

## Sang Culture: Social Comparisons of Generation Z Youths in China on Social Media

YANG WEIQI  
NORMALIZA ABD RAHIM  
BENJAMIN LOH YEW HOONG  
*Taylor's University, Malaysia*

NURZIHAN HASSIM\*  
*Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia*

### ABSTRACT

Sang Culture emerged among Chinese youth, showcasing digital expressions that encompass written words, audio clips, visuals and videos that portray feelings of despair and decadence. This phenomenon offers insight into the lived experiences and attitudes of Chinese Generation Z, commonly known as Gen Z. Rising from the challenges of the 2020 pandemic, the guarded and pessimistic mindset of this generation towards existential fears and uncertainties is distinctive, particularly on social media, where the youth find comfort in a sense of belonging, channelling their expressions through ironic wit and light-hearted jokes, resulting in not only personal healing but also shared amusement. While it is being embraced as a means of self-expression and discourse on societal norms, Sang Culture has faced criticism from conservative Chinese society for its perceived disruptive nature. In stark contrast to traditional beliefs and philosophies, Sang Culture and its cynicism are often considered a societal stain. Nevertheless, as China's youth continue to navigate their place in a rapidly changing society, Sang Culture remains a powerful force, reflecting the aspirations and frustrations of a generation seeking to carve out its own path. This study examined Gen Z through the Sang Culture on social media platforms and analysed social comparisons that emerge from the Sang Culture expressions online. The analysis deployed Festinger's Social Comparison Theory and findings of this study underline how the creation of user-generated content concerning the Sang Culture compare their perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours with those dictated or implied by societal realities.

**Keywords:** *Sang culture, generation Z, social media, user-generated content, social comparison theory.*

### RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Cui et al. (2020) argued that Generation Z, commonly known as Gen Z and born between 1995 and 2009, has far fewer opportunities for upward mobility compared to generational cohorts from previous decades. Nevertheless, unique experiences and challenges faced by Generation Z (Gen Z) are shaping contemporary trends as young people grapple with the pressures of social media, academic stress, and societal expectations. Henceforth, awareness and openness about mental health issues have led to increased advocacy and support systems within youth communities (Wood, 2022). The youth of today are more informed and passionate about society and politics, using digital platforms and social media to amplify their voices and mobilise movements such as on climate change, racial justice, and LGBTQ+ rights, to name a few (Dimock, 2019). This reflects a desire for meaningful change and a willingness to challenge traditional power structures. Through technology and online platforms, youths are exploring alternative career paths and embracing the gig economy, challenging traditional

notions of employment and work-life balance (Brody, 2021). Moreover, there is a need to project authenticity, self-expression, and individuality, as exemplified by the *Sang Culture* in China (Cullen, 2019). Young people are rejecting societal pressures to conform and are instead embracing their unique identities, using fashion, art, and social media as outlets for self-expression (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). *Sang Culture* has emerged as a prominent youth subculture in China over the past decade, characterised by a distinct fashion aesthetic, slang language, and a rebellious attitude that uproots societal expectations (Chen, 2021). The term "Sang" is derived from the Mandarin word for "losing" or "unrestrained," reflecting the carefree and nonconformist spirit of this subculture (Wang et al., 2019).

The origins of this phenomenon can be traced to 2016, when the "Ge You—Lying Down" meme became a pivotal moment in the development of *Sang Culture* (Li & Peng, 2020). The meme suggested the normalisation of depressed mental and emotional states, thus developing a subculture that posited hopeless views about life (Li, 2018; Liu, 2018; Zhu, 2018). Several scholars have posited that China's "One-Child Policy" has, to a large extent, shaped the social and psychological construct of Gen Z, thus profoundly contributing to the array of user-generated content (UGC) on *Sang Culture* online. Such content echoes societal expectations related to academic achievement, job competition, and family honour that are all focused on this single child, where their inability to cope results in their lack of resilience (Cai & Feng, 2021; Nie et al., 2022). In doing so, the youth are driven to alleviate these tremendous pressures by questioning societal conventions and pursuing recognition of their own identities, which can be found in satire and self-mockery of the said user-generated content (Sun, 2022).



Figure 1: "Ge You - Lying down" meme

Chinese authorities have labelled *Sang Culture* harmful, while state-run media have frequently cautioned Chinese youngsters to keep a positive outlook and to make better contributions to society as *Sang Culture* has been characterised as a form of mental paralysis (Xia, 2016; Shi, 2017). Tan and Cheng (2020) contended that *Sang Culture* contradicts the traditional Chinese concept of "face," which typically impels individuals to suppress and hide

their negative emotions to preserve their social reputation. Gen Z, having grown up in affluence, is more concerned with leisure and entertainment consumption, individual tastes and styles, thrills and experiences, and higher standards for personal spiritual endeavours (Li, 2020). Gen Z is growing into an influential force in new media that should not be undervalued, and it is becoming more and more important for them to achieve their group identity through these digital platforms. Gen Z is passionate about new media technology and has a desire to grow, create, and build different cyber subcultures in order to express themselves artistically and gain recognition in virtual spaces (Zhu, 2018). Henceforth, fear resulting from wealth disparity and class solidification would lead to feelings of negativity and loss (Lv, 2017). Moreover, social media provides immediacy and geographical transcendence, which have become critical environments for individuals to engage in social comparison that would result in increased self-doubt and evaluation of self-worth (Coyne et al., 2017; Qi & Wang, 2018).

