Sang culture: Exploring the new Chinese youth movement and the way forward

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ABSTRACT

"Sang culture", a cultural phenomenon pervasive among Chinese youths is characterised by expressions of resignation and pessimism in their social media engagements. Inculcated by an interplay of structured social and educational practices as well as strict government policies, the Sang culture is a deeply ingrained social expression that voices out resistance and non-conformity of the said youths. This study explores the proliferation of the Sang culture, outlines its implications, and navigates the ensuing challenges. Using the foundation of the Social Comparison Theory, the study found that the "downwards comparison" element dominated and were heavily applied by selected informants from the Generation Z cohort through semi-structured interviews that were conducted, but also saw positive "upwards comparison" in terms of togetherness in the social discourse. The influence of family expectations, along with stressful work environments fostered by rigorous academic expectations has also shaped the prevalence of the Sang culture. This study also found fostering open dialogues in families, diversifying academic evaluation systems, promoting work-life balance in corporations, and the efforts in nurturing mental health and active civic participation is fairly absent among youngsters form the Generation Z cohort in China. Further to this, ingrained social norms and rigid traditional structures resist these changes, thus rendering a strategic balance between social harmony and open discourse as necessary. The study underscores the necessity of initiating dialogues on the Sang culture, promoting Sang culture-centric research, and studying the effectiveness of social media in deconstructing the "Sang".

Keywords: **Sang culture, Chinese youth, generation z, social media, social comparison**

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INTRODUCTION

The "Sang culture" is a prominent subculture among Chinese youth typified by language, text, or memes that communicate feelings of decadence, despair, and pessimism on the internet, particularly through social media (Xiao et al., 2017). As such, the rising Sang culture popularity of *lying flat*, a mental state signifying indifference or a lack of response or resistance thus indicative of submission as well as *foxi culture*, an attitude of living devoid of desires akin to Buddha or "slacking off" behaviour represents the spiritual traits and collective anxiety of the Chinese youth today as an online discourse. The social practice of Sang culture reflects their thoughts, behaviours, and attitudes in everyday life. At present, Chinese youth are experiencing a crisis of cultural and spiritual emptiness, leading to a trend of mediocrity and nihilism that often clashes with traditional Chinese values as well as the social norms and the Chinese endorsement of positive energy (Liu et al., 2019).

Traditions in China is a value system centred in Confucianism alongside traditional Chinese culture that also underscores collectivism and harmony whilst stressing on obedience (Li et al., 2019; Liu, 2021). This is in stark contrast to the Sang culture that emphasises individualism and resistance (Tan & Cheng, 2020). The younger generation in China is more inclined to pursue personal success and realise individual value, however, the higher demands placed on oneself can likely create experiences of setback and accumulation of more negative emotions (Nanda et al., 2020; Steele & Lynch, 2013). Young people in China currently face various challenges, such as skyrocketing housing prices, high cost of marriage, class stratification, and work overload. Simultaneously, individualistic beliefs have also reinforced the pursuit of negative individual and emotional expressions, particularly on social media (Rui, 2019). In the Chinese society, many companies and organisations expect employees to adhere to company culture and social norms, such as working diligently to create value for the enterprise, such as the "996 work system" or working from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., six days a week. Sang culture enthusiasts often resist these expectations with self-deprecating phrases like *lying flat* and *slacking off*. Such conflicts may lead to tense relationships between individuals and their employers, thereby affecting personal career development and organisational efficiency (Gaur et al., 2023).

Subsequently, the Sang culture is often perceived as a threat to social stability and government authority, given its negative and resistant characteristics that challenge traditional order and norms. The government and media are critical of the Sang culture and typically depict it as an unfavourable cultural phenomenon. Despite this, internet users continue to find various ways to voice their dissatisfaction towards the society they live in. In an environment where political expressions of social injustice are heavily suppressed, some young Chinese have resorted to using the Sang culture stance to express dissent, as the internet provides Chinese youth with anonymity, real-time interaction, and relative freedom and inclusivity for expressing their views (Li & Peng 2020; Wu & Fitzgerald, 2021). The authorities primarily handle negative subcultures through censorship and punishment; however, governmental monitoring and restriction of the Sang culture has not weakened its propagation on the internet but have instead, spurred more netizens to adopt this subculture to communicate their viewpoints.

