# The Dilemma and Solutions of the New Phenomena in the Network Subculture of Generation Z

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**Abstract**

As a new force on the internet, Generation Z has created a landscape of network subcultures in the new media era. They gather in groups based on shared interests, forming circle cultures such as the lying flat culture, partner culture, MBTI culture, and mystery box culture. Additionally, through the collage, deconstruction, and reconstruction of linguistic symbols, new internet terms like crazy literature, rat literature, and abbreviations have emerged. However, these emerging network subcultures face dilemmas such as label solidification due to excessive circling, bottomless traffic hype driven by entertainment supremacy, and value distortions caused by a lack of regulatory measures. To address these issues, Generation Z need to improve their information discernment capabilities to identify harmful online content. Mainstream media should guide appropriately to maintain the innovation and vitality of network subcultures. Meanwhile, the government should focus on the physical and mental health and needs of Generation Z, actively guiding them in scientifically relieving stress.

**Keywords:** Generation Z, circle culture, linguistic symbols, group dynamics

## 1. Introduction

Generation Z is the generation born between 1997 and 2012, also known as "Generation I" or "Zoomer", who are currently the youngest adult group in society. As natural digital natives, Generation Z has grown up alongside the development and maturity of the digital network. In the new media era, the advent of a networked society represented by intelligent media and internet technology has profoundly changed the mechanisms of cultural formation and sedimentation(Ling Jiang, 2021). Generation Z, revolving around the characteristics of the era, has formed distinctive generational circles and cultures. As native digital media users, Generation Z is highly individualistic, expressive, and eager for recognition, leading to the formation of hard-to-penetrate subcultures and pan-entertainment circles on the internet, along with a set of internally coherent but externally incomprehensible discourse systems(Xiaoliu Yang, 2018). The study intends to focus on the online subculture phenomenon of Generation Z in the new media era and the post epidemic era, and attempts to answer the following questions:

1) What new phenomena of Generation Z online subculture are emerging?

2) What are the group dynamics of Generation Z that are reflected in its new online subculture?

3) What dilemmas have emerged from Generation Z online subculture phenomenon?

4) What are the solutions to the dilemma of Generation Z online subculture phenomenon?

## 2. New Phenomena in the Network Subculture of Generation Z

Network subculture exists in a relatively open virtual space, with rapid information sharing and dissemination at its core. Various cultural phenomena of Generation Z are generated through the internet, intelligent media, and social platforms, growing through media platform sharing and participation. Thus, they possess subversive and postmodern characteristics, being relatively marginal compared to mainstream culture and independent from other subcultures, reflecting Generation Z's unique generational traits and attitudes.

### 2.1 Lying Flat Culture

Lying flat culture mainly refers to the young generation's initiative to give up mainstream paths such as promotion, buying a house, having children, etc., fading to the fringe, and using their own unique ways to dissolve the external environment's regulations and constraints(Wenyi Zhang, 2022). The term "lying flat" originally derived from the phrase "lying flat to be mocked," used by fans in the entertainment industry. The culture began in April 2021 with a post titled "Lying Flat is Justice" by a user named "Kind Traveler" on Baidu Post Bar, where he shared his attitude of choosing a "lying flat" life. This post quickly went viral, sparking widespread imitation among young people, especially those born in the '90s and '00s. The lying flat culture contrasts with the mainstream culture's advocacy of hard work, reflecting Generation Z's response to the pressures, class solidification, and anxieties they face during social transformation(Wenting Lu, 2023).

While lying flat humorously satisfies the emotional needs of young people for modern stress relief, it carries a negative connotation of passivity and lack of ambition. Despite varied societal responses to this culture, the underlying anxiety and fatigue it reveals resonate widely, spreading across different social strata through media technology(Qi Cai, 2022). As lying flat becomes a societal craze, it's crucial to examine the spiritual symptoms it represents in Generation Z and be wary of the alienation and erosion of self-value it entails.

