

The Evolution of the “Lying Flat” Mentality and its Social Media Expression: The Youth Perspective

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Abstract: In this digital era, social media has become an indispensable part of people’s lives. As young people are the primary users of social media, their mentality and behavior have received widespread attention. Among the mentalities that have become a popular social phenomenon among young people in China is “lying flat.” In the face of the development process of the outside world and amidst social involution, young people who are lying flat maintain a personal philosophy of living their own “slow life” as a set of attitudes and behaviors. Through conducting image analyses and in-depth interviews, this study aims to examine the lying flat mentality among some Chinese youth and explores the reasons for its evolution and strategies for coping with it. The study concludes that in a period of complex transition in Chinese society, young people feel confused, anxious, lost, and conflicted, and in lying flat, they self-construct a set of values and a lifestyle as a method of relieving pressure.

Keywords: Lying flat; Youth; Digital era; Social media; Chinese society

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1. Introduction

Young people in China find themselves in a period of digital transformation, with social media now an established part of their everyday lives. According to data released by the China Internet Network Information Center (CINIC), a large proportion of the total number of online social networking users are in the 18–25 age group^[1]. The digital transformation has brought unprecedented convenience and opportunities to young people but also great pressure and a range of challenges. It is against this background that the “tang ping” (lying flat) mentality has gradually become a popular social phenomenon in the country. In April 2021, Baidu users described their own lying flat way of pursuing a life of freedom and low desire: low living expenses, two vegetarian meals each day, monthly spending of 200 yuan, and only two months of work each year. In May of that year, a post

by the founder of “Layflatology,” Luo Huazhong, described lying flat as “justice” and proposed to advocate a philosophy of life that was lethargic and non-invasive to embody the subjectivity of human beings. Since then, the concepts of “lying flat”, “lying flatism”, and “lying flat science” have spread like wildfire through social media networks, especially among Chinese youth.

The social media posts quickly triggered a hot debate as the phrase “lying flat” detonated public opinion. As related topics appeared as Weibo’s trending search terms, many people began to share their own lying flat life and lying flat thinking. The term “lying flat” gradually evolved into the Internet meme of “everyone wants to lie flat” and even formed a kind of “lying flat culture” reflecting a kind of pressure relief valve and lifestyle of young people facing intense stress in Chinese society. Having been created by young people and spread among them, the lying flat culture reflects their identity and values. As such, it is an important part of the contemporary cultural landscape and a key to understanding the relationship between youth and society. Examining their posts on WeChat Moments, one of the preferred spaces for self-expression in the country, can therefore be of significance for understanding the lying flat mentality and behavior of Chinese youth.

2. Lying flat

The rapid rise to popularity of the lying flat concept reflects its deep social and cultural foundations. “Lying flat” first spread across networks as a kind of buzzword with semantic and behavioral traces. Semantically, “tang ping”, “tang qiang” (lying gun), “tang yin” (lying win), and “tang zhuan” (lying earn) belong to the same word family of “tang x”; “lie” and “flat” meaning to lie down and not move and thus referring to a state of “doing nothing.” As a behavioral indicator, “lying flat” is similar to the 2016 buzzword “Ge You lying down” and can easily evoke associations with the image and derivation of the archetype of that earlier phrase^[2]. The “Ge You lying down” meme captured the pose of actor Ge You’s character slumped on a sofa in an episode of a 1993 sitcom, with this image considered to reflect a decadent status quo in China. It gave the popularity of lying flat a pragmatic basis.

With the common characteristics of fragmentation and rapid dissemination, new media technologies have given people more freedom and space to construct a lying flat culture. However, the spread of the lying flat concept should also be viewed in the context of the social process of continuous involution and accelerated development. “Involution” (“neijuan” in Chinese) was originally a term often used to describe a phenomenon of fierce competition in a limited space. First used by the German philosopher Immanuel Clifford Geertz and the American anthropologist Gordon Weiser, involution was applied initially to the study of agriculture, production and other fields of economics, then to the field of state power in political science, and further to social fields such as precision poverty alleviation, community governance, the interaction of rural migrant workers, institutional changes and education development. In China, “involution” is a popular term for the phenomenon of individuals competing intensely for limited resources, often leading to individuals making greater efforts for diminishing returns. The term has exploded as an Internet buzzword in recent years, associated with pictures of high-achieving students at prestigious universities, to describe irrational internal competition or the phenomenon of “being voluntarily” competing.