This study, therefore, examines Gen Z engagement through the Sang Culture on social media platforms. Further to this, the study analyses social comparisons that emerge from the Sang Culture expressions online.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Youth Resistance Through Sang Culture*

Studies on youth subcultures have assessed the value of Sang Culture, highlighting that young new media users are contributing to its development and constructing a more diversified and open perspective, accelerating cultural transformation and cultural innovation (Bai, 2018; Zhu, 2018). Prior to the Sang Culture, self-deprecating and defeatist statements were already present in "Pepe the Frog" created by Matt Furie in 2009 (Lobinger et al., 2020); the teary-eyed frog that quickly gained popularity and became a symbol of disillusionment on international forums such as *4chan*, the Japanese version of *2chan* for otaku culture (Tan & Cheng, 2020). This speaks to the emotional disillusionment and self-satisfaction of the Sang culture in China, suggesting a universal state of mind among youth. According to Kato et al. (2018), *Hikikomori* in Japan is similar to the Sang Culture where it similarly discusses intense competition, job insecurity, and high societal expectations. These subcultures are characterised by an attitude of defeat and disillusionment towards life and serve as a unique form of emotional expression and societal commentary for youth (Bai, 2018). Researchers argued that this shift in youth subculture character, from active resistance to passive acceptance, reflects the complex socio economic challenges faced by Asian youth today (Su, 2023; Qin & Dai, 2022). From the perspective of Western scholars, Sang Culture represents a form of youth resistance against the pressures of China's rapid economic development and traditional values. Cullen (2019) suggests that the unconventional fashion, language, and attitudes associated with Sang Culture allow Chinese youths to assert their individuality and challenge societal expectations. Similarly, Cartier (2021) views Sang Culture as a way for Chinese youth to negotiate their identities in a rapidly changing society. The subculture's embrace of nonconformity and irreverence towards authority reflects the frustrations and aspirations of a generation navigating the tensions between tradition and modernity.

However, Walters (2020) offered a more critical perspective, arguing that Sang Culture may reinforce existing societal divides and marginalises certain groups. She contends that the subculture's emphasis on consumerism and urban youth culture may alienate rural or lower-income individuals who cannot participate in the same fashion and lifestyle. Despite these

critiques, the cultural significance of Sang Culture as a youth-driven movement challenges traditional norm and provides a platform for discourse (Liang & Thompson, 2022).

#### *Digital Self-Presentation and Social Comparison*

Liu (2020) argued that despite its unfavourable connotations, Sang Culture has mobilised public participation through the “fragmentation” of the internet, “tribalisation” of social media, and elucidating user-generated content (UGC) in the form of memes. This highlights the vital role of media platforms and technologies in facilitating and accelerating the dissemination of cultural phenomena like Sang Culture. Yang (2021) delved into the role of media in constructing the Sang Culture narrative, resulting in a phenomenon of “anti-framing” coexistence, suggesting a complex interplay between mainstream media, commercial media, and the constructed narrative of Sang Culture.

According to Liu and Wang (2019), self-presentation and Sang Culture media entities capitalise on the traits of youth groups, packaging predominant *Sang* theme, and value exchange through marketing and interaction with the UGC applied on new media platforms. This is in tandem with Generation Z (Gen Z) youths who advocate individuality and freedom, as well as embrace multiculturalism online. In the past five years, Gen Z active mobile Internet users have nearly doubled, and the average monthly use of mobile internet and the number of apps used are much higher than the average in China (Cyberspace Administration of China, 2021). The sense of engagement and loneliness emerges because they are more eager to learn, interact with others, and work through other real-world issues in the virtual environment (Ren, 2021; Wu & Zhang, 2021). According to Hou (2019), Gen-Z was born into a time of abundant material goods, and as a result, they have developed a preference for impulse purchases because pleasure-oriented consumerism has undermined their self-control. As a result, it is thought that they have a "deformed view of consumption" in addition to the consumption psychology of possession, comparison, and crowding (Zhang, 2019; Li & Liu, 2019).

Through the affordance of short videos, memes, and emoji booms, Gen Z disorientation, anxiety, concerns, and other predicaments in the internet era have been normalised among viewers who can relate to the discourse (Song & Liu, 2020). These internet “pop-ups” are very popular communication tools among Gen-Z that satisfy their needs for immersion and fulfilment as well as their desire for a collective identity (Gao, 2020). Xiang (2020) further posited that the stratification of emerging media types has technologically diversified linear communication paths. The qualities of Gen Z expressiveness, creativity and positive self-confidence have made them more vocal on social media. However, their dependence on electronic devices increases their social isolation.

Festinger (1954) was the first to coin the phrase *social comparison* and to present a methodical theory based on the observation that people assess their abilities and values clearly, but they judge themselves by comparing them to others who are similar to them instead of doing an objective assessment. In line with this, there are two main categories of social comparison: upward comparison and downward comparison. Peer comparison is more of an upward social comparison in an internalised setting, which lowers individual self-efficacy by inciting cognitive dissonance in the self (Fang, 2021). Anxiety sets in, and a conversation with peers and oneself ensues when a person discovers a significant difference in value and skill between themselves and their peers.

According to Festinger (1954), social comparison serves a variety of purposes in the development of the self, such as self-evaluation, self-beautification, self-protection, and so forth. In certain domains, the process of forming one's identity may also involve self-glorification or active stigmatisation in the selection process. Seligman, an American psychologist, proposed the concept of *learned helplessness*, believing that people's perception of their abilities and environmental control is learned from experience (Xue et al., 2023). On the other hand, social networks allow people to access information about others, make social comparisons, and influence their self-evaluation process anytime and anywhere (Vogel et al., 2014). As a result, social networks become an important place for individual social comparisons due to their convenience, immediacy, and cross-regional nature (Coyne et al., 2017). Festinger (1954) put forward this notion, which emphasises the natural tendency to assess ourselves against others. We use the opinions of those around us to evaluate our skills, accomplishments, and even our own value. Beyond only outperforming others, it's also about figuring out where we fit in the social order and adjusting our goals and self-worth accordingly. The objective of this research is to enhance comprehension of the intricate connections between media consumption, social comparison, and self-presentation in the distinct cultural setting of Sang Culture. The complex processes of identity creation and the social factors that shape and define it may become clearer as a result of this investigation.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Research Design*