Existing research have highlighted the importance of effective communication between the government and young individuals, which could provide profound insights into their real-world challenges and enable suitable guidance. Notably, there appears to be potential for heightened dialogue with young people across various social contexts, such as schools, workplaces, and families. Such engagement could contribute to providing the

necessary attention and support for the development of the Chinese youth affected by the Sang culture. Whilst the detrimental effects of the Sang culture on the Chinese society and the urgent need for intervention have been acknowledged, research on effectively addressing the Sang culture phenomenon and improving the mental health and quality of life of young people from a systemic perspective is still relatively scarce. Furthermore, there is an incessant need for research to understand how various social factors influence mental health and life satisfaction amongst the Chinese youth, particularly Generation Z (Gen Z), potentially aggravating the proliferation of the Sang culture.

The Sang culture could also be interpreted as a plea for help and attention from China's younger generation, for the society and government to extend more support and understanding. Many young individuals feel that their concerns are not properly addressed, and their voices are ignored. This study explores the emergence of the Sang culture and the government's response, and it proposes solutions to diminish resistance, discover mutual resolutions, and bridge the gap between the Chinese society and young advocates of the Sang culture. It also hopes to provide clarity towards the culmination of the Sang culture and its influence towards the Chinese communities and society acceptance at large.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Comparative pressures and expectations in Chinese families

Adolescence is acknowledged as a crucial transition period, shifting into maturity (Li et al., 2007). During this phase, individuals grapple with significant challenges such as social integration, parental separation, and self-identity formation, all the while undergoing considerable physiological, psychological, and social changes (Gerard & Buehler, 2004). The demand for independence intensifies during this period, henceforth, controlling parenting behaviours can obstruct the fulfilment of young people's autonomy. This obstruction can negatively impact their psychological development and increase their predisposition to maladjustment issues like depression, anxiety, and nihilism (Skoog & Kapetanovic, 2022).

Parenting habits are profoundly influenced by the cultural environment, and traditional cultural values can shape parenting behaviour (Feng et al., 2013). Driven by Eastern collectivist values and Confucian traditions, the Chinese culture emphasises parental authority, whereby Chinese parents perceive their roles as disciplinarians for their children, incorporating elements of care and love. However, they often stress strict discipline, punishment, and absolute obedience from children to their parents (Mousavi et al., 2016). For instance, non-compliant children might be threatened with the cessation of economic support or reminded endlessly of the sacrifices made by the family, which damages their sense of autonomy and self-expression, and could lead to the said maladjustment (Shek et al., 2021). Chinese-style parenting also implies parents' expectations for their children to conform to mainstream values, attain a superior social status, and secure more social resources to honour their parents and bring prestige to their family. These expectations typically come with the demand for unconditional obedience, often neglecting respect for their children's individual values and desires.

In addition, parents often exert significant pressure on their children through comparison, with a phrase "other people's children", frequently used by Chinese parents to convey, either directly or indirectly, that their children are less accomplished than their peers (Gong & Zhang, 2020). When a child's behaviour falls short of their parents' expectations, these comparisons become more evident. The parents may overtly or subtly

convey to their children that their peers are more successful, intending to inspire their children to strive for similar accomplishments. This approach, however, tends to create negative experiences for children, causing them to feel as though they are being criticised for not measuring up to their peers (Liu, 2018).

After being exposed to the *other people's children* narrative, individuals may feel that their peers are happier, more successful, and overall, better off. This exposure may lead individuals to engage in negative self-comparisons, which can result in negative psychological outcomes such as rumination, jealousy, and depression (Li, 2019). The authoritarian approach of parents, coupled with these constant comparisons, amplify the pressures and expectations on the Chinese youth, neglecting respect for their individual values and desires. This pressure exacerbates feelings of anxiety and despair among young people, culminating in the phenomenon known as the Sang culture.

The lack of autonomy in Chinese education

School education forms a vital part of the socialisation process, with its primary aim being the cultivation of individuals who are equipped with the necessary knowledge, skills, and right life values, and can adapt to social needs (Akkermans et al., 2018). Regrettably, schools continue to adopt strict curricula, such as the *Hengshui* model, an exam-oriented educational approach created by Hengshui Middle School to align with the current college entrance examination system. This evaluation system not only places enormous psychological pressure on students, but also undermines the essence of education, causing students to prioritise test scores over authentic knowledge and skill acquisition (Hirsch, 2019). Even when some students successfully enter their desired universities, they often lose their sense of direction and motivation when faced with new challenges (Wei et al., 2021).

This sense of disillusionment may result from a variety of factors, including limited opportunities for self-discovery and self-realisation, uncertainty and anxiety about the future, and a perceived disconnect between actual circumstances and expectations (Froese et al., 2012). These factors contribute to students' unstable emotional and psychological states, causing some to feel overwhelmed and confused in the pursuit of self-growth and goal achievements. Such feelings can further lead to the emergence of the Sang culture among young people. To counter the influence of the Sang culture, Chinese universities aim to nurture socialist core values among students by strengthening ideological and political education (Liu et al., 2019). Thus, ideological and political education in Chinese universities have been established with the objective of aligning students with socialist core values and national interests (Lu, 2017).