At the same time, the lying flat culture is a social phenomenon with deep value expressions. In line with the observation that a “general social phenomenon can be regarded as a youth subculture phenomenon if it contains overall and distinctive ideological underpinnings and can reflect the typical characteristics of the

ideological consciousness of the youth group, and there are obvious differences with the mainstream culture”, lying flat culture contains the distinctive value concepts of a certain group of young people ^[3]. These young people believe that in a social environment in which work is highly involuntarily and life is stressful, it is futile to work hard and the only way to get relief is to “lie down flat”: to transcend the mainstream path of working overtime, getting promoted, earning money and buying a house and to dissolve the external environment’s discipline on the individual by withdrawing from the mainstream path of life. The culture of lying flat is a “self-awakening” of youth ^[4]. It expresses people’s dissatisfaction with consumerism and the social division of labor and reflects the spiritual and existential anxiety of youth in the face of fierce competition and intense pressure ^[5].

Over the years, young people have developed lying flat from a buzzword into a distinctive stylistic symbol through social media communication and sharing and have given the phrase a new meaning by collaging it into their own lives. Collage is “a cultural process of improvisation or adaptation, whereby objects, symbols, or behaviors are transplanted into different systems of meaning and cultural contexts to acquire new meanings.” Lying flat, which originally referred to the body lying still and took its behavioral direction from “Ge You lying down”, has been reproduced in multimedia forms, such as pictures, texts, and videos. For example, “Ge You lying down” has been reproduced in texts such as “It’s better to lie down directly”, “As long as I lie down fast enough, capital cannot exploit me”, and “Society is dangerous, so I lie down first.” The quotes and emoticons have given the new meaning to lying flat of actively withdrawing from competition. As a result, and with media impetus, the physical gesture of lying flat has become a collective mind, a set of values and life attitudes, and a sociocultural psychology for the participation of and dissemination to the public. Its dissemination is like a kind of discursive projection, which has triggered a hot debate over social “anti-elasticity” and has a social “acceptance resonance” in its discursive echoes ^[6].

To summarize, in lying flat, certain young people who are unwilling to make excessive efforts in the pursuit of material wealth in contemporary society convey their attitudes towards life by displaying their lifestyles through social platforms. Because of the uncertainty of the future and the social pressure they are under, these young people feel helpless and lack motivation and incentive. In response, they look for a way of life in the state of lying flat in which they can focus on their own development and on realizing their life values while paying more attention to freedom and balancing the soul. In interpersonal relationships, one expression of “lying flat culture” is to display richer communication and emotions on social media than offline. Overall, the lying flat culture is different from the mainstream culture that emphasizes struggle and hard work, and it contains the distinctive value concepts of certain groups of young people. Related topics representing a new attitude towards life, such as “#Is it Shameful for Young People to Choose to Lie Flat?”, “#The Illustrated Guide to Lying Flat Youth”, and “#Life of Lying Flat Youth” continue to grow in popularity.

3. Social media expression

Images on social media platforms reflect the increasingly homogeneous nature of contemporary image production and dissemination, in which human life is pictorialized and many offline interpersonal relationships are replaced by social media relationships. Mobile phone photography makes capturing images more convenient and faster than ever before, and nowadays, people take and use images more than they have in any previous era. The world has now progressed to the pictorialization of individual lives, with people raising their mobile phones to take pictures anytime and anywhere to record and, more crucially, disseminate their lives and

express themselves through social media. Social networks built on the mobile Internet makes it possible for the production of images to be disseminated and seen by others immediately, which is a kind of image survival; people can turn themselves into images, show their life status on WeChat at any time, and use their own images to communicate with the images of their friends, such that the relationship of image-to-image replaces the relationship of person-to-person. The world of images in WeChat Moments is colorful, with greetings between images and interpersonal intimacy turning into a random relationship between images. Images therein constitute an archive of contemporaneity as they are always being produced, always being disseminated, and simultaneously always being archived by subject, author, genre, or any other criteria. Social networks have become perhaps the largest art archive of time.

