THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE AND RESEARCH PROSPECTS OF YOUTH SUBCULTURE OF DESPONDENCY (2017–2024): A CITESPACE-BASED VISUALIZATION ANALYSIS

Nan Jin, MengYu Li*

School of Journalism and Communication, Henan University of Technology, Zhengzhou 450000, Henan, China.
Corresponding Author: MengYu Li, Email: emma_limengyu@sina.com