As social changes and higher education evolve, the content and form of education have become progressively diverse. Despite the capacity of ideological and political education to disseminate positive values, the "cramming" style often employed in such education may overlook individual differences, stifle creativity, and contribute to a lack of independent and diverse thinking among students (Zhang & Fagan, 2016). Ideological education often constrains students' freedom of thought and speech by imposing a singular ideology. This practice hinders their exposure to varied perspectives, weakens their ability to think and judge diversely, emphasises unity, sacrifice, and collectivism, encourages a tendency to blindly conform and limit freedom and diversity (Lu, 2017). These negative effects may result in young people resisting and opposing education, more readily generating negative emotions and behaviours, and potentially intensifying the Sang culture among youths on social media.

Stressful work environments and involuted competition

China is among the nations with the longest working hours worldwide, with overtime being a common occurrence across various organisations (Chen, 2021). The pervasive issue of extended working hours and uncompensated overtime is influenced by China's traditional culture of diligence and hard work (Gao, 2011; Zhang, 2013). Recently, the "996 work system", prevalent in the internet industry, elicited widespread controversy and resistance. "996" refers to a work schedule where employees work from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., six days a week, that has gradually become an ingrained overtime culture in internet companies (Su, 2023). The widespread "996" work mode, social stratification, and inequality further exacerbate young people's plight, who face difficulty in promotion, securing labour rights, and potential economic and health risks, forcing them to engage in the increasingly normalised overwork culture (Chen, 2021). With the inflation of the value of higher education diplomas, the pressure of social competition has not eased with the universal improvement of education levels, but rather has steadily intensified.

Influenced by the traditional Confucian culture and driven by a free-market economy, the Chinese society's competitive nature leaves little room for quitting or failure (Wang, 2023). Young people grapple with intense social and familial expectations, high effort-to-reward ratios, and increasing competition thresholds, all of which cause feelings of hopelessness and confusion (Yu, 2021). Some respond by expressing discontent and depression, while others employ self-deprecating humour, disguising themselves as *code farmers*, *social animals*, or *workers*. Another group increases their competitiveness, further compressing their lives and time. Regardless of the coping strategy, the common denominator is a sense of confusion and despair. Furthermore, the youth in China face significant challenges related to work culture. The longstanding culture of high-pressure overtime is prevalent, posing a substantial threat to young people's physical and mental health. Extended working hours and intense work stress lead not only to physical health issues, but also to negative emotional states such as disappointment, anxiety, and frustration.

Suppressed negativity in public discourse and the Social Comparison Theory

Since 2012, the Chinese government had consistently promoted *positive energy* on the internet, encouraging individuals and groups to harbour positive emotions and attitudes, including cohesion, love, social responsibility, national pride, and striving for excellence. Yang and Tang (2018) defined positive energy as the capacity to induce positive emotions and attitudes in individuals and the potential for constructive speech and actions. Further to this, the Chinese government initiated a specific campaign named *Qing Lang* which meant "clear and bright" to eradicate harmful information and regulate the online environment, with the objective of curbing negative trends on social media and inhibiting the manipulation of young people's emotions which includes the "Sang culture" (Tang, 2023). According to official directives issued by the government, Chinese youths are advised to scrutinise sensitive posts, comments, and information on social media platforms that are considered inaccurate. These platforms have also adopted more stringent removal policies to ensure compliance of shared content with the continuously evolving official guidelines (Petre et al., 2019).

Conversely, the Sang culture of despair is a cultural phenomenon inclining towards pessimism, negativity, and suppression which supports the disenchantment of young people who are desperate about their lives and which might even develop into psychological issues such as anxiety and depression. In the current society where information is highly accessible, many young people communicate and express themselves through the internet.

In such circumstances, the dissatisfaction and resentment harboured by young individuals may be consigned to internal rumination, potentially intensifying the proliferation and entrenchment of the Sang culture.

With that said, the social comparison theory emphasises the process by which individuals gauge their perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours against those prescribed or implied by prevailing social norms. Festinger (1954) introduced the concept of choosing whom individuals emulate or compete with whilst Argo et al. (2006) highlighted that individuals tend to create a façade of themselves in an alternate fashion when confronted with unfavourable social comparisons to themselves. Consequently, any exceptional performance by someone, whether closely connected or not, necessitates the management of both the public and private persona. This is notably evident in the current scenario where social media accounts often depict unrealistic and false perceptions of reality.