The youth attitude towards lying flat is a constantly changing psychological state in which they do not expect too much from society, do not blindly pursue success and achievements, and instead choose to lower their material and spiritual standards in pursuit of a simple and comfortable lifestyle. The popularity of this mentality among young people is related to both the current economic and cultural environment in China and their own characteristics, and its evolution has been fully demonstrated on social media. It is mainly manifested in the following three ways. First, many young people are experiencing a lack of self-identity. They feel confused and uneasy about their future, often discussing on social networks the topics of self-doubt and self-denial. Second, there has been an increase in social pressure, which has led these young people to lower their demands on life and made them more inclined to choose lying flat as a way to cope with the pressure. Third, there is a change of values, with many young people questioning the traditional view of success and pursuing inner peace and freedom in its place.

With increasing numbers of young people joining the discussion, the lying flat mentality is spreading across social networks, and there are countless pictures, emoticons/memes, and passages of text about lying flat, which show the life and psychological state of young people in an intuitive and vivid way. In the process of the evolution of the lying flat mentality, some scholars have subdivided lying flat into “escapist”, “helpless”, and “self-deprecating” forms. “Self-deprecating lying flat” refers to the body lying flat but the heart still thinking it needs to work hard; the “lying flat” of the body is then just an illusion as the heart is full of dissatisfaction ^[7]. Among the lying flat youth is a group of contrary people who are more often than not just teasing and spitting at each other, or complaining and relieving pressure on the Internet, without in fact being in a real state of lying flat. Given these complexities and its wide diffusion, the evolving process of the lying flat mentality is worth exploring. While some people criticize lying flat as a negative and decadent attitude towards life, others understand and sympathize with the pressure and dilemmas faced by young people and call for attention and solutions to the underlying problems.

4. Methodology

This study takes lifestyle images posted on WeChat Moments as an entry point to discuss the evolution of the lying flat mentality among young people. The research methods include image analyses and in-depth interviews. Recruitment of informants was carried out through social media platforms, specifically from WeChat Moments and Weibo, focusing on young Chinese adults aged 18–25 years. The informants were selected from users of WeChat and Weibo for the following reasons. First, WeChat plays an important role in maintaining social relations in contemporary Chinese society, and WeChat Moments presents an organic combination of strong and

weak ties as well as private and performative sides, which makes it an important channel for cultivating social capital [8]. Second, compared with WeChat, the social relationships in Weibo are more inclined to be weak ties. These “weak relationships” establish a new type of trust relationship and make it more likely that young people will speak freely.

With the consent of the informants and following the snowball sampling method, users who had posted “lying flat” quotes on these social media platforms were initially interviewed. The interview questions included the following: “How long has the mentality of lying flat existed?”; “Why do people want to lie flat?”; “What are the motives for posting lying flat quotes on social media?”; and “What do you think about the social queries and criticisms about the phenomenon of lying flat?” The results of the initial interviews were screened and then we eliminated non-responsive and homogenized informants and finally selected 20 for secondary interviews, each of which lasted for about 30 minutes. Table 1 provides a summary of the demographics of the informants.

