

A Study on the Current Situation and Underlying Logic of “Lying Flat” Among Undergraduate Students at Local Universities in China

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of increasingly intense social competition and the phenomenon of “involution”, the “lying flat” culture has gained growing popularity and acceptance among undergraduates at local universities in China, and their “lying flat” behavior has become increasingly prominent. How to properly understand this phenomenon and guide undergraduates at local universities to strive tirelessly in the new era has become an important research topic. This study conducted a questionnaire survey to assess the current prevalence of the “lying flat” phenomenon among undergraduates and identify differences among various student groups. The findings reveal that a significant proportion of undergraduates at local universities currently exhibit “lying flat” behaviors in their studies, daily lives, and social interactions. Furthermore, such behaviors are more pronounced among students who are not only children, males, those from counties or smaller areas, first-year students, and those majoring in the humanities. Building on this foundation, this study analyzes the underlying logic behind the “lying flat” phenomenon among undergraduate students from four perspectives: socioeconomic transformation, communication between families and universities, peer group influence, and diminished self-efficacy. It also proposes countermeasures and recommendations in four areas—support systems, education on ideals and beliefs, mental health education, and family support—with the aim of helping undergraduate students overcome the “lying flat” dilemma.

Keywords: Local universities; Undergraduates; “Lying flat”; Current situation; Underlying logic

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1. Introduction

Undergraduate students at local universities bear the responsibility of realizing national prosperity and the rejuvenation of the nation. However, faced with the social reality of “involution” and influenced by youth subcultures, some students have developed distorted values; they choose to give up on striving and working hard, adopting a “lying flat” attitude to passively confront various difficulties and challenges. On the surface, “lying flat” appears to be a choice to lead a simple, ordinary, and low-desire life, adopting a “Buddhist-style”

attitude toward life and the future; in essence, however, it represents a youth subculture mindset characterized by passivity, laziness, self-abandonment, and hedonism.

“Lying flat” is characterized by a lack of hope and goals in life, as well as passivity, laziness, confusion, and resignation^[1]. Typical subtypes include escapist lying flat, resigned lying flat, and self-deprecating lying flat^[2]. Escapist lying flat refers to the phenomenon where, against a backdrop of rising social costs and intensifying competition, some undergraduates actively choose to “lie flat” as a way to resist the pressure they face. These students confront reality by adopting a “world-renouncing” attitude characterized by low desire, reducing their consumption and social needs^[3]. Resigned lying flat is a psychological stance adopted by undergraduates who feel powerless in the face of real-world difficulties and challenges and thus choose to compromise. These students were once proactive but discovered that no matter how hard they tried, they could not change their predicament; consequently, they use “lying flat” as a means of temporary avoidance. Self-deprecating lying flat refers to undergraduates who, in the face of competition and social pressures, express dissatisfaction and relieve psychological stress by openly proclaiming their “lying flat” stance in self-presentation and social interactions. Since external verbal expressions reflect one’s inner thoughts and values, self-deprecating “lying flat” carries distinct undertones of value nihilism^[4].

“Lying flat” refers to a psychological state in which undergraduates choose to abandon their efforts and passively withdraw from their responsibilities^[5, 6]. Conducting research on the current prevalence of this phenomenon among undergraduates at local universities, thoroughly analyzing the underlying logic behind it, and exploring ways to mitigate its adverse effects are not only crucial for the personal development of these students but also for the future of the nation and society.

2. The current trend of “lying flat” among undergraduates at local universities

To understand the current phenomenon of “lying flat” among undergraduate students at local universities and to guide them in adapting to and integrating into society with greater initiative and confidence, we conducted a questionnaire survey of current undergraduate students at local universities in Guangdong Province. A total of 350 questionnaires were distributed, with 311 valid responses collected, resulting in a response rate of 88.86%. Of these, 283 were from the Pearl River Delta region and 28 from the eastern, western, and northern regions of Guangdong; 191 male and 120 female respondents; 25 first-year students, 102 second-year students, 127 third-year students, and 57 fourth-year students; and 101 respondents from townships and rural areas, 35 from county seats, 91 from prefecture-level cities, 68 from provincial capitals, and 16 from municipalities directly under the central government.

