, and exit-able, and to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (1995) "individualization," for which romance and marriage are an "option" rather than a "mandatory path." Yet existing studies rarely examine the discursive level—how youth articulate and explain the choice not to date.

2.2. Social Media and Youth Romantic Discourse

Social media is also a production and performance platform for emotional discourse. digitally mediated public discourse shifts toward emotionally resonant communication, where emotional infectiousness drives spread; Bilibili "marriage-urging" content shows youth deconstructing traditional romantic narratives with playful, ironic strategies, though existing samples remain small. LDA (Blei et al., 2003) has been widely applied to public opinion and social mentality research; this study applies LDA to intimate-relationship discourse, uniting data-driven "distant reading" with theoretical "close reading."

2.3. Analytical Framework

This study takes "refusal as defense" as its core proposition and builds a two-dimensional framework of "thematic structure—rhetorical strategies," under which "defensive emotional communication" serves as the operational concept. Thematically, a three-level logic of "subjective will—emotional cognition—institutional pressure" examines active refusal ("don't want to"), intimate-relationship anxiety, and "marriage" as an institution bearing economic, social, and familial pressures. Rhetorically, literal statement, irony, meme usage, and self-mockery vary in defensive intensity and emotional distance. The core argument: defensiveness lies in both "what is said" and "how it is said," jointly constituting "defensive emotional communication."

2.4. Conceptual Distinction: Defensive Emotional Communication and Related Concepts

"Defensive emotional communication" (DEC) refers to strategic emotional expression and diffusion by individuals on digital platforms when facing potential emotional risks in intimate relationships, with discursive refusal, emotional narrative, and collective identity construction as primary means: "refusal" is the discursive starting point, "communication" the collective mobilization mechanism, and "defense" the deep psychological motivation. Unlike emotional labor—institutional, passively disciplined emotion management—DEC is a freely chosen strategy in digital public space. Unlike avoidant attachment—an individual trait rooted in early attachment—DEC is collective and discursive, driven by group interaction. Unlike cynicism—diffuse distrust of all social values—DEC specifically deconstructs the desirability of intimate relationships while still longing for "authentic relationships."

2.5. Operational Indicators of Defensive Emotional Communication

To render DEC measurable, three indicators are designed: Rejection Discourse Density (RDD) measures "how much refusal is said" (explicitness of the defensive posture); Defensive Argument Intensity (DAI) measures "whether refusal is rationalized" (causal argumentation = deep cognitive defense, bare refusal = surface defense); Group Resonance Coefficient (GRC) measures the collective identification with refusal discourse.

3. Method

3.1. Data Source

Data were collected from Zhihu (zhihu.com), whose highly educated users produce relatively rational, detailed texts suitable for discourse analysis. Keywords covered "not dating" (bù tán liàn'ài), "why not date," and "young people not dating." A total of 24,863 entries were crawled and 10,000 retained after preliminary cleaning. The collection spans 2019–2026, concentrated in 2025–2026 (63.2% combined), with a notable 2020 peak (1,797 entries, 18.0%) (Figure 1).

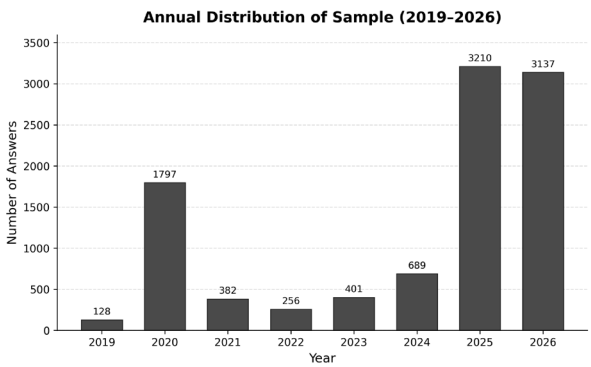


Figure 1. Annual distribution of samples (2019–2026).

3.2. Data Preprocessing

Cleaning removed non-text markers and invalid answers (emojis-only, fewer than 10 characters), retaining 8,699 valid texts (effective rate 86.99%). Word segmentation used jieba with a custom stop-word list adding high-frequency interference words ("dating," "romance," "Zhihu," "answer," classifier phrases). The final vocabulary comprised 9,679 terms with 251,650 total occurrences.