Digital ethnography was adopted to explore and interpret the Sang Culture. Digital ethnography is a methodological approach that employs various research techniques to study online communities, interactions, and cultural practices within digital environments. Analysing different formats of social media content is crucial in digital ethnography as it allows researchers to gain insights into the lived experiences, behaviours, and meaning-making processes of individuals and communities online (Kozinets, 2015). Text-based content, such as posts, comments, and discussions, can reveal linguistic patterns, discourses, and narratives that shape online interactions (Varis, 2016). Visual content, like images and videos, offers insights into symbolic representations, identity construction, and the performative aspects of online self-presentation (Underberg & Zorn, 2013). Additionally, multimedia formats, such as live streams and interactive content, can shed light on the temporal and embodied dimensions of online experiences (Pink et al., 2016). Social networks can, on the one hand, give people access to a vast amount of social information, including other people's images, videos, and life stories. This can lead to the automatic creation of social comparisons between people and have a significant effect on how people perceive and construct themselves (Hou et al., 2023).

### *Sampling Criteria*

The study observed and analysed manifestations of Sang Culture on social media platforms through the most popular Sang-related documents or artefacts. The said documents have been identified as memes, emojis, stickers, music, and videos. It was necessary to select and analyse the most representative and frequently used documents by social media users online in China. In doing so, the most representative internet buzzwords related to Sang Culture from 2016 to 2022 using the *Yaowenjiaozhi* magazine were used as a guide. As a result, eight of the top ten internet buzzwords from 2016 to 2022, linked to Sang Culture were ascertained.

These buzzwords were the foundation for locating pertinent materials and texts representative of Sang Culture. Next, documents containing the said buzzwords were collected from social media platforms, focusing on Sang Culture instances, and the selection criteria determined that each document should have more than 1000 likes. A total of 19 documents were collected.

#### *Data Coding and Analysis*

After preliminary vetting, the necessary translation is done if the documents are in different languages to ensure that all data conforms to one language for coherent analysis. Following this, categorisation was performed, whereby the data was divided into logical groups or clusters based on predefined criteria such as type of content, source, or other relevant factors. The categorised data were then encoded to transform into a format easily interpretable by the analysts and any utilised software tools. Theme identification was the next step in the process, focusing on determining the key topics and ideas that emerge consistently within the documents. It involved closely examining recurring words, phrases, and related terms to identify patterns that could point to central themes of Sang Culture. Finally, the identified patterns, themes, and key ideas were interpreted and reported. This thematic analysis entailed contextualising these findings within the larger socio-cultural environment in relation to *Sang* culture. The results are reported in a way that aligns with the initial research objectives.

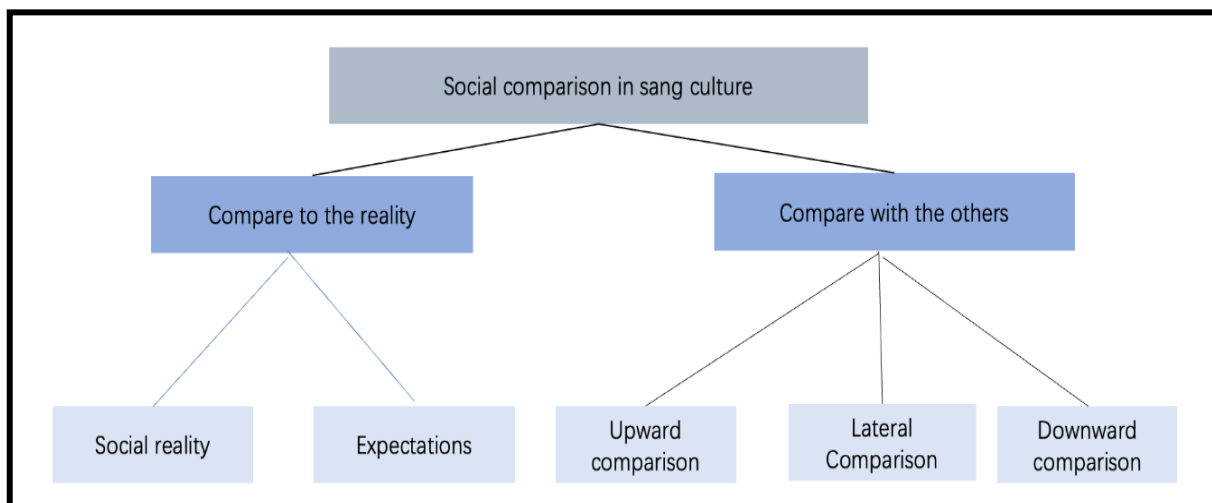


Figure 2: Coding frames based on Social Comparison Theory

Triangulation was employed through the strategy of data collection from multiple sources. The analysis of online Sang Culture materials provided insights into the broader socio-cultural facets of the phenomenon. The convergence of these diverse data sources allowed for a multi-dimensional view of the research question and heightened the overall validity of the findings. To retain the authenticity of the participants' perspectives, document contents were transcribed in Mandarin, and translations to English were done. This approach ensured that the translation process accurately preserved cultural subtleties and contextual meanings (Fu, 2017).

## FINDINGS

### *Downward Comparison*

By engaging in downward social comparison, individuals can maintain or enhance their self-esteem and subjective well-being (Brickman & Bulman, 1977, p. 149). When people compare themselves to those who are less fortunate or have fewer desirable attributes or circumstances, they may feel better about their own situation. This can be seen as a self-protective mechanism, as it allows individuals to perceive themselves in a more positive light relative to others. Downward comparison can serve as a coping strategy, particularly in challenging or stressful situations, by providing a sense of relative advantage or gratitude for one's circumstances.