2.1. Overall situation

Drawing on the approach of Ma et al. (2024), this study examines the “lying flat” behavior of undergraduates at local universities from three perspectives: the learning process, daily life, and social interactions^[7]. The survey results are presented in Table 1. Regarding the learning process, more than 12% of the surveyed undergraduates invest little time and effort in their studies, lack enthusiasm and motivation for learning, and do not care about their academic performance; In terms of daily life, as many as 20.9% of the surveyed undergraduates frequently stay up all night binge-watching shows or playing video games, maintaining irregular sleep schedules, while 3.86% do not care about their appearance, attire, or personal hygiene; regarding social interactions, 15.43% of the surveyed undergraduates are unwilling to participate in social

activities. These findings indicate that while the majority of undergraduate students at local universities are proactive and motivated, a significant proportion still exhibit a “lying flat” attitude toward their studies, daily life, and social interactions.

Table 1. Statistical overview of the “lying flat” phenomenon

Dimension	Item	Percentage
“Lying Flat” in the Learning Process	Skipping class, not paying attention in class, arriving late, leaving early, or failing to turn in homework.	6.11%
	Procrastinating when writing term papers, studying for exams, or completing assignments given by teachers.	11.58%
	Lacks enthusiasm and motivation for learning, and does not care about academic performance.	12.86%
	Spends little time and effort on studying and rarely collaborates, interacts, or communicates with classmates and teachers.	12.54%
“Lying Flat” in Everyday Life	Doesn’t care about personal appearance, clothing, or hygiene.	3.86%
	Irregular sleep patterns, such as frequently staying up all night binge-watching shows or playing video games.	20.9%
	Irregular eating habits, such as frequently skipping meals or overeating.	13.83%
“Lying Flat” in Social Interactions	Does not actively maintain existing social relationships.	7.07%
	Does not actively make new friends, does not want to attend social events, or tends to be quiet and reserved in social situations.	15.43%

2.2. Differences between only child and non-only child

Qin et al. (2022) argue that only children cannot generally make independent choices, having been instilled from an early age by their parents with a success-oriented mindset centered on “making a name for oneself and changing one’s destiny”. To examine differences in “lying flat” behavior between only children and non-only children, we conducted a t-test. Statistical results indicate that the mean scores for “lying flat” behaviors among non-only children were higher than those of only children across all items. Furthermore, there were significant differences in mean scores between the two groups on the items “spends little time and effort on studying and rarely collaborates, interacts, or communicates with classmates and teachers” and “irregular sleep patterns, such as frequently staying up all night binge-watching shows or playing video games”. These findings suggest that “lying flat” behaviors are more pronounced among non-only children than among only children.

Table 2. Differences in “lying flat” behavior between only children and non-only children

Item	Only Child (Mean ± SD)		T-value	P-value
	Yes (n = 187)	No (n = 124)		
Spends Little Time and Effort on Studying and Rarely Collaborates, Interacts, or Communicates with Classmates and Teachers	0.08 ± 0.020	0.19 ± 0.036	-2.777	0.006***
Irregular Sleep Patterns, such as Frequently Staying Up All Night Binge-watching Shows or Playing Video Games	0.17 ± 0.027	0.27 ± 0.040	-2.231	0.027**

2.3. Gender differences

After analyzing gender differences, it was found that male undergraduate students at local universities had higher mean scores than female undergraduate students across all three dimensions: academics, daily life, and social interactions. Further analysis using an independent-samples t-test revealed that male undergraduates

had significantly higher mean scores than female undergraduates on the items “skipping class, not paying attention in class, arriving late, leaving early, or failing to turn in homework” and “doesn’t care about personal appearance, clothing, or hygiene”. This indicates that these two forms of “giving up” are more prevalent among male undergraduates.

Table 3. Gender differences in “lying flat” behavior

Item	Gender (Mean $\pm$ SD)		T-value	P-value
	Male (n = 191)	Female (n = 120)		
Skipping Class, Not Paying Attention in Class, Arriving Late, Leaving Early, or Failing to Turn in Homework	0.08 $\pm$ 0.020	0.03 $\pm$ 0.016	1.771	0.078*
Doesn’t Care about Personal Appearance, Clothing, or Hygiene	0.05 $\pm$ 0.016	0.02 $\pm$ 0.012	1.787	0.075*

2.4. Differences in student origins

Family background has a significant influence on undergraduates’ “lying flat” behavior^[8]. To analyze the “lying flat” behavior of undergraduates from different regions of origin, this study employs one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) for statistical analysis. The results indicate that there are significant differences among undergraduates from different regions of origin in terms of three “lying flat” behaviors during the learning process and three “lying flat” behaviors in daily life. Specifically, the mean “lying flat” scores for undergraduates from rural, township, and county-level city backgrounds were generally higher than those for undergraduates from prefecture-level cities, provincial capitals, and municipalities directly under the central government. This indicates that the “lying flat” phenomenon is relatively more severe among undergraduates from rural, township, and county-level city backgrounds. The reason for this may be that the smaller the city, the less intense the competition, and consequently, the lower the level of pressure felt by undergraduates from these areas.