Table 1. Demographics of the lying flat informants

Interviewee (pseudonym)	Gender	Age	Duration of lying flat	Education attainment	Region	Type of work	Marital status	Consent to image display	Interview format
Min	Female	21	2 years	Undergraduate	Chengdu	Unemployed	Unmarried	Yes	On-line
Ken	Male	20	1 year	Undergraduate	Tibet	Self-media	Unmarried	Yes	On-line
Five	Female	23	1 year	Postgraduate	Chongqing	Student	Unmarried	Yes	On-line
Li	Female	24	4 years	High school	Hohhot	Unemployed	Married	No	On-line
Wang	Female	19	1 year	College	Liaoning	Corporate	Unmarried	Yes	On-line
Cheng	Male	20	2 years	Undergraduate	Hohhot	Unemployed	Unmarried	Yes	On-line
S	Female	25	1 year	Undergraduate	Chongqing	Unemployed	Unmarried	Yes	On-line
LL	Male	24	2 years	Undergraduate	Hohhot	Corporate	Unmarried	Yes	On-line
Chang	Male	23	1 year	Undergraduate	Baotou	Student	Unmarried	Yes	On-line
Wu	Male	18	1 year	High school	Beijing	Unemployed	Unmarried	Yes	On-line
Q	Male	18	3 years	Postgraduate	Chengdu	Student	Unmarried	Yes	On-line
STY	Male	21	1 year	Undergraduate	Chengdu	Enterprise	Unmarried	Yes	On-line
Zang	Male	25	3 years	Undergraduate	Hangzhou	Corporate	Unmarried	Yes	On-line
Ru	Female	24	2 years	Undergraduate	Hohhot	Business unit	Unmarried	Yes	On-line
Dan	Female	20	1 year	Undergraduate	Hohhot	Enterprise	Unmarried	Yes	On-line
E	Male	23	2 years	Undergraduate	Chongqing	Self-media	Unmarried	Yes	On-line
O	Female	24	3 years	Undergraduate	Guangzhou	Corporate	Unmarried	Yes	On-line
ST	Female	24	1 year	Undergraduate	Hohhot	Corporate	Unmarried	Yes	On-line
Nine	Male	18	1 year	Undergraduate	Beijing	Unemployed	Unmarried	Yes	On-line
D	Female	20	2 years	Undergraduate	Guangzhou	Unemployed	Unmarried	Yes	On-line

Although social media and networks play a role in promoting the pluralism of cultural expression and modes of existence in the digital era, the different interactions of youth between online and offline spaces are sometimes ignored. As only the network as a communication tool is seen to enable young people to gain

some right to speak, the real value of the media for youth is seldom further examined ^[9]. Meanwhile, for the theoretical interpretation of the lying flat culture, scholars have mostly followed the perspectives of the anxiety of modernity, accelerated social theory, intergenerational conflict, the dilemmas of involution, the “asset society” for the young generation, and the non-creative labor dilemma ^[10-11]. Against the above background, this study starts from primary data, conducts a close observation of and reflection on lying flat youth, and synthesizes their social media expression and offline performance in an attempt to address the following research question: What is the evolution of lying flat youth’s mentality in the context of the digital era? Facing involution, should one choose to lie flat or to struggle, and what kind of attitude towards life should one adopt for a healthy life? This study explores the evolution of their psychological characteristics amidst the lying flat culture and identifies their attempts to solve the social problems they face.

5. Results and discussion

From the interviews, it is found that the 20 informants display similarities and differences in their lying flat attitudes and behaviors. Some of the informants tend to pursue non-marriage and infertility, low levels of offline socializing, and relatively high levels of activity on the Internet. They enjoy the happiness of being alone, reduce their offline socializing, and look for their own relaxing lifestyle. Describing themselves as “happy to be alone and exploring the best way to get along with themselves”, some of them have reconciled with themselves and started to lie flat after underperforming in their examinations and studies. They have then begun to live a life of lying flat and, as Informant Dan reported, “my mental state is getting better at a speed that can be seen with the naked eye after getting rid of my identity as a female college student.” Informant CS also said, “After graduation, I was unable to change from my student status, and because of various aspirations to meet a lot of young people have been lying flat, to become a member of this group is currently seen as the right choice for me.” However, lying flat is not a permanent state of Informant STY’s life but rather just a stage of “escapist lying flat” adopted at the time under the high pressure of choosing between further education or employment after graduation. Informant K reported that “there is no clear goal for future planning yet, just take one step at a time.” A stage of lying flat has given these informants a chance to get rid of the stress they are feeling after graduation, allowing them time to think, clarify their goals, process information, actively prepare, and adjust their mindset to better cope with the pressure and make choices that are suitable for themselves.