In this framework, social realities encompass various factors such as socioeconomic conditions, social norms, prevalent attitudes, and the overall social environment. The discrepancy or alignment between personal viewpoints and social realities plays a significant role in shaping how individuals perceive, internalise, and engage with phenomena like the Sang culture. The social comparison theory encompasses both "upward" and "downward" comparisons, which are described as universalistic and particularistic, respectively. Engaging in an upward comparison, where individuals compare themselves to those with more attractive and fascinating lifestyles, can be detrimental to one's confidence. Conversely, making downward comparisons with individuals perceived as less accomplished or inferior can offer a sense of validation and dominance (Suls et al., 2002; Wills, 1981).

This perspective underscores how social realities function both as a benchmark for self-evaluation and as a substantial factor influencing individual perceptions and actions. It deepens our understanding of how Gen Z navigates the disparity between their personal experiences and social realities, and how they express this navigation within the realm of the Sang culture on social media platforms.

METHOD

In this study, semi-structured interviews were deployed as the primary method to delve into the profound understanding and personal experiences of informants concerning the Sang culture. This approach provided a framework for consistency, fostering comparability across various interviews, yet retained enough adaptability to accommodate the distinct experiences and perspectives of each informant. Gen Z is often characterised as the Internet Generation as their upbringing is seamlessly intertwined with the era of digital information technology. Their lives have been profoundly shaped by the widespread use of digital information technology, instant communication devices and smart mobile products.

These individuals classified as "digital natives" are known for their technological proficiency and adeptness with various social media platforms and scholars often investigate specific behaviours and reactions within this generational cohort (Fernandez-Cruz & Fernandez-Diaz, 2016). Consequently, they serve as ideal subjects for examining and comprehending how the Sang culture is developed and disseminated through social media and the internet. As such, snowball sampling gathered 14 informants for the study. Creswell (2013) suggested a varied range of interviewees by recommending five to 25 interviews for phenomenological research, henceforth informants in this study exhibited diverse backgrounds and included both students and employed individuals.

Table 1. Informant background

ID	Age	Gender	Occupation
S1	23	Female	Medical representative
S2	25	Female	Sales
S3	26	Male	Product manager
S4	26	Male	Product manager
S5	26	Male	Gamer
S6	19	Female	Student
S7	25	Male	Sales
S8	27	Male	Gamer
S9	19	Female	Student
S10	27	Female	Producer/director
S11	23	Female	Teacher
S12	26	Female	Government worker
S13	24	Female	Freelancer
S14	26	Male	Sales

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Informants of the study clearly indicated that they adopt the Sang culture as a means of dealing with daily stresses and anxieties. These participants openly communicate their stress and anxiety on social media, using the language and symbols associated with the Sang culture, in an effort to garner understanding and support from their peers. This conduct not only acknowledges the harsh realities of stress and anxiety, but also reflects their endeavour to seek assistance and find psychological solace which is solely associated with negativity and pessimism, revealing its complexity and diversity.

Dealing with daily stresses and anxieties

Informant S1 clearly expressed that participating in the Sang Culture activities had, to a certain degree, mitigated feelings of anxiety and unhappiness. This behaviour can be understood as a mechanism for self-healing, where S1 seeks psychological relief by expressing and sharing emotions on social media. This strategy is a way of seeking help and self-motivation. Informant S11 also openly challenged the stereotype of the Sang Culture:

> *It's this state of lying flat that can actually recharge me. It's actually a positive influence, not that I have to be full-blooded all the time, all the time, all the time. The occasional lying flat is actually a kind of break for me or an occasional Sang, which is actually a kind of stress relief for me.* (Informant S11)

This illustrates the agency of Gen Z in practicing the Sang culture not as a form of resignation to pessimism, but as an intentional tool for managing stress and practising self-care. As a result, this contributes to a more nuanced comprehension of the role, complexity, and potential positive effects of the Sang Culture within the Chinese Gen Z demographic. Similarly, Informant S10 uses Sang culture emojis to express dissatisfaction and cope with workplace stress. The behaviour of *slacking off*, acknowledged within this culture, is employed in this context to reflect dissatisfaction and stress arising from negative workplace experiences. Informant S13 echoes this sentiment below:

> *When you feel powerless about a certain matter, sometimes it helps to vent or express your Sang feelings, just to get some relief. Keeping it all inside can be really annoying and overwhelming, you know?* (Informant S13)

This can be interpreted as a potential plea for change, representing an effort to manage perceptions and signal a need for improvement in the work environment.