3.3. Research Ethics

Data came only from publicly visible answers; quoted usernames are public nicknames, not real names; the analysis targets overall discourse structure, not specific users; and the results are used solely for academic research. No human experimentation or sensitive personal data is involved; the study falls under exempt ethical review.

3.4. Analytical Method: LDA Topic Model

LDA (Blei et al., 2003) treats each document as a mixture of topics. K was selected via grid search (K = 2–10) combining perplexity and coherence (c_v): perplexity falls from 485.2 (K = 2) to 211.8 (K = 10), while coherence peaks at 0.787 at K = 3 (0.412 at K = 2; 0.715 at K = 4). K = 3 thus balances fit and interpretability (Figure 2). Dual-model cross-validation—Gensim LDA (passes = 30, five random initializations) as baseline, Scikit-learn LDA (max 100 iterations) as control—yielded highly consistent topic word distributions.

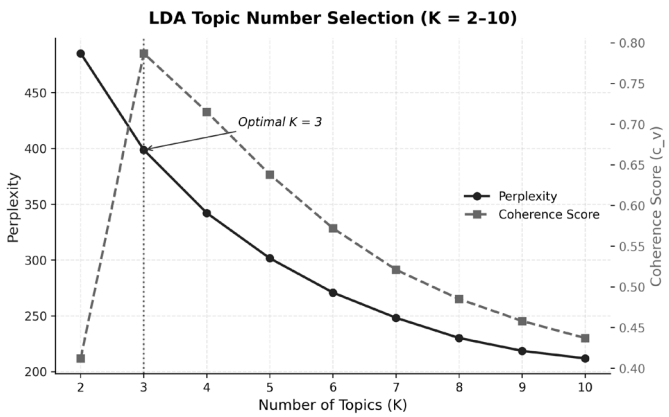


Figure 2. LDA topic number selection: perplexity and coherence (K = 2–10).

3.5. Discourse Analysis Strategy

The study adopts a two-stage "data-driven—theoretical interpretation" strategy: distant reading identifies keywords, co-occurrence networks, and topic proportions via LDA; close reading performs critical discourse analysis on representative texts

(topic probability > 0.6) in each theme, supplemented by content coding of all 10,000 texts. Quantitative sentiment tools (SnowNLP/BERT) were deliberately not used, because irony, self-mockery, and mixed emotions would be flattened by simple positive–negative classification.

4. Results

4.1. Overview of Keywords and Thematic Structure

Among the 8,699 valid texts, 251,650 occurrences and 26,724 unique types were identified. "Bùxiǎng (don't want to)" ranks 3rd (1,990), "jiéhūn (marriage)" ranks 4th (1,710), and "qīnmì guānxì (intimate relationship)" ranks 22nd (661); words for "like" (3,735) and "just/precisely" (2,247) top the frequency list.

Table 1. Distribution of LDA Three Themes

Theme	Core Keyword	Documents (n)	Proportion (%)
Theme 1	bùxiǎng (don't want to)	2,664	30.6
Theme 2	qīnmì guānxì (intimate relationship)	4,528	52.1
Theme 3	jiéhūn (marriage)	1,507	17.3

Dual-model LDA yielded the three-theme distribution in Table 1; content coding of all 10,000 texts cross-validates it, with "economic and material pressure" (19.2%), "emotional fear and risk avoidance" (18.4%), and "high standards and refusal to settle" (13.7%) as the three most prevalent frameworks. The latter two narratives together account for 37.6%, confirming the dominance of rational-calculation and emotional-fear narratives.

4.2. Theme 1: "Bùxiǎng" (Don't Want To) — Discursive Construction of Subjective Refusal

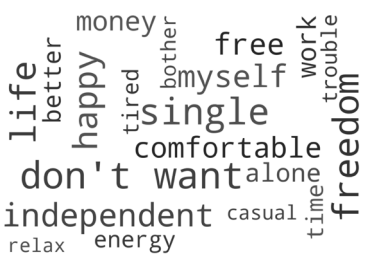


Figure 3. Word cloud for Theme 1 "bùxiǎng (don't want to)".