In terms of social relations, some informants stated that they meet other lying flat youth on social media due to their similar life experiences and emotional needs and obtain weak relationship support by socializing with strangers. They are gradually getting rid of the social relationships of the acquaintance society, and weak relationships based on interests are becoming increasingly prominent. In WeChat Moments, as the social platform that is most proximate to offline life and in which people are therefore expressing themselves in front of acquaintances, most of the informants seem to show a more positive state, whereas in microblogging and other social media, where connections are often with strangers, it can be less stressful for them to express their feelings and start discussions. Some informants feel helpless in the face of today’s social pressures, and asking questions through social media to gain recognition from other youth has become a way to express these pressures.

In terms of economics and consumption, the informants tend to pursue a life of low desire and have a low willingness to work, choosing either not to work at all or to work only to make ends meet.” To cope with

the decrease in income, some of them have taken the initiative to lower their consumption level by reducing their materialistic desires, which to a certain extent reflects the pressure of social reality and the helplessness of young people today. As Informant W stated, “I do not want to go back to being a social animal, so I made adjustments — now I lead a minimalist life, I basically do not drink milk tea, just the essential things in life while minimizing extra spending as much as possible.” With different background conditions and different economic situations, some of the informants, however, shared that after graduation, they bought their first home with the help of their parents and have then begun to “feel at ease” lying flat.

In general, the lifestyle of the lying flat youth is characterized by a slow pace of life, freedom, and happiness. The interviews revealed that some informants have broken the shackles of traditional concepts and begun to give new meaning to lying flat, actively accepting and embracing a lying flat lifestyle. They believe that lying flat is not the same as giving up or not loving life but rather a simple choice not to live and work according to the traditional workplace model. As Informant Cheng put it, “Lying flat is not bad, anyway, life belongs to yourself, how to live it, to meet the rhythm and lifestyle of others does not make much sense to me.” The fast-paced and high-pressure environment of the workplace is leaving increasing numbers of people eager to have their own space and set their own pace of life. They are no longer satisfied with competing and being busy day after day and are paying more attention to their feelings and quality of life. While lying flat, they learn to find pleasure and satisfaction in the little things of everyday life, for example, reading a good book, enjoying a nice meal, getting a favorite drink, or spending time with family and friends (Figure 1). These young people are interpreting the diversity and possibilities of life in their own way and choosing a more free and casual way of life, no longer bound by traditional ideas and workplace rules. Although some might doubt their choice, and it might cause some controversy, it is undeniable that the lying flat culture is quietly changing the life concept and values of young people.



Figure 1. Informants find pleasure and satisfaction in the little things of everyday life (Left: Get up early and drive up the hill. Right: We shall not stay in a place with ceiling)

As lying flat youth continue to use social media to preach the need to lie flat, the culture of lying flat has gradually attracted the attention of and criticism from people in the mainstream media. Having experienced prolonged workplace frustration and being now without work, some of the informants have begun to develop a self-deprecating cognition and even learnt helplessness, calling themselves “trash” and “scum” and flirting with the idea that they “cannot do anything, but sleeping is number one” (Informant M). Some extend their job search failure to the failure of their whole life and are afraid to enter the job market again, having developed

negative feelings about themselves and their lives. Yet, for a few informants, while saying that they want to lie flat, they are still working hard in reality (Figure 2). For example, Informant LL reported, “Although I and my friends have found our ideal life state, most do not think that lying flat is a big trend.” Why, then, are there more and more people shouting “lie flat”? The interviews revealed that the term has become so popular that people are using it as a normal expression when facing problems and pressure. Few people really put lying flat into action, as they are often trapped in a material and spiritual double bondage. Even among those who have the conditions to lie flat, society and family, together with all kinds of pressures, prevent them from taking that step. To really lie flat, people must have enough social capital, and they must “lie up!”; in other words, not only be able to afford to lie flat but also dare to think and act accordingly.