### *a) Glorifying Failure to Launch*

The original image is a screenshot from the Chinese sitcom "I Love My Family" featuring popular actor Ge You in a sitting posture, but actually lying against the back of the sofa, looking very decadent (Hon, 2020). Item B1M1 translates to "I'm almost a useless person," and B1M2 translates to "I am wasting my life but do not want to stop". In conservative Chinese culture, this meme violates the traditional rule of "standing like a pine and sitting like a bell," which requires people to maintain a positive and upward image. In the show, the famous comedian Ge You plays a parasite-like person who has no job, no money, and has not fulfilled his filial duties. In this sense, *paralysed Ge You* represents a failed persona that is also, in a sense, likeable.



Figure 3: Ge You "Lying Down" persona

The B1M2 meme observes that Ge You's haggard face, unfocused eyes, and extremely thin limbs make people feel he cannot care for himself and survive. While these BIM1 and B1M2 images both convey a sense of negativity and despair, these correlate with and celebrate youths who wish that they do not need to put in any effort towards life. Both memes also represent intentional and self-deprecating negativity. This collective identity of young people towards the ideology of *lying flat* has further promoted resistance to social expectations.

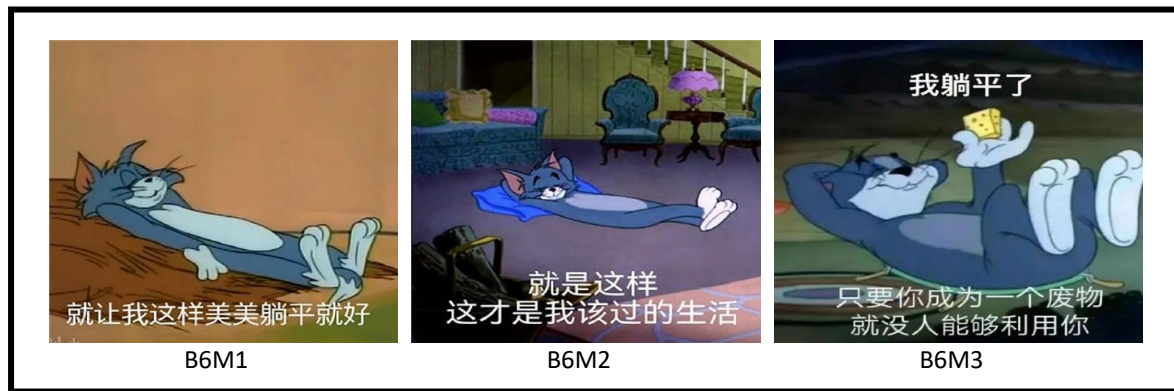


Figure 4: Tom and Jerry lying flat

Further to this, a group of memes featuring the character of Tom from the animated series *Tom and Jerry* are depicted in various comfortable postures with a satisfied smile, appearing in a state of idleness and thoughtlessness. The accompanying text in B6M1 says, “Just let me lie down peacefully and enjoy life”. Meanwhile, for item B6M2, the expression “This is it, this is the life I should be living,” highlights longing for a life of *lying flat*, reflecting an attitude of rebellion towards excessive labour, responsibility, and pressure. This attitude reflects a cultural tendency to resist competition and success, as many young people seek inner peace and satisfaction. The phrase in meme B6M3 that says, “Once you become a waste, no one can use you,” can be interpreted as a form of defiance against exploitation and oppression. By collaging the *lying-flat* image and text from the well-known cartoon series Tom and Jerry and presenting them at appropriate times and situations, individuals not only attain resonance but also gain group recognition and sympathy. These *lying-flat* memes have gained significant traction on social media, attracting users' attention due to their strong emotional appeal (Zhang & Li, 2023). Memes demonstrate significant potential and influence as a new mode of communication.

Two more examples of exemplifying failures come from popular chat sticker packs. The first example, P1M1, depicts an adorable cat lazily leaning on a pile of wine bottles with the text “Life is so tiring,” reflecting a deep sense of exhaustion. The second sticker, P1M2, portrays a young person hiding in a worn-out cabinet, attempting to close the door, with the text “Starting to shut down,” expressing a desire to escape. P1M1 and P1M2 align with *Sang* culture, conveying a profound sense of fatigue, helplessness, and pride in wishing to avoid reality.



Figure 5: Sticker packs signifying resignation



Due to their ease of dissemination and shareability, this sticker pack rapidly spread on social media, making it an important piece of discourse within the Sang Culture. With that said, youths can continuously create new, rich, unique, humorous, and expressive symbols that affirm their desire to not act and compare their harsh reality with others.

Similar to this, a blog post titled *“The First Batch of Post-90s Have Become Monks”* published in December 2017 introduced the “Buddhist-style” lifestyle that also quickly went viral. “Buddhist style” refers to being relaxed and indifferent, where little thought is put into things. This has since become a cultural phenomenon, giving popularity to the term “Buddhist-style youth.” These young people advocate going with the flow, not asking for anything, accepting what they have or don't have, not competing or striving for victory, and being content with the present moment.

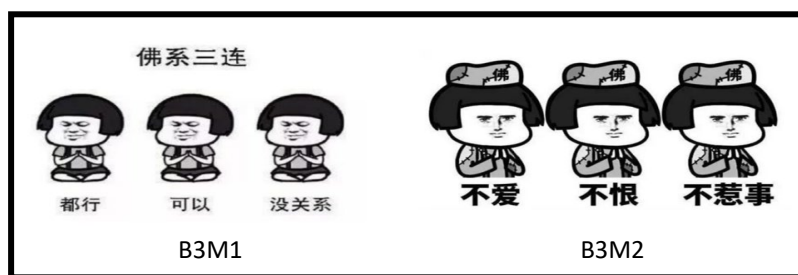


Figure 6: Buddhist monks

B3M1 and B3M2 depict the message of letting go of one's obsession and pursuing inner peace and tranquility. It features three small figures sitting cross-legged, palms together, with frustrated expressions. The characters appear to accept frustrating situations, revealing sarcasm in the incongruence. Item B3M1 posited, *“All is fine, acceptable, it's okay.”* Meanwhile, B3M2 reveals the caption *“Don't love, don't hate, don't stir up trouble,”* which is casual and matter-of-fact, associated with Buddhist teachings, but the connotation implies giving up all desire. Although the characters are in a forced meditation mode, their facial expressions display an unhappy state of mind.