Collective space

Expressing their emotions in a public space such as social media platforms has the potential to mould perceptions of themselves, aligning with their self-image and transparency about their feelings. It becomes evident that the Sang culture influence on the lives of Chinese Gen Z goes beyond emotional expression. It serves as a shared language for collectively addressing dissatisfaction, stress, and powerlessness. Even though this appears like a "downwards comparison" as posited by the social comparison theory, this collectivism functions as an "upwards comparison" as a means to share with each other a feeling of belonging, and serving broader sociocultural and psychological purposes.

Informant S10 indicated that participation in the Sang culture comes from creating a shared world of "catharsis." According to S10, this togetherness in the Sang culture becomes a method for emotional regulation, a mechanism to manage feelings and a way to negotiate experiences within their social sphere. This further solidifies the idea that for Chinese Gen Z, the Sang culture is an outlet for collective venting and contributes to their overall well-being by enabling them to seek help when faced with social pressures. As shared by Informant S12, social media was referred to as a *virtual confessional*.

> *[…] I tend to vent more on Weibo, while on WeChat, it's more about light-hearted banter and playful teasing.* (Informant S13)

Informant S13 strategically chooses social media platforms for expressing opinions, considering their functionality and the anticipated audience. This reveals a sophisticated approach to information management, showcasing how Gen Z adeptly navigates the digital landscape in their pursuit of self-help through the Sang culture. Similarly, Informant S8 talks about engaging in Sang culture behaviours on social media to shape the perceptions of others. In this instance, the strategy involves using Sang expressions strategically to evoke empathy or understanding from the audience.

Self-actualisation

Although the primary purpose of participating in the Sang culture is to seek help or find emotional relief, this upwards comparison in cultural engagement also plays a crucial role in nurturing interpersonal relationships and shaping desired self-images, serving as a pathway towards self-actualisation. By openly sharing Sang emotions and experiences, the informants establish a shared understanding and mutual empathy, thereby strengthening relationships with peers and co-workers. Additionally, it aids in constructing an authentic and relatable image, contributing to their process of self-actualisation.

> *There is an emoji that says, 'You go to work every day, but you just slack off'. In this case, I'm not criticizing your job or your boss, but simply giving you a gentle reminder. At the same time, it can also divert the attention of your colleagues.* (Informant S1)

The earlier statement illustrates how Informant S1 is actively fostering more robust interpersonal connections, a vital component of the self-actualisation journey. Through the incorporation of symbols from the Sang culture, social workplace interactions foster relatability in personal identity. Despite the initially negative appearance, the use of Sang expressions proves to be a valuable tool for individuals aiming for personal fulfilment and bolstering social ties. According to Informant S7, with regard to the interactions on social networks, Sang also serves as a shared tool for mutual entertainment. The informant reshaped Sang, originally a seemingly negative concept, into a source of humour and amusement when engaging with others.

> I believe it's more of a joke, creating a lively atmosphere. It's because you spend a lot of time with your colleagues, and everyone knows what's going on. It's more of a joke. I go through the Sang culture and then create a way of empathy that makes my work and my management go more smoothly. (Informant S7)

The experience of this informant offers a unique perspective on how the Sang culture can facilitate self-actualisation within professional settings. By using Sang expressions as a medium for humour, S7 effectively strengthens interpersonal relationships, simultaneously portraying oneself as a source of positivity and camaraderie in the workplace. Consequently, the Sang culture transforms from mere tools of expression to catalysts for professional growth and personal fulfilment, thereby illustrating the duality of the Sang culture in impression management and self-actualisation. Additionally, Informant S1 shared that the successful creation of an empathetic atmosphere through the deployment of the Sang culture not only facilitates the building of colleague relationships, but also fuels personal growth and professional efficiency. However, Informant S12 finds that this is contradictory amongst some of his peers, where the idea of self-actualisation is downwards comparison.

> But he's not genuinely feeling down, he's boasting. For example, he would say to me, 'Oh, I'm so miserable,' even though he has a good salary and benefits. On the contrary, he would even complain about his own job and how difficult it is. (Informant S12)

On the other hand, Informant S2 encountered a comparable situation wherein expressions of unhappiness serve as a strategy for self-promotion, reflecting authentic and real discontent. This illustrates a distinct manifestation of the Chinese-style of "showing off" where the person laments the challenges of their job while simultaneously emphasising their substantial salary and perks. In this particular context, the individual employs Sang expressions strategically to depict an image of diligent effort and resilience in the midst of difficulties, thereby elevating their social status and personal fulfilment.