## 2.2 Partner Culture

"Partner" refers to friends who share specific interests and accompany in short-term activities, such as dining, traveling, or studying. The rise of partner culture reflects the changing social psychology of Generation Z in the new media era. With increased societal fluidity and fatigue, and in the face of "social disconnection" and "digital loneliness," young people crave social companionship and emotional support. Partners offer fresh and stimulating experiences, allowing Generation Z to escape mainstream social relationships. Partners, characterized by precise companionship and clear boundaries, meet the social needs of Generation Z with minimal social costs and no emotional maintenance requirements, highlighting weak ties in social networks(Xindi Wang, 2023).

The emergence of partner culture is rooted in the interplay of social structure and social psychology (Hang Liu, 2023).In the fast-paced modern society, Generation Z continually "disembeds" from traditional contexts, making the choice of partners understandable when digital personas fail to meet real social needs. However, it's important to recognize that partner relationships do not offer a timeless, safe social form. While they provide immediate emotional gratification, they may erode the ability to manage long-term relationships. Additionally, the lack of regulation in partner culture can lead to social scams, with anonymous users exploiting the voluntary nature of partner relationships for monetary or emotional fraud.

## 2.3 MBTI Culture

MBTI, or the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, is a personality assessment tool developed from psychologist Carl Jung's theory of psychological types. It categorizes personality differences into four dimensions: Extroversion (E) vs. Introversion (I), Sensing (S) vs. Intuition (N), Thinking (T) vs. Feeling (F), and Judging (J) vs. Perceiving (P), resulting in sixteen personality types like INTJ, INTP, ENTJ, and ENTP. The rise of MBTI culture reflects Generation Z's identity confusion and desire for belonging within their cohort. The process of completing the personality test serves as a journey toward an ideal self. Although the test cannot provide precise results, it offers Generation Z a positive identity enhancement, enabling them to imagine an idealized self. Within their circles, Generation Z uses private codes to communicate, achieving emotional resonance and reaffirming their identity and security(Wei Li, 2023).

While MBTI tests categorize human personalities into sixteen types, actual personalities are dynamic and malleable. Though straightforward, this categorization can lead to narrow and stereotypical understandings of people. Additionally, official MBTI tests are relatively

expensive, creating a financial barrier more suitable for those with economic means willing to pay for self-exploration. When MBTI results are merely used as social conversation pieces, their necessity diminishes(Lan Peng, 2024). Furthermore, the personality type descriptions are general, masking the individual personalities and cultural identities of Generation Z, essentially creating a false sense of community that undermines individual values.

### 2.4 Mystery Box Culture

A mystery box is a toy box with no external hints, making the product inside a surprise for the buyer, featuring a random element, such as POP MART. Mystery box enthusiasts share their "unboxings" on platforms like Little Red Book, Micro Blog, Tiktok, and Zhihu, forming subcultural communities where they use unique terms to communicate, gaining group belonging and identity recognition(Jingyi Yang, 2022). Different types of toys cater to the aesthetic tastes of Generation Z, allowing them to construct personalized identity labels and gain emotional support. Mystery box culture fits the decentralized network's need for Generation Z's "retribalization," with its gamification aspect appealing to their preference for spiritual products. In addition, as a cultural symbol, mystery box establishes the emotional connection of players. It is an abstract manifestation of the unique culture of generations. It is an important carrier and form of subculture connotation. It can be seen that the popularity of blind box culture is rooted in the recognition crisis, life loneliness, and emotional anxiety faced by Generation Z during the social transformation(Qizhen Yue, 2022).

Under the enchantment of consumerism, Generation Z is susceptible to commercial culture, leading to impulsive and transient consumption(Yongtao Wang, 2021). They may hoard mystery boxes for their potential value, becoming ensnared in consumerism. Essentially, mystery boxes are a form of gambling, providing emotional highs similar to gambling. The moment of unboxing turns numerous uncertainties into a single certainty, making the experience's emotional rewards overshadow the product's price. The secondary market phenomenon of "toy speculation" and scarcity reflects Generation Z's indulgent and unrestrained consumption, prioritizing "toy collecting" as life's highest pursuit, promoting hedonism, instant gratification, and mystery consumerism, distorting generational values.