#### b) Lateral Comparison Through Music



Figure 7: Screenshot of the song “Feeling Empty”

The “Feeling Emotionally Drained” song in B2M1 is a typical example of a *Sang* culture song. It conveys feelings of exhaustion and helplessness in modern work life through its music and lyrics. Its dissemination as viral content strengthens its influence in spreading *Sang* culture. The song lyrics in B2M1 are filled with sarcasm and irony, yet they express the genuine feelings of many working individuals. Lines such as “*Who needs sleep? It's a waste of time*” and “*How about it, boss, are you satisfied?*” reflect the lateral comparisons and share similar concerns about the pressures and challenges of modern society, such as heavy workloads, time constraints, and hectic lifestyles. To that end, the songs create an immersive atmosphere that immerses listeners in a sense of sadness. B2M1, with its direct and powerful lyrics and melody, quickly spread on social media, sparking widespread discussions and resonating with many. Its emergence and dissemination deepen people's understanding of *Sang* Culture and prompt reflections on modern work and life conditions, thereby influencing societal attention to work pressures and quality of life to some extent.

### *c) Sharing in a Public Discussion*



Figure 8: P13M2 - Short Video Life is not Worth it

As a new form of digital content, short videos have been widely used on social media platforms and have become important carriers of popular culture and social communication. Among them, the famous phrase “*Life is not worth it*” made famous by Li Dan in a talk show as depicted in P13M2 resonates with the current trend of internet *Sang* Culture and has become a representative of the subculture. In P13M2's short video, Li Dan's statement, “*Be happy, my friend, life is not worth it*” has a sense of world-weariness and independence that aligns perfectly with the current downward comparison trend of internet *Sang* Culture, where it has been regarded as a motto and life creed by artistic youth.

Visual presentation has become the focal point of people's attention. In particular, *Sang* Culture short videos like P13M2 have already had a profound impact on social media platforms. They vividly and quickly showcase the essence of downward comparison. *Sang* culture discusses doom and despair, which cannot be negotiated unless one learns to live with it. Short videos' rapid dissemination and highly interactive nature enable the *Sang* culture to spread quickly and gain wider attention and resonance.

### *Upwards Comparison*

People often engage in upward comparisons to gain inspiration, motivation, or a better understanding of how to improve themselves. However, upward comparisons can also lead to feelings of inadequacy, envy, or diminished self-esteem if the comparison target seems

unattainably superior. The consequences of upward comparison depend on factors like the relevance and psychological closeness of the comparison target. While upward comparisons can sometimes be self-deflating, they can also spur self-improvement by highlighting areas for potential growth.

*a) Expectations: Involution of Education Opportunities*

Youths often resort to extreme measures, including extended working hours, sacrificing personal interests, and lacking social lives, which has led to the emergence of a term known as *neijuan* (involution). This concept of involution in the context of social change and development has been influential in anthropology and sociology, particularly in discussions of peasant societies and their responses to population pressure and limited resources (Geertz, 1963). The term *neijuan*, or “involution,” initially proposed by cultural anthropologists Goldenweiser and Lowie (1936), refers to a pattern of cultural change in which a cultural model gradually becomes more complex and fixed, ultimately leading to a state of stagnation from which it cannot transform into new cultural forms. In the contemporary context of the internet, the meaning of *neijuan* has evolved from its initial description of cultural change and analysis of economic development stages to refer more to the state of futile efforts for individuals who invest more time, energy, and resources into their studies, work, and daily lives but do not receive expected returns.

In the year 2020, the item B5M3 below, an involution meme, went viral: an individual reading a book while riding a bicycle, another using a computer while riding a bike, as well as a bed covered in stacks of books. This individual, who used a computer while riding a bicycle, was called the *Exam King* and appeared frequently on social media. The “内卷 *neijuan*” involution trend became popular, and university students used it to refer to the irrational need to compete with one another, albeit with sarcasm.



Figure 9: The Exam King went viral on social media as a satire of competition among youths

Meanwhile, item B5M1 shows a meme of a young student simultaneously reading five books, which is impossible to achieve. B5M1 represents the pressure and excessive competition in an involution society, and the image B5M1 of reading five books simultaneously mocks the impossible task. The accompanying text reads as, “*I’d rather exhaust myself than let others surpass me,*” and highlights how the youth are forced to participate in the involution, particularly in their studies, and are compelled to compete intensely with others despite knowing that such behaviour can lead to excessive fatigue and even death under pressure.



Figure 10: Excessive studying brings out unhealthy competition among students

#### b) Employment Inequalities



Figure 11: F\*\*\*ing involution

In relation to the involution earlier discussed, youths forcibly accept and actively participate in the discourse because of the pressures of education and employment, as well as an upwards attitude at the workplace among the youth. In doing so, example B5M2 depicts two groundhogs tasked with cutting down trees. While both are meant to chew the tree

branches, one of the groundhogs has created a beautifully sculpted figure during the process, with a proud smile on its face. However, such a sculpting task is unnecessary for achieving the goal of tree cutting and could result in overwork and increased employment thresholds for the entire market. The B5M2 accompanying text, “I say f\*\*\* you, involution,” reflects the anger, resistance, and aversion of many ordinary young Chinese people towards this upwards comparison.