Determining social realities

From the lens of the social comparison theory, self-perception, morale, engagement in the workplace and subsequently, interaction with the Sang culture is seen as a common "downwards comparison" sentiment among others in Gen Z.

> I really dislike and strongly resent those who prioritise business performance at the expense of genuine enjoyment. I find it irresponsible towards players, and it really bothers me. But if the boss insists on pushing that agenda, I might just give up and say, `Don't count on me anymore. I won't take part in it'. (Informant S8)

This discontent arises from juxtaposing the existing social reality; the divergence between these realities can induce feelings of disillusionment and even defiance, as evidenced by S8. This comparison results in a perceived injustice, fuelling dissatisfaction and resistance. The downwards comparison potentially leads to a distancing effect from the values of the company, which S8 perceived as misaligned with their own and expressions of dissatisfaction may be reflected in their Sang culture identity on social media platforms. At the same time, informant S13 compared extended periods of continuous work with their personal expectation of a balanced work-life rhythm. The discrepancy between these two states seems to result in feelings aligned with the Sang culture — indicating fatigue, and potentially, a sense of helplessness thereby contributing to the experience of Sang.

Meanwhile, Informant S12 admitted that within the Chinese social context, the long-standing social culture in China is that deceptive behaviour towards superiors can result in positive outcomes and would be rewarded in terms of getting a promotion and further work-related activities. The dissonance between these two realities contributes to the respondent's discontent and sense of resignation that leads to expressions of cynicism through Sang culture identities on social platforms. Informant S14 identified a stark contrast between the economic prosperity experienced by their parents and the current "new normal" of slower economic development faced by their generation.

> *[…] many times, this Sang phenomenon is not a deliberate choice, but rather a result of being forced and feeling helpless.*　　　　　(Informant S14)

The comparison between generations emphasises the salience of historical and socioeconomic contexts in shaping cultural phenomena. Additionally, the comment on social hierarchies becoming "relatively fixed" implies a perception that socioeconomic status is becoming harder to change, contributing to feelings of stagnation and limited potential for improvement. The perceived social hierarchies imply a sense that opportunities for upward mobility are fewer, leading to diminished motivation to strive. This narrative illustrates the concept of social comparison, particularly in the context of economic prospects.

Informant S4 weighed the potential for economic advancement against the perceived opportunities available in the current societal and economic state. This comparison seems to yield a sense of frustration and diminished motivation, as the perceived opportunities are not congruent with their expectations of the economy.

Identity conflict in the context of societal norms

As society dictates certain values and behaviours, it becomes crucial to examine how this generation navigates the tension between individualism and societal expectations.

> *But because of the current environment, I feel like I'm constrained. It's like I must buy a house to settle down. But why am I buying a house? To be honest, it's because my parents feel that buying a house here means establishing a home. However, personally, I still don't have a sense of belonging. Really, even now, I don't feel like I'm going to stay here for the rest of my life. I truly lack that sense of belonging.*　　　　　(Informant S12)

This expectation carries a deep-seated, possibly intergenerational belief that owning something tangible such as a house symbolises stability, permanence, and commitment. However, Informant S12 seemed to resist this ingrained notion. Gen Z cohorts and

globalised perspectives, do not resonate with the more traditional, perhaps materialistic, measures of success. The potential nonconformity to these expectations can cause distress, furthering the appeal of the Sang culture among Gen Z individuals in China.

Meanwhile, the perceived social barriers that thwart the accomplishment of their ideal romantic relationships may be viewed as part of larger inhibitive societal structures, nudging individuals toward expressions resonating with Sang. This perceived resistance could serve as a coping mechanism, allowing an avenue to share experiences that might otherwise remain untold.

> *Because I believe that those close to you should be there for you in your most difficult times, or when you need help the most. They should be the first to stand by your side, comforting your emotions and facing things together. But that's not the case for me personally. I feel that as a family, no matter what, when you come back home, you should always find solace. You should be able to find genuinely positive and uplifting things that help you see the beauty in life rather than making you more negative and down Sang.* (Informant S8)

This aspect of the Sang culture is significant as it notably illuminates Gen Z confrontation with social expectations regarding familial relationships in China. The contradiction between their experiences and societal norms can result in alienation and estrangement. The narrative of Informant S8 portrays this contradiction vividly, emphasising the role of social norms in shaping the emotional experiences of individuals. Ultimately, accepting the Sang culture provides a platform for voicing these unheard sentiments, thus reflecting its role as a coping mechanism amid social pressures and familial discordances.