"Bùxiǎng" (1,990) is the most direct modal verb of the not-dating stance, co-occurring with "girl," "boy," "friend," and "work." Its core is not passive "can't date" but active "I don't want to date," in three narrative forms. Rational calculation narrative: dating is objectified as a substitutable utility; "Mingyue Ru Qingyun": "Enduring loneliness is easier than enduring idiots… the spiritual satisfaction that dating can give me, my phone already gives me all of it"—no unique utility, so refusal is "rational." Self-actualization narrative: dating encroaches on "self-time";

"don't want to" defends individual autonomy and investment in self-development. Gender confrontation narrative: "girl" (710) and "boy" (695) reveal a gendered dimension; "Hunyu Tianya": "Most people who don't date are women... Getting entangled with men has no value"—a value-exchange argument easily liked (the "affective public"). Together they redefine dating from a "mandatory" to an "unnecessary," even "negative" option.

4.3. Theme 2: "Qīnmì Guānxì" (Intimate Relationship) — Anxiety and Ontological Doubt

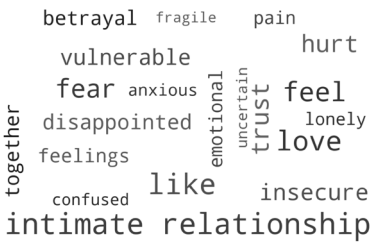


Figure 4. Word cloud for Theme 2 "qīnmì guānxì (intimate relationship)".

Theme 2 (52.1%) centers on "like," "relationship," "love," "fear," and "pseudo-", reflecting ontological doubt. Trust deficit: "fear of giving one's true heart only to be let down" resonates most; "Bu Chi Qiezi De Hao": "This world gives me the feeling that if you give your true heart, you're done for"—"fear" (489), "give" (377), and "true heart" (255) form the chain "true heart giving—let down—fear of getting hurt." “Pseudo-intimacy”: "pseudo-" (412) labels relationships that seem intimate but lack deep communication; "Modern people's relationships are basically performances" reveals how performance culture erodes authenticity. Emotional vulnerability: "Nian Nu Jiao": "People will eventually separate. No one will always like someone. Feelings are very thin and changeable..."—a "vulnerability ontology" of intimacy that links emotional choice to class position and bridges to marriage pressure.

4.4. Theme 3: "Jiéhūn" (Marriage) — Institutional Pressure and Structural Constraints



Figure 5. Word cloud for Theme 3 "jiéhūn (marriage)".

"Jiéhūn" (1,710; Gensim weight 0.0252) co-occurs with "child," "young people," "society," "economy," "cost," "pressure," "parents," "bride price," and "childbirth." Although smallest (17.3%), it occupies the deepest discursive position—the institutional endpoint that ultimately legitimizes not dating. Economic cost argument: not-dating is placed at the start of the chain "dating → marriage → childbirth → childrearing" for overall accounting; "economy" (525), "cost" (351), "pressure" (388) co-occur. "Zai Xia Wang Haoran": ordinary youth "clearly are not lacking in anything… yet when it comes to moving the relationship forward, they start fighting with the other person and struggling with themselves"—economic pressure activating "self-protection" in advance. Intergenerational conflict: "parents" (467), "family" (502), and "bride price" point to family expectations; not dating means pre-emptive resistance to marriage-urging—"if you don't start dating, you won't be forced to marry or have children" ("not giving birth," 351). Youth crisis argument: "young people" (936) objectifies individual experience into a universal problem; "Huangcheng Dian": youth "tired of playing games, have no messages on WeChat… although very lonely, they don't want to settle"—a structural social symptom.

5. Discussion

5.1. Comparison of Propagation Indicators

Across all 10,000 texts, the average post drew 243.8 likes, 27.4 comments, and 35.0 favorites, with 11.5% reaching the high-like threshold (likes ≥ 500). The three themes nevertheless differ descriptively. Theme 1 has the highest average likes (287.3) and high-like proportion (14.2%)—its 28.4 comments and 31.2 favorites show concise refusal manifestos spreading more strongly than complex arguments; Theme 2 has the highest comments (32.6) despite middling likes (245.6) and favorites (28.7), reflecting the controversy of intimacy topics; Theme 3 the highest favorites (45.1) despite the lowest likes (198.4) and comments (21.3)—"high favorites, low interaction," consistent with privately identifying with structural pressure. Kruskal-Wallis tests were not significant (likes $H = 2.14$, $p = 0.343$; comments $H = 1.87$, $p = 0.393$; favorites $H = 4.62$, $p = 0.099$); comparisons are descriptive only.