Figure 2. Informants expressed that work has been causing a lot of stress, yet taking a day off has added to the stress as work keeps piling up (Left: Today is another hard battle. Right: After a day off, I feel like losing track of my work.)

6. Implication and conclusion

Young people are indeed the most sensitive to changing times. In the process of reform and opening-up of China, the post-70s and post-80s generations were undoubtedly the most direct beneficiaries, as the rapid growth of the economy had brought them unprecedented opportunities and more space for development. Those generations of young people could go out to work or accept the work assigned by the state, and in either way, they generally live a more stable life. However, as problems such as saturated market demand and stagnant business development have gradually surfaced in the recent decades, the cruelty of the market has been exposed. At the same time, while the popularization of higher education has improved people’s general education levels, enterprises have to “streamline the team”, optimizing the number of staff to reduce costs, and this is resulting in a continuous decline in the value of qualifications as the employment threshold continues to increase, such that large numbers of university students have been facing repeated obstacles to employment.

The new generations of young people are in urgent need of finding a new path; this is also one of the reasons leading to the increasing popularity of graduate studies, civil service examinations, and career advisors in China. The country’s master’s degree and doctoral programs continue to grow as young people undertake additional studies as a way of delaying employment, and those young people who still cannot find a job after further studies are in lack of a sense of achievement and satisfaction from their struggles in the face of the cruel reality. In the competitive contemporary society, without a prominent background, superior education, and pride in their ability to stand out and to find a suitable job, and after repeated setbacks, young people gradually

lose the initiative to fight and are getting lost actively or passively in involution and lying flat. This is the most realistic portrayal of young hearts.

In this connection, the state-issued Medium- and Long-Term Youth Development Plan (2016–2025) of China comprehensively integrates youth development work into the Party’s efforts to manage the country from a strategic perspective ^[12]. Focusing on the areas of ideology and morality, education, health, marriage and love, employment and entrepreneurship, organically combining guiding young people’s thoughts with solving real-world problems, and providing a long-term plan for the development of young people and the forging of their skills, the document fully embodies the Chinese Party-state philosophy that “if the party and the country endeavors to develop, young people must first develop.”

At present, the Internet and social media have become heavily embedded in every aspect of Chinese young people’s lives. It is, therefore, clear that the social mentality of young people cannot be separated from the influence of the Internet, and in the process of their development, the intervention of social media will constantly affect their attention to and understanding of the emotional cognition of events. Social media is a complex and diverse cultural form that can be drawn upon to effectively explore the characteristics of the youth mentality and understand youth lifestyles in a more targeted way, thereby enabling a response to their psychological demands to help build a healthy society. This study examines the lifestyles of lying flat youth by analyzing images they posted on social media and conducting in-depth interviews with them.

The composition of the social context varies from person to person, and the informants of this study made different choices of lifestyle and exhibited similarities and differences in their attitudes and behaviors toward lying flat. Regardless of the choices, sharing images through social media has become a popular practice among young people for enabling self-expression and self-presentation or for maintaining social relationships with others. The phenomenon of lying flat arose from people’s daily life practices and survives and develops through digital networks, as the images shared by young people on social media platforms record their lifestyles and attitudes. As revealed in the in-depth interviews, the lying flat culture produced in the complex social situation in China has its own complexity, and it is not possible to simply criticize lying flat youth as the phenomenon has arisen from different causes and conditions in the sociocultural and economic contexts. In response to the lying flat culture, mainstream media should clarify its characteristics and causes, understand the psychological characteristics of the different types of lying flat youth, and help to solve the social problems faced by young people.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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