> *My mom has always had a habit of comparing me to children from other families since I was little. It started with comparing grades, then later comparing jobs. Now that I'm at the age to get married, she even compares the person I'm going to marry, asking why I can't find someone like so-and-so. But I understand them because they are also first-time parents. They probably don't realise the psychological impact or trauma these comparisons can have on their children.* (Informant S12)

This tendency, although not maliciously intended, results in feelings of inadequacy and psychological distress, manifesting as feelings associated with the Sang culture. The expression of Sang, as the external validation they receive depends on their capacity to match or surpass others' achievements. This narrative sheds light on the societal norms of competitiveness and comparison in China that may contribute to the feelings of Sang among Gen Z. Despite the intent to motivate and foster ambition, such practices might inadvertently trigger feelings of inadequacy, low self-esteem, and melancholy.

It emphasises the critical need for a nuanced understanding of parenting approaches and their implications on children's psychological well-being. The prevalence of the Sang culture signals a collective response to these social pressures, potentially serving as a medium for expressing their struggles and discontentment.

> *My mom had high expectations of me and had a strong desire for control. For example, when it came to choosing subjects in high school, I preferred humanities, but my mom forced me to choose science. She prioritised practicality and having a stable future over pursuing my own interests.* (Informant S5)

This potentially results in an identity conflict for the individual, who must navigate between personal inclinations and external expectations. It raises critical questions about the implications of societal norms and parental expectations on developing one's identity. Consequently, it brings to light the possible impacts on an individual's mental health and overall life satisfaction. It also underlines the need to understand and accommodate individual differences and interests rather than strictly adhere to societal norms or traditional pathways to success. This also draws attention to the potential negative consequences of "over-parenting" or imposing high expectations without considering the child's perspectives. Indubitably, these dynamics could contribute to the feelings of being Sang among the younger generation, as they might perceive a lack of control over their life decisions and futures. From the perspective of downwards comparison theory, this narrative adds an interesting dimension to our understanding of the Sang phenomenon. It introduces the element of financial security as a significant factor in shaping attitudes toward life, career, and societal pressures. This perspective, combined with the previous one, underlines the intersectionality of the Sang.

DISCUSSION

The attitude and strategies of the government towards the phenomenon of Sang exert substantial social influence, as government actions and policies can mould the social environment, as well as the deeply impacted behaviours and attitudes of various social segments (Hall, 1993). Firstly, the current stance of the government on the Sang culture can shape public perception and understanding, thereby influence their reactions and approaches towards it. Secondly, government strategies, particularly those related to public engagement, democratic decision-making, and social support, can directly affect the quality of life and mental well-being of young people, consequently influencing their behaviour and the development trends of the Sang culture (Holt-Lunstad, 2018).

Social support can assist individuals in better managing stress and challenges, enhancing their life satisfaction and psychological well-being (Ng et al., 2022). The government should encourage participation of young people in social discussions and democratic decision-making, establish open and transparent information disclosure and public oversight mechanisms, enhance their sense of participation and belonging, and protect citizens' freedom of speech and information freedom (Uchino, 2014). HamzaoĞLu (2022) suggested that the government must meet the needs of young people through the provision of social support and services, assisting them in managing life pressures to promote their health and happiness.

As a leader, the administrative rulers need to exhibit clear and consistent attitudes, effectively communicating and leading various sectors of society (Men & Stacks 2014). The communication style of leaders plays a critical role in shaping and changing the organisational atmosphere (Men, 2015). Drawing from the study by Ceatha et al. (2021), it becomes clear that governments should actively engage with young individuals, involving them in the development and execution of policies aimed at safeguarding their rights. By fostering an open, inclusive social environment, governments can bolster mental health support services, improve workplace environments, and, in turn, alleviate the pressures and challenges facing youths of today. Such a proactive approach will amplify youth voices in policy-making, ensuring the strategies crafted are both reflective of and responsive to their genuine interests and concerns.

Parents

In addressing the challenges presented by the Sang culture, parents can implement a series of comprehensive strategies. Firstly, parents should respect their children's need for autonomy and encourage them to independently explore and develop their interests and talents (Ryan & Deci, 2017). This can be accomplished by providing the necessary support and resources and creating opportunities for autonomous decision-making. Respecting their children's independence and removing excessive pressure and expectations are also significant components of this strategy (Joussemet et al., 2014). Secondly, parents need to establish effective communication mechanisms and maintain open, supportive dialogues with their children (Brackett et al., 2011). This entails not only listening to their needs and opinions, but also expressing care and concern for their emotional and psychological well-being. By fostering emotional intelligence, parents can better comprehend and respond to their children's emotions (Rivers et al., 2019), maintaining an attitude of love and care. Lastly, parents can aid their children in coping with the challenges of the Sang culture by providing emotional, informational, and tangible support, thereby becoming a crucial support system for them within this cultural context. This involves promoting positive family values and providing opportunities for social support networks, such as facilitating social interactions and participation in beneficial community activities, to assist youths in establishing a positive identity and self-esteem (Rodríguez-Fernández et al., 2021).