### c) Migrant Workers

In addition to the semantic transposition of old words with new meanings, the discourse of the “migrant workers” extensively uses the art of sarcasm, where the symbolic representation and its true meaning differ from, or are even opposed to, their literal meaning. The “migrant” expression is referring to the double standard placed on local youths who are expected to feel grateful that they are offered a meagre wage on a labourer’s job, like a foreigner who has to work hard to earn their keep. The discourse of “migrant workers” stems from a sense of disappointment and powerlessness in real life and socialist expectations from their traditional Chinese upbringing.



Figure 12: Socialist pictorials of labour and dedication

The socialist pictorials in Figure 12 refer to propaganda images produced by government departments to promote social production and social development, intending to present social themes of the time, such as labour and dedication. It was intended to show those themes in a positive, upward way. Nevertheless, the pictures were originally positive in meaning, but netizens collaged such pictures with the upward comparisons of “working as a worker,” such as B7M1, which posited, “You don’t earn much money from working, but working as a worker gives you no time to spend money.” This reveals a satirical reality that despite earning a modest income from work, you may not have much time to spend it due to the busy nature of your job, indirectly saving your money.

B7M1 reflects the harsh reality and relatively low income of working-class individuals and highlights how their time and energy are consumed by work, potentially affecting their quality of life, despite its good intentions. Meanwhile, B7M2 posits, “Migrant worker, you are not afraid of being tired, as long as you are paid overtime.” B7M2 expresses a resigned yet upwardly optimistic attitude, suggesting that workers can endure fatigue as long as they are adequately compensated with overtime pay. Furthermore, B7M2 reveals the willingness of

workers to endure the hardships of work in exchange for financial rewards while highlighting their expectations for economic compensation and their pursuit of materialistic living, highlighting, *"It's not that work needs me, but that I need work!"*. They have to embrace these circumstances, reflecting a sense of helplessness. At this point, the collage of emojis strips the original symbols from their original context and embeds them into the discourse system of "migrant worker," generating a self-parody of black humour. Although fragmented, the symbols collaged by netizens form an orderly whole in terms of meaning. They have certain expectations and aspirations for their future development.

#### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of the study showed how social media platforms have created an environment conducive to the flourishing of the Sang Culture by providing a space where people can freely express their feelings and attitudes. This is in line with the research by Wang (2019) and Liu (2020), which underscored the significant role of diverse social media platforms in facilitating the spread and acceptance of the Sang Culture. Having secured a wider space and audience, as supported by the findings of Li and Peng (2020) and Yang (2021), the ever-evolving digital landscape provides fertile ground for the Sang Culture, allowing it to adapt and thrive in various digital contexts. Indeed, the advancements in digital media technology have democratised the production of Sang Culture content, facilitating its dissemination among a broader audience. This technical evolution has allowed users to conveniently create and share their Sang Culture expressions, fostering a participatory culture where individuals are no longer passive consumers but active creators.

In this study, it can be seen that user-generated content fuels the propagation and diversification of the Sang Culture on digital platforms. This concept is supported by the work of Wagner (2023), who asserted that the progress in digital media technology transformed users into producers, promoting the spread and richness of the Sang Culture. In this context, the ascendancy of social media has been paramount, marking a transition from face-to-face interactions towards a digital space where users can interact and communicate, irrespective of geographical confines.

The manifestation of Sang Culture in everyday life signifies passive resistance to high-pressure societies. Young individuals are seen to abandon the conventional pursuit of success and achievement, disengaging from societal evaluations and expectations. Instead, they are observed to adopt a relaxed approach to life, which many consider a stress-relief mechanism. This perspective was validated by the studies of Zhang and Li (2023), showcasing the practicality of "lying down" as a coping strategy. Class solidification in contemporary society leads to ineffective individual struggle, with personal success through hard work often failing to significantly alter one's social status and fate. This scenario, as noted in the study by Chen (2021), drives some youths towards Sang Culture as a form of expressing discontent and seeking spiritual equilibrium through self-deprecation and ridicule.

Furthermore, the transition of expectations from "spiritual victory" to "self-diminishment" becomes a key manifestation of Sang Culture on social media, supporting the findings of Qin and Dai (2022). Though aiding in achieving "spiritual victory" with ease, this mindset often results in self-deprecation and relinquishment of personal pursuits, reinforcing the significance of Sang Culture as a form of resistance and expression against real-life constraints. The findings highlight that the proliferation of media and the daily activities of Gen Z significantly contribute to the widespread dissemination of Sang Culture. The social comparison theory underlines how the creation of user-generated content concerning the

Sang Culture compares their perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours with those dictated or implied by societal realities. In this context, societal realities include, but are not limited to, socioeconomic conditions, societal norms, prevalent attitudes, and the general societal milieu. The gap or alignment between personal perspectives and societal realities can significantly influence how individuals understand, internalise, and engage with phenomena like Sang Culture.

The key premise of this perspective lies in understanding that societal realities act as a crucial frame of reference for individuals. They use this frame to evaluate their experiences and circumstances, and the degree of conformity or divergence from these realities can shape their self-perception, behaviours, and choices. It highlights how societal realities can serve as both an external criterion for self-evaluation and an influential factor in shaping individuals' perceptions and behaviour.

In the context of Gen Z interaction with Sang Culture, the social comparison perspective can help elucidate how they understand and participate in *Sang* culture based on their appraisal of societal realities. It offers a deeper understanding of how Gen Z navigates the gap between their experiences and societal realities and how they express this navigation within the Sang Culture on social media platforms. The examination of Gen Z experiences continues from the standpoint of intrapersonal comparisons and self-expectations. This portion unravels how Gen Z individuals contrast their current selves with their ideal or expected selves. In essence, it is an exploration of how they navigate the expectations set for themselves amidst the realities they face. Gen Z individuals are found to perceive societal pressures and personal aspirations as an integral part of their social reality. Often, this results in feelings of inadequacy when their reality does not align with their expectations, driving them towards the *Sang* culture. This culture provides a platform for self-assessment and coping, thereby mitigating the disparity between societal expectations and their self-perceived reality. A deeper analysis of Gen Z engagement with the Sang Culture on social networks unveiled their various comparison strategies. A downward comparison approach is utilised for self-esteem enhancement, involving the display of empathy towards others in distress and the occasional experience of *schadenfreude* for self-affirmation in the face of others' adversities. In lateral comparison, empathy proves to be a crucial component, indicating a shared emotional reality among Gen Z, which often resonates with the relatable content provided by the Sang Culture.