5.2. From "Bùxiǎng" to "Marriage": A Progressive Explanatory Chain

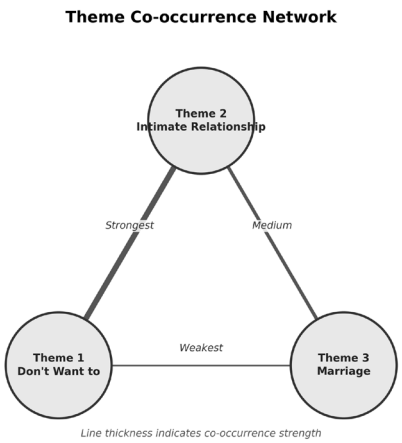


Figure 6. Theme co-occurrence network (edge weight ≥ 100).

The three key terms correspond to three thematic clusters superficially but form one progressive chain in deep logic (Figure 6; strongest co-occurrence pairs: "high standards × relationship cost" 912, "emotional fear × high standards" 858, "economy × marriage" 827). Surface (30.6%)—"bùxiǎng": the most direct and communicatively powerful form; a complete attitude declaration needing no argument, but weak in explanatory power alone—more catharsis than argument. Middle (52.1%)—"intimate relationship": the richest level and the key intermediary that lifts discourse from emotion to position: because relationships are untrustworthy, inauthentic, and fragile, therefore "I don't want to" enter them—preference becomes a "reasonable position." Deep (17.3%)—"marriage": the most fundamental motivation: unattainable marriage costs, unbearable intergenerational pressure, and urgent class advancement make any "serious" relationship risky; the most rational strategy is not to enter the game at all.

5.3. Discourse Diffusion Mechanisms

Diffusion presents three mechanisms. Pain-point resonance: "bùxiǎng" hits the defense of autonomy, "intimate relationship" hits trust anxiety and emotional vulnerability, "marriage" hits declining expectations and survival anxiety. Narrative layering: dissemination is UGC-style layering that develops catharsis into a self-consistent worldview. Group identity: repeated resonance transforms a scattered individual choice into an identifiable group identity, encouraging more public speech in a positive feedback loop.

5.4. Social Implications: Reflection Rather Than Lying Flat

The analysis does not support labeling not-dating as "lying flat" or "emotional apathy": the critique of "pseudo-intimacy," the defense of subjectivity, and the implicit critique of structural injustice all indicate reflective depth. The

"individualization" described by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) is accelerating in Chinese society; marriage is being "de-institutionalized," and the rise of not-dating discourse is a collective "renegotiation" of the intimate-relationship system by youth in deepening social modernity.

6. Rhetorical Forms and Strategies of Online Discourse

6.1. Distribution of Rhetorical Forms

"Refusal as defense" appears not only in "what is said" but in "how it is said." Stratified sampling by theme proportion (61/104/35) drew 200 texts, annotated by two coders (Cohen's kappa = 0.78, $p < 0.001$; Tables 2–3).

Table 2. Distribution of Rhetorical Forms and Typical Examples (N = 200)

Rhetorical Type	Freq.	Prop. (%)	Length	Typical Example	Defense Mechanism
Literal statement	87	43.5	186	"I just don't want to date; quality of life is higher alone."	Direct: clear stance, boundary
Irony	42	21.0	153	"Dating is so great—costs money, time, emotions, easily breaks your heart."	Indirect: saying the opposite
Meme usage	37	18.5	92	"The wise do not enter the river of love; the lonely king pursues degrees."	Gamified: defusing seriousness
Self-mockery	34	17.0	168	"People like me should stop wasting others' time."	Pre-defeat: pre-empting rejection

Note. Stratified sampling by theme proportions; Cohen's kappa = 0.78, $p < 0.001$. Examples lightly edited for privacy.

Table 3. Theme × Rhetoric Cross-Distribution (N = 200)

Theme	Literal Statement	Irony	Meme Usage	Self-Mockery	Total
Theme 1: Subjective Refusal	34 / 55.7%	9 / 14.8%	8 / 13.1%	10 / 16.4%	61
Theme 2: Emotional-Cognitive Anxiety	40 / 38.5%	26 / 25.0%	21 / 20.2%	17 / 16.3%	104
Theme 3: Institutional Pressure	13 / 37.1%	7 / 20.0%	8 / 22.9%	7 / 20.0%	35
Total	87 / 43.5%	42 / 21.0%	37 / 18.5%	34 / 17.0%	200

Note. Chi-square = 7.83, df = 6, p = 0.250 (Fisher's exact, two-tailed); descriptive trends only.