Schools

In addressing the challenges presented by the Sang culture, schools can implement a variety of comprehensive strategies. Firstly, to alleviate academic pressure and anxiety among students, schools can introduce diversified evaluation systems, such as comprehensive quality assessments and practical competency evaluations. These evaluation systems extend beyond traditional academic performance measurements and concentrate on the development of students' multiple intelligences and comprehensive abilities, offering them more holistic opportunities for development (Abdelhak & Romaissa, 2022; Gardner, 2008). Secondly, schools should avoid excessive emphasis on ideological and political education and instead cater to the individual needs and interests of students. By employing personalised educational methods and flexible learning plans, schools can stimulate students' learning interests and potential (Abdelhak & Romaissa, 2022).

Moreover, schools should offer psychological counselling and support services to assist students in dealing with challenges and stress, as well as foster mental health and positive emotional development (Leshner & Scherer, 2021). This can be accomplished through the establishment of counselling centres, training of professional mental health personnel, provision of individual and group psychological support, and organisation of mental health education activities (Regehr et al., 2013). Lastly, schools can establish a positive social environment and support network to provide social support opportunities for students. This may include organising student clubs, conducting teamwork projects, and encouraging mutual assistance and experience sharing. By offering social support, schools can enhance students' sense of social belonging and support systems, helping them establish positive identity and self-esteem (Thoits, 2011).

Workplace

When addressing the challenges presented by the Sang culture in the workplace, a variety of strategies can be employed. Firstly, cultivating a positive organisational culture is crucial (Schein, 2010). Companies must reinforce positive values and behavioural norms, promoting a culture of sharing, care, and cooperation. By establishing clear core values,

employees can gain a deeper understanding of the company's mission. Implementing goals and reward mechanisms that offer employees a sense of recognition for their efforts and contributions, along with encouraging teamwork and mutual support, can enhance team cohesion. Secondly, offering opportunities for employee development and growth is crucial to ignite their intrinsic motivation and counteract the negative influence of the Sang culture (Ryan & Deci, 2017). This can be accomplished through personalised development plans, training, and learning opportunities.

In addition, assigning challenging tasks and projects, along with providing opportunities for promotion and career advancement, can stimulate employees' enthusiasm and growth motivation. Furthermore, achieving work-life balance is vital for employees' mental and physical well-being. Companies can help employees find balance by offering flexible working hours, providing family support measures, and encouraging vacation time and relaxation, thereby alleviating stress and anxiety (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Lastly, strengthening communication and participation can enhance employee satisfaction and engagement (Kompaso & Sridevi, 2010). Companies should offer open and transparent communication channels, encourage employees to share opinions and suggestions, and involve them in decision-making processes to increase their sense of participation and belonging.

CONCLUSION

Navigating this intricate landscape necessitates a collaborative approach, that is, tackling the Sang culture root causes from various perspectives. Families must cultivate spaces that encourage individualism, open dialogue, and emotional support. Academic institutions should aim to mitigate student stress by diversifying evaluation methods and emphasising comprehensive education. Corporate entities ought to foster work-life balance, promote cooperative dynamics, and provide pathways for meaningful career progression. Government bodies should strive for an inclusive societal climate, enhance mental health initiatives, and endorse active civic participation.

The implementation of these solutions is laden with challenges. Deep-rooted societal norms and attitudes may resist change, and both educational and corporate structures traditionally favour rigidity. Balancing societal harmony with open discourse, potentially contentious, is a daunting task for the government. The pragmatic way forward entails initiating dialogue amongst stakeholders including families, academic institutions, corporations, and governmental entities. A critical initial step could involve the creation of platforms for sharing experiences and perspectives, fostering mutual understanding. Promotion of research and public discourse on the Sang culture impact and consequences could raise awareness and prompt action. Governmental entities could launch small-scale pilot programs to assess the effectiveness of various strategies, eventually scaling up successful initiatives. Ultimately, the endeavour to mitigate the Sang culture necessitates collective effort, patience, and unyielding commitment.

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. This theme involves a deeper dive into the psychological dimensions of self-comparison, which provides valuable insights into the internal mechanisms influencing their response to the Sang culture.

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