Firstly, this study shows that *Sang* culture is not merely a manifestation of despair or a state of loss of hope and purpose. Instead, it is a complex social phenomenon that plays a crucial role in the construction of self and collective identities among China's Gen Z. This understanding significantly enriches the interpretive framework of Sang Culture, emphasising it as a self-protective strategy employed by the younger generation to cope with societal pressures and emotional challenges. This redefined Sang Culture is a bold reflection of youth resilience - their courage to face setbacks, to acknowledge their limitations, and to confront reality. This theoretically extends the Sang Culture concept, providing a holistic perspective that captures its essence as a positive emotional outlet and an empowering tool for self- and collective realisation.

#### BIODATA

*Yang WeiQi* is a PhD student at the School of Media & Communication (SOMAC), Faculty of Social Science & Leisure Management, Taylor's University. Her research focuses on subculture social media and marketing. Email: yangweiqi@sd.taylors.edu.my

*Normaliza Abd Rahim* (Prof Dr) is Senior Research Fellow at Taylor's University, Malaysia. Her expertise is in media and technology, discourse studies, linguistics and educational technology. She has published more than 10 books and nearly 200 articles in journals, chapters in books and proceedings. Email: Normaliza.AbdRahim@taylors.edu.my

*Benjamin Loh Yew Hoong* is a senior lecturer at the School of Media and Communication, Taylor's University. A media scholar who employs digital ethnography in studying emergent cultures and the digital public sphere, he received his doctorate in communications and new media, and focuses on the confluence between technology and society, particularly on minority and marginalised communities. Email: benjaminYewHoong.Loh@taylors.edu.my

*Nurzihan Hassim* is a senior lecturer at the Centre for Research in Media & Communication (MENTION), Faculty of Social Sciences & Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Her research interests include cultural and new media studies, specifically youths and behavioural change in the digital sphere. Email: nurzihan@ukm.edu.my



## REFERENCES

- Bai, F. (2018). Resistance and inclusion: The development trend of “Sang culture”. *Research on Communication*, 2(15), 29–30.
- Brickman, P., & Bulman, R. J. (1977). Pleasure and pain in social comparison. In J. M. Suls & R. L. Miller (Eds.), *Social comparison processes: Theoretical and empirical perspectives* (pp. 149-186). Hemisphere.
- Brody, L. (2021). The gig economy and the side hustle: Exploring the motivations and experiences of young adults in the United States. *Youth & Society*, 54(8), 1462-1484.
- Cai, Y., & Feng, W. (2021). The social and sociological consequences of China's one-child policy. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 47, 587–606.
- Cartier, M. (2021). Navigating modernity: Sang Culture and youth identity in urban China. *American Anthropologist*, 123(2), 312-325.
- Chen, Z. (2021). Awakening and breakthrough: Discourse analysis of internet buzzwords “dagongren” and “involution”. *New Media Research*, 7(11), 6–13.
- Coyne, S. M., McDaniel, B. T., & Stockdale, L. A. (2017). “Do you dare to compare?” Associations between maternal social comparisons on social networking sites and parenting, mental health, and romantic relationship outcomes. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 70, 335–340.
- Cui, C., Huang, Y., & Wang, F. (2020). A relay race: Intergenerational transmission of housing inequality in urban China. *Housing Studies*, 35(6), 1088–1109.
- Cullen, S. (2019). Rebellion in style: Sang Culture and youth resistance in China. *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Studies*, 8(1), 43-61.
- Cyberspace Administration of China*. (2021). The 47th China statistical report on internet development. [http://www.cac.gov.cn/2021-02/03/c\\_1613923423079314.htm](http://www.cac.gov.cn/2021-02/03/c_1613923423079314.htm)
- Dimock, M. (2019). Defining generations: Where Millennials end and Generation Z begins. *Pew Research Center*, 17(1), 1-7.
- Fang, H. (2021). Exploring the spread of anxiety among young people from the perspective of involution. *Audiovisual*, 7, 196–197.
- Festinger, L. (1954). A theory of social comparison processes. *Human Relations*, 7(2), 117–140.
- Francis, T., & Hoefel, F. (2018). 'True Gen': Generation Z and its implications for companies. *McKinsey & Company*. <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/consumer-packaged-goods/our-insights/true-gen-generation-z-and-its-implications-for-companies>
- Fu, J. (2017). *A study of online citizenship practices of Chinese young people* [Master's thesis, The University of Melbourne, Melbourne].
- Gao, G. (2020). Exploring the “Z Generation” subcultural community ecology under the barrage communication mechanism—Taking the Bilibili barrage network as an example. *Media Forum*, 3(2), 134-136.
- Geertz, C. (1963). *Peddlers and princes: Social change and economic modernization in two Indonesian towns*. University of Chicago Press.
- Goldenweiser, A., & Lowie, R. (1936). *Essays in anthropology*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Hon, N. Y. M. (2020). The game of communication: An analysis of the emoji landscape in social media. *Journal of Physics: Conference Series*, 1684(1), 012002.