Literal statement is most common (43.5%) but less than half; 56.5% employ non-literal rhetoric—dictionary-based sentiment analysis would misjudge over half the texts. Descriptively, Theme 1 favors literal statement (55.7%); Theme 2 the highest irony + meme share (45.2%); Theme 3 the highest meme share (22.9%). Chi-square was not significant ($\chi^2 = 7.83$, df = 6, $p = 0.250$); only trends are reported. Each form maps to a defense mechanism: literal statement draws boundaries; irony creates distance; meme usage wraps refusal in group play; self-mockery pre-empts rejection by "admitting defeat first."

6.2. Irony Rhetorical Strategy

Irony (21.0%) is "saying one thing but meaning another": "Dating is so great—it just costs money, time, emotions, and easily breaks your heart" dissolves its affirmation through the turn. Its defensive function is to clothe refusal in humor and avoid the moral pressure of direct declaration; ambiguity itself protects—listeners may take it

as a joke, speakers may retreat to "I was just joking."

6.3. Academic Packaging and Meme Culture

Meme usage (18.5%) embeds choices in youth subculture ("The wise do not enter the river of love; the lonely king pursues advanced degrees all the way"), providing group belonging and de-seriousization. Notably, Zhihu users mix memes with academic concepts ("pseudo-intimacy," "cost-benefit analysis"), a platform-distinctive "cultured meme-ing"; golden phrases are repeatedly cited and rewritten, forming memetic chains that let individuals borrow collectively verified phrases instead of constructing reasons alone.

6.4. Contradiction and Ambiguity

Some answers combine "don't want to date" with "longing to be loved" (e.g., "Huangcheng Dian"), reflecting the core tension of DEC: unmet emotional needs beneath refusal. About 12% of the 200 samples mix two or more strategies (e.g., self-mockery + irony), confirming the discourse's complexity and supporting qualitative interpretation over quantitative sentiment analysis.

7. Opinion Leaders and Discourse Diffusion Chains

Zhihu's Q&A mechanism forms chains of "question—high-like answer—comments." High-like answers (top 10%) concentrate narrative templates; later answers repeat or respond to them, forming a "core-periphery" structure. Opinion leaders play three functions: frame-setting (their frameworks—"Enduring loneliness is easier than enduring idiots"—become the default reference), emotional mobilization (one sentence—"if you give your true heart, you're done for"—received thousands of likes), and identity confirmation ("it turns out I'm not the only one who thinks this way"). The recommendation algorithm amplifies this Matthew effect. Future research can quantify diffusion chains via like-rankings and text similarity.

8. Conclusion

Grounded in "refusal as defense," this study dually analyzed thematic structure and rhetorical strategies in 10,000 Zhihu answers on not-dating. Dual-model LDA identified three themes—subjective refusal (30.6%), emotional-cognitive anxiety (52.1%), institutional pressure (17.3%)—forming a three-level progressive chain. Manual annotation of 200 samples found literal statement (43.5%), irony (21.0%), meme usage (18.5%), and self-mockery (17.0%), whose complexity defeats simple polarity analysis. The themes also differ in communication indicators (likes 287.3/245.6/198.4; comments 28.4/32.6/21.3; favorites 31.2/28.7/45.1; high-like 14.2%/11.8%/8.5%).

Contributions: (1) the proposition of "refusal as defense" and the two-dimensional framework; (2) the operational concept of "defensive emotional communication"

with indicators (RDD, DAI, GRC); (3) a paradigm combining LDA with critical discourse analysis and rhetorical annotation; (4) evidence of Zhihu's role in the "affective public." Limitations: Zhihu-only, educated-user bias; no demographic controls; N = 200 annotation; cross-sectional design; qualitative diffusion analysis. In sum, themes answer "what is refused," rhetorical strategies "how to refuse," jointly realizing "refusal as defense." Conclusions are limited to not-dating discourse on Zhihu, not generalizable to all social media or contemporary youth.

Author Contributions

H.N.: Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Project administration. H. Guo: Investigation, Data curation, Formal analysis, editing. Y. Zhang: Data curation, Validation, editing. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

Upon reasonable request, data used and analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author.

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