### 2.5 Crazy Literature

Crazy literature is a literary style characterized by extreme repetition, exaggeration, disorder, and intense emotions. It uses long, logically inconsistent sentences to mimic the speech of someone in a frenzied state, typically starting with an emotional statement and then reversing or affirming it from different angles. This style gained widespread popularity during the Double Eleven shopping festival in 2022, when netizens used it to urge merchants to ship their orders, sharing chat records on social platforms, such as: "I know I'm not worthy of shipping, everyone else is shipping, not like me, even urging is done cautiously, becoming a ridiculous joke."

Generation Z expresses their emotions and attitudes through the parody, collage, and reconstruction of linguistic symbols. These seemingly "crazy" statements often reflect their frustration and anxiety about reality, school, and peer pressure, serving as a form of

helplessness and mockery. Crazy literature, with its entertainment and humorous attributes, easily resonates emotionally with Generation Z. Though it appears absurd, it functions as a subcultural form of resistance to mainstream culture through the use of unique codes, forming a distinctive group symbol(Chen Zhu, 1976-).

As an extreme stress relief method, crazy literature represents an escapism from reality. Addiction to it can lead to mental health issues and cognitive errors. The disorderly and nonsensical expressions in crazy literature can misguide contemporary youths' normative use of language. Furthermore, from a societal perspective, both crazy literature and related memes or merchandise harm modern civilization, conflicting with moral values. Unrestrained pursuit of it is detrimental to psychological health and quality cultivation. While tolerating crazy literature, Generation Z must guard against falling into nihilism, leading to self-loss.

### 2.6 Rat Literature

"Rat" is a self-deprecating term used by contemporary youths to describe those living at the bottom of society without the power to change their circumstances. Rat literature begins with the first-person narrative and uses metaphor, contrast, parallelism, and irony to recount setbacks in marriage, higher education, work, and so on. In the dissemination, rat literature is no longer limited to the creation of literature, but integrates with short videos, emoticons and other carriers to become a comprehensive ideological system.

The gathering of "rats" on the Internet revolves around the similar social practices of the Generation Z. Facing the disappointment and pain of reality, the group uses self-deprecation as a means of reconciliation with society, and obtains a defense against reality through self-depreciation, and links into a subculture circle through similar discourse and symbols, in which they share their views such as "I, the rat, am still defeated" and "I, the rat, suddenly realized that I am not the best". Through similar discourses and symbols, they link into subculture circles, in which they share their own experiences such as "I'm still defeated" and "I'm suddenly realizing that I'm not the best". Generation Z is engaged in cathartic discourse production, joining this intergenerational group carnival through stylized collage, appropriation and imitation.The youth groups who claim to be "rats" rely on institutionalized discourse practice to establish group identity in the virtual community, and perform game -style personal exhibitions, express the pressure and dissatisfaction in the process of individual socialization through collective actions(Hongyuan Su, 2019).

Rat literature is a similar symptom of the "mourning culture", which further aggravates the undesirable trend of social inactivity and compromise（Hongyuan Su, 2019）. It should be noted that although the self-deprecation and solace brought by rat literature has relieved the pressure of Generation Z, the real problem has not been solved, and the emphasis on self-condemnation, although it can temporarily escape from the reality, produces a kind of "pseudo-humility", which intensifies the habit of self-disparagement, compromise and doubt. The emphasis on self-condemnation, though a temporary escape from reality, produces a kind of "false humility," which in turn exacerbates the habit of self-denigration, compromise, and doubt. When wrapped up in a sense of powerlessness, the spirit of personal struggle of Generation Z will undoubtedly fade in the current of the times.