2.5. Grade-level differences

For undergraduate students at local universities, the challenges and difficulties they face vary by academic year. Statistical results indicate that there are significant differences in the mean scores among undergraduates of different years regarding “lacks enthusiasm and motivation for learning, and does not care about academic performance”, “spends little time and effort on studying and rarely collaborates, interacts, or communicates with classmates and teachers” and “irregular sleep patterns, such as frequently staying up all night binge-watching shows or playing video games”. Furthermore, scores consistently peaked in the first year, declined steadily in the second and third years, and rose slightly in the fourth year. This indicates that the “lying flat” phenomenon is most severe among first-year undergraduates at local universities, after which it eases to some extent. This may be attributed to the high academic pressure experienced in high school; upon entering university, students tend to relax somewhat due to the absence of supervision from teachers and parents. As specialized coursework becomes more advanced in the second and third years, undergraduates proactively increase their academic effort; however, with a reduction in specialized coursework in the fourth year, “lying flat” behavior tends to increase.

Table 4. Grade-level differences in “lying flat” behavior

Item	Grade-level (Mean $\pm$ SD)				F-value	P-value
	First Year (n = 25)	Second Year (n = 102)	Third Year (n = 127)	Fourth Year (n = 57)		
Lacks Enthusiasm and Motivation for Learning, and does Not Care about Academic Performance	0.36 $\pm$ 0.098	0.13 $\pm$ 0.033	0.09 $\pm$ 0.026	0.11 $\pm$ 0.041	4.658	0.003***
Spends Little Time and Effort on Studying and Rarely Collaborates, Interacts, or Communicates with Classmates and Teachers	0.24 $\pm$ 0.087	0.10 $\pm$ 0.030	0.09 $\pm$ 0.025	0.21 $\pm$ 0.054	3.119	0.026**
Irregular Sleep Patterns, such as Frequently Staying Up All Night Binge-watching Shows or Playing Video Games	0.44 $\pm$ 0.101	0.18 $\pm$ 0.038	0.18 $\pm$ 0.034	0.23 $\pm$ 0.056	3.205	0.024**

2.6. Differences in majors

Statistics show that the severity of the “lying flat” phenomenon, from highest to lowest, is as follows: law and education, business and management, humanities, history, and philosophy, science and engineering, agriculture and medicine, and arts and physical education. Since law and education, business and management, and humanities, history, and philosophy all fall under the category of liberal arts majors, this indicates that the “lying flat” phenomenon is more prevalent among undergraduate students in liberal arts majors.

3. The underlying logic behind the “lying flat” phenomenon among undergraduates at local universities

The “lying flat” phenomenon among undergraduates at local universities has brought about multiple negative consequences. For the students themselves, it not only undermines their ideals and convictions and saps their drive to strive, but also harms their physical and mental health. For the nation and society, it may lead to a sense of spiritual apathy and a crisis of faith among young people, affect undergraduates’ career choices, and hinder social development and progress. “Lying flat” reflects the life circumstances and life choices of undergraduate students at local universities in the face of social realities. Its underlying logic stems from four factors: economic and social transformation, communication between families and universities, peer group influence, and a weakening sense of self-efficacy.

3.1. Economic and social transformation has given rise to the “lying flat” phenomenon

China is transitioning from a phase of rapid growth to one of high-quality development. The transformation of economic and social structures has intensified clashes and shifts in ideological perspectives, thereby creating fertile ground for the emergence of the “lying flat” phenomenon. On the one hand, after decades of rapid development, China’s economy has expanded significantly, material resources have become more abundant, and household living standards have improved; on the other hand, this transformation has led to profound adjustments in social structures, with the costs of personal development rising while opportunities for advancement have relatively diminished, and competition has become increasingly fierce^[9]. With a certain material foundation to fall back on, and as the cost-benefit ratio and sense of fulfillment diminish, some undergraduates at local universities are choosing to slow down and live life in a way that is more comfortable

for them.

3.2. Insufficient and ineffective communication between families and universities

The family and the university are the two main pillars of an undergraduate's life. Some families operate under the belief that "once a child gets into college, everything is taken care of," viewing the conclusion of the college entrance exams as the completion of their parenting responsibilities. At the same time, since undergraduates attend universities in different cities, parents are unable to provide daily supervision, which further reinforces the notion that education and upbringing during the college years are solely the university's responsibility. On the other hand, universities often only contact parents when students violate discipline, fail courses, or face psychological issues, lacking timely and effective communication. Survey results showing that "lying flat" behavior is most severe among first-year students also indicate insufficient coordination and communication between families and universities, leading to excessive relaxation among first-year students.