- Hou, X., Ren, S., Rozgonjuk, D., Song, L., Xi, J., & Möttus, R. (2023). The longitudinal association between narcissism and problematic social networking sites use: The roles of two social comparison orientations. *Addictive Behaviors, 145*, 107786.
- Hou, Y. (2019). Research on the current situation and countermeasures of contemporary youth consumption. *Chinese Youth Studies, 11*, 107–112+199.
- Kato, T. A., Kanba, S., & Teo, A. R. (2018). Hikikomori: Experience in Japan and international relevance. *World Psychiatry, 17*(1), 105–106.
- Kozinets, R. V. (2015). *Netnography: Redefined*. SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Li, C. L. (2020). Intergenerational sociology: A unique perspective for understanding the values and behavior patterns of the new generation in China. *Chinese Youth Studies, 11*, 36–42.
- Li, F. Y. (2018). An analysis of media framework construction of “Sang culture” network phenomenon. *Audiovisual, 8*, 156–157.
- Li, H. B., & Liu, P. Y. (2019). The abnormal consumption behavior and regulation of contemporary college students. *Academic Forum, 42*(4), 131–136.
- Li, X., & Peng, Y. (2020). Symbolic performance: Critical discourse construction of cyberspace mourning culture. *International Press, 42*(12), 50–67.
- Liang, Z., & Thompson, J. (2022). *The rise of Sang Culture: Youth subcultures and social change in China*. Routledge.
- Liu, Z. (2020). Rebellion and subversion: Research on the identity of college youth's “morning culture” and countermeasures in the context of new media. *Silicon Valley, 4*(19), 85–86.
- Liu, Z. X., & Wang, Y. (2019). Research on the communication of youth network “Sang culture” from the perspective of new media——Taking the popular word “buddha” as an example. *Chinese Youth Social Sciences, 38*(3), 101–110.
- Lobinger, K., Krämer, B., Venema, R., & Benecchi, E. (2020). Pepe—Just a funny frog? A visual meme caught between innocent humor, far-right ideology, and fandom. In B. Krämer & C. Holtz-Bacha (Eds.), *Perspectives on populism and the media* (pp. 333-352). Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG.
- Lv, Q. Y. (2017). *Sang culture: A study of the discourse turn of youth groups*. Paper presented at the He Wei News Award Conference, Xi'an.
- Nie, T., Hu, G., & Qiu, T. (2022). Parental control and college students' adversarial growth: A discussion on Chinese one-child families. *Healthcare, 10*(10), 1872.
- Qi, Y. L., & Wang, Y. F. (2018). Youth network political expression based on discourse analysis. *Chinese Youth Social Sciences, 37*(2), 95–101.
- Qin, X. Y., & Dai, Y. Q. (2022). From “involution” and “buddhist youth” to “lying flat”: Understanding the cultivation of youth striving spirit from the perspective of social mentality changes. *Chinese Youth Research, 2*, 5–13.
- Ren, Z. N. (2021). *Research on the network expression of Generation Z and the construction of discourse system* [Master's thesis, Shanghai Normal University, Shanghai]. CNKI.
- Shi, L. (2017). Powerlessness and resistance dissolving——An interpretation of the phenomenon of “Sang culture” on the internet. *Journal of Fujian Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition), 6*, 168–174+179.
- Song, K., & Liu, X. S. (2020). Exploration of the construction of the campus moral education path for the Z generation students with the short video as the craze of the network culture. *Journal of Yangzhou Institute of Education, 38*(2), 59–65.

- Su, W. (2023). "Lie flat"— Chinese youth subculture in the context of the pandemic and national rejuvenation. *Continuum*, 37(1), 127–139.
- Sun, J. (2022). Urban youth culture under the one-child policy in China: A multiperspectival cultural studies of internet subcultures. *Educational Studies*, 59(1), 74–92.
- Tan, K. C., & Cheng, S. (2020). Sang subculture in post-reform China. *Global Media and China*, 5(1), 86–99.
- Underberg, N. M., & Zorn, E. (2013). *Digital ethnography: Anthropology, narrative, and new media*. University of Texas Press.
- Xia, Z. Y. (2016). Guide young people away from the erosion of "Sang culture". *Chinese Self-Study*, 23, 16–17.
- Xiang, J. Y. (2020). Perspective on the phenomenon of "circularization" of youth: representation, reason and guidance. *People's Forum*, 1, 104–106.
- Varis, P. (2016). Digital ethnography. In A. Georgakopoulou & T. Spilioti (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of language and digital communication* (pp. 55-68). Routledge.
- Vogel, E. A., Rose, J. P., Roberts, L. R., & Eckles, K. (2014). Social comparison, social media, and self-esteem. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, 3(4), 206.
- Wagner, K. B. (2023). TikTok and its mediatic split: The promotion of ecumenical user-generated content alongside Sinocentric media globalization. *Media, Culture and Society*, 45(2), 323–337.
- Walters, E. (2020). The limits of Sang: Class, rurality, and the boundaries of youth culture in China. *Chinese Sociological Review*, 52(3), 214-234.
- Wang, Y., Li, Y., Gui, X., Kou, Y., & Liu, F. (2019). Culturally-embedded visual literacy: A study of impression management via emoticon, emoji, sticker, and meme on social media in China. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 3(CSCW), 68.
- Wood, J. (2022). Gen Z's mental health crisis: Pandemic stressors, social media, and more. *NPR*.
- Wu, M. H., & Zhang, Y. (2021). The behavioral logic and reflection of Gen Z's online live learning. *Contemporary Youth Studies*, 6, 45–50.
- Yang, J. Y. (2021). *Research on "Sang Culture" in the Netease Cloud Virtual Community* [Master's thesis, Hunan Normal University, Changsha]. CNKI.
- Zhang, J. J. (2019). Who are the "main force" of buying, buying and buying— Interpretation of the characteristics of China's current consumption era. *People's Forum*, 14, 22–24.
- Zhang, Z., & Li, K. (2023). So you choose to "Lie flat?" "Sang-ness," affective economies, and the "Lying flat" movement. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 109(1), 48–69.
- Zhu, S. L. (2018). The "decadence" of internet youth and the style turn of subculture— Based on the research of Internet "Sang culture". *Southeast Spread*, 2, 44–47.