*2.7 Abbreviations*

Abbreviation is a title that is formed by taking the first letter of a word in a phrase or sentence and using it to refer to something else. Abbreviations were first popularized in fandom, belonging to the slang of internal communication within the fandom. With the development of the Internet and the emergence of social events, abbreviations have gradually broken through the circle, and now they are mainly popular in fandom circle, game circle, animation circle and film circle, forming a new category of Internet abbreviation, presenting new features such as obscurity, flexibility and entertainment. According to the theory of symbolic interaction, the meaning of language symbols comes from social interaction and is arbitrary.As the main user group of Internet abbreviations, Generation Z has created its own unique "Morse code" and formed a network circle with strong exclusivity, in which the "encoding" and "decoding" of the language are utilized to create a new category of Internet abbreviations(Pei Chen, 2024). Through the "encoding" and "decoding" of language, they communicate with each other, deepen the boundary and identity of the circle, promote the emotional communication within the group, and maintain the uniqueness of the culture they live in. In addition, Generation Z knows that there is a set of censorship rules in the platform, and words that do not conform to the norms of the platform will be blocked, so in order to avoid censorship and reduce the cost of communication, they use abbreviations to communicate, which subverts the traditional structure of the discourse, and embodies the soft resistance to the mainstream culture.

As Internet abbreviations gradually penetrate into daily life and begin to influence the context of people's communication, it is reasonable to consider whether this frenzy of Internet abbreviations will, in turn, affect people's language habits and even the language system. Generation Z accepts, spreads and even creates different forms of online language, and their unthinking acceptance and high frequency of using abbreviations not only interferes with the standardized use of the language system, but also may lead to the degradation of language ability. At the same time, acronyms have a differentiated nature, which creates an unbridgeable gap between generations, aggravating intergenerational communication barriers, and making intergenerational communication in the Internet arena more and more difficult.

## 3. Challenges of the Gen Z Online Subculture Phenomenon

The emergence of new phenomena in the Gen Z online subculture reflects the complex social environment and the evolving cultural meanings. The development of online subcultures and the growth of Gen Z provide insights for a deeper understanding of these phenomena. Undeniably, online subcultures offer Gen Z a space for self-expression, personality development, identity construction, and social networking. However, the virtual nature of these subcultures also brings about issues such as identity fixation, language dilemmas, and value misguidance, which warrant our vigilance and attention.

*3.1 Labeling: Crisis of Identity Fixation within Circles*

The emerging online subculture develops and matures within interest-based groups, where "labeling" serves as a way of communication among group members, reflecting their shared

thinking. However, this also leads to excessive labeling and identity fixation. To highlight their individuality, Gen Z often label themselves and view themselves through the lens of "others" .Over time, these identity labels can lead to self-discipline and alienation, gradually diminishing the significance of the individual. Moreover, the clearly defined and distinct boundaries of these interest-based circles enhance internal cohesion and a sense of belonging, but also exacerbate conflicts and differences between groups, leading to potential friction and disorder, such as clashes and confrontations online(ShuiXiong Wang, 2022). Long-term immersion in a single circle or wearing homogeneous masks can deepen external prejudices, causing emotional and cognitive biases that hinder social integration and the establishment of dialogue and negotiation mechanisms between different groups.

### 3.2 Language Codes: The Hidden Risks of Traffic-Driven Culture

The popular use of crazy literature, mouse literature, and abbreviations among Gen Z provides an outlet for emotional expression and stress relief. While these language codes create meaning and pleasure, they also foster an environment for entertainment-driven growth. The use of these codes for pressure relief and self-mockery is understandable, but when meaningless discourse generated through parody, reconstruction, and collage becomes a "traffic harvesting machine" and is excessively hyped, it can trap many young people in an endless online frenzy. When language loses its communicative significance and gives way to entertainment, the language dilemma faced by Gen Z needs to be re-examined.

### 3.3 Misinterpretation and Misguidance: Value Crisis Among Adolescents

While the circle culture of Gen Z enriches the forms of online subculture, it can also mislead and distort adolescents' values and worldviews, which is detrimental to the formation of a positive social ethos:

- **Lying Flat Culture**: Promotes an attitude of passivity and inaction, easily imitated by adolescents whose psychological mechanisms and judgment are still maturing, fostering a negative societal trend.