3.3. The impact of negative emotions in peer groups

Peer groups are the primary source of daily interaction for undergraduates at local universities and exert a significant influence on their attitudes and behavior. Experiences of failure in peer competition, along with remarks such as "I can't compete anyway, so I might as well enjoy life," subtly influence undergraduates who lack inner resolve and are prone to conforming to the crowd. This exacerbates their feelings of helplessness, anxiety, and panic, leading them to simply give up on striving for success.

3.4. The decline in undergraduates' self-efficacy

The rapid development of the economy and society has brought both hope and pressure to undergraduate students at local universities. On the one hand, undergraduates hope to realize their self-worth through their own efforts; on the other hand, issues such as social "involution," high housing prices, and employment difficulties, coupled with their own relatively limited capabilities, have left them feeling a tremendous sense of oppression. The phenomenon of "involution"—characterized by rising costs of competition and diminishing odds of success—that is increasingly evident in today's society has left some undergraduates feeling deeply exhausted and helpless. If undergraduates are unable to find a sense of self-efficacy over an extended period, they may develop "learned helplessness," believing that no matter how hard they try, they cannot win over others, and thus become unwilling to believe that their own efforts can change reality.

4. Strategies for addressing the "lying flat" phenomenon among undergraduates at local universities

The "lying flat" phenomenon reflects the passive and unmotivated mindset of some undergraduates at local universities. Occasional, short-term "lying flat" can help undergraduates adjust their mental state and maintain physical and mental well-being; however, prolonged "lying flat" may lead to habitual inaction, hindering both individual growth and the overall development of society. Therefore, it is necessary to address this behavior among undergraduates and encourage them to persevere and strive for progress.

4.1. Establish a robust support system

A key reason for the "lying flat" phenomenon among undergraduates at local universities is that their personal

goals have not been effectively achieved and their concerns have not been given sufficient attention. Therefore, the first step is to establish and ensure the smooth operation of mechanisms for expressing these concerns. This involves collecting feedback from undergraduates through official platforms and WeChat, paying attention to the issues they encounter in their studies, daily lives, and social interactions, and responding promptly. Second, the evaluation system for undergraduates must be improved. It should not only focus on explicit achievements such as academic performance and competition results but also consider implicit indicators—such as moral character, mental health, and teamwork—that significantly impact personal future development, ensuring the rationality of evaluation criteria and the fairness and impartiality of the evaluation process. Third, emphasis must be placed on cultivating undergraduates' employability. Academic programs, course content, and learning formats should be adjusted in response to societal demands, and flexible teaching methods should be employed to strengthen undergraduates' practical skills, thereby enhancing their autonomy in life choices and their opportunities for personal development.

4.2. Strengthen education on ideals and convictions

Ideals and convictions serve as the spiritual pillar that drives undergraduate students at local universities forward. To strengthen education in ideals and convictions, we must first help undergraduates establish a correct outlook on life, worldview, and values, and insist on understanding and transforming the world through dialectical materialism and historical materialism. Second, we must fully explore the excellence of traditional Chinese culture and cultivate undergraduates' spirit of hard work and perseverance by offering courses on traditional culture and interpreting classical texts^[10]; Third, we must enhance undergraduates' ability to identify and resist various erroneous and negative ideologies, while strengthening the scrutiny of online content that spreads false reports, exaggerates anxiety, or encourages a “lying flat” mentality, thereby fostering a healthy online environment.

4.3. Strengthening mental health education for undergraduate students

First, local universities should incorporate mental health education into their curriculum, using courses, lectures, class meetings, and themed forums to disseminate mental health knowledge and help undergraduates master basic coping skills. Second, they can organize recreational activities that appeal to undergraduates to help them actively integrate into the community, spend time outdoors, and appreciate the beauty of life. Third, local universities should establish mental health records for undergraduates and promptly identify and address their mental health issues through regular assessments and the appointment of class mental health representatives.

4.4. Family care and support

On the one hand, parents need to adjust their parenting styles, moving away from overprotection and excessive pampering, and instead focus on strengthening undergraduates' ability to solve practical problems and cope with psychological stress. On the other hand, parents should abandon the notion that a university education is solely the responsibility of the institution; they should understand the challenges undergraduates face in their studies, social lives, internships, and job searches, and pay attention to their psychological well-being while providing effective support.

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