- **Partner Culture**: Advocates for short-term relationships, leading to a lack of responsibility, emotional detachment, and distrust, which is detrimental to social integration.

- **MBTI Culture**: Imposes a restrictive framework on self-perception, limiting adolescents' deeper self-understanding, development, and the exploration of life possibilities.

- **Mystery Box Culture**: Places consumerism at the top of life values, distorting the proper consumption view, leading to overconsumption and addiction despite economic constraints(Senlin Liu, 2022).

- **Crazy Literature**: Over-entertains and vulgarizes classical literature, misleading adolescents' language cognition and perception of historical stories and characters.

- **Rat Literature**: Implicitly involves self-deprecation and diminishment, fostering a pessimistic mindset that hinders the cultivation of ideals and progress.

- **Abbreviations**: Simplifies and replaces traditional writing, fostering a disregard for the value of traditional characters, impeding the formation of a respectful and culturally appreciative society.

The deviance in these online subculture phenomena directly contributes to the misguidance of adolescents' values, views on life, and worldviews. If not effectively curbed and addressed at the root, these issues could proliferate and form a distorted online communication ecology.

## 4. Measures to Address the Challenges of Gen Z Online Subculture

As the primary participants and even creators of online popular culture, Gen Z is gradually transforming social culture and becoming a significant part of it. In an era of diverse cultures, it is crucial to guide Gen Z in a manner that aligns with their physical and psychological characteristics, fostering correct thoughts and positive psychology.

Firstly, individuals of Gen Z need to enhance their ability to discern and filter online information. They should learn to differentiate between online friendships, secondary literary creations, classical literature interpretations, and vulgar traffic manipulation. Establishing a "firewall" between themselves or their circles and harmful online information can help maintain valuable thinking in the complex online world. They also need to cultivate correct consumption and values, demystify consumerism, and engage in rational consumption within their means, avoiding blind following. Additionally, respecting the value of excellent traditional culture and characters, adhering to principles of both inheritance and innovation in literary creation and dissemination, and fostering a respectful and civilized online environment are essential.

Secondly, mainstream media and Internet platform companies should not shirk their responsibilities in guiding the healthy growth of Gen Z online subculture. They should avoid biases, adopt a tolerant and broad-minded approach, and promote a positive social ethos. Mainstream media can engage with platforms like TikTok, Little Red Book, and Micro Blog, using mainstream values and popular presentation methods to lead trends, spread positive energy, and guide interactions within circles, preventing information closure and fostering cultural development that integrates positive energy, thus curbing over-entertainment and creating a positive online cultural ecosystem.

Lastly, government and relevant departments should pay attention to the mental and physical health of Gen Z, guiding them in scientific stress relief. They can provide more companionship and emotional support services, such as encouraging the development of shared study spaces, cloud study companionship, and AI companionship. Increasing investment in physical check-ups, psychological counseling, fitness, and therapy industries can offer more avenues for stress relief. Moreover, respecting the needs of Gen Z, enhancing humanistic care, balancing economic growth with happiness, improving labor rights protection, continuing tax reduction policies, and advocating for a new healthy social environment can stimulate social vitality.

## 5. Conclusion

The circle culture and online language created by Gen Z form a new landscape of online subculture. As digital natives, the creativity and confidence displayed by Gen Z in the digital media realm are transforming youth self-perception and elevating the status of youth subculture within the broader social culture. Research has found that the group dynamics reflected in the new online subculture of Generation Z are often linked to their unique growth environment, era characteristics, and life experiences. At the same time, the cultural dilemma of Generation Z, which arises from the development of subcultures, requires finding solutions to the problem from different levels of stakeholders, understanding the essence of the problem, and guiding the healthy development of subcultures in the digital age.In the future, various forms of online subculture will continue to emerge. Understanding the subcultural phenomena and group dynamics of Generation Z in the process of social structural changes can help us to grasp their value orientations and behavioral characteristics, helping us understand generational transitions and developmental trends while mitigating the potential negative impacts of online subculture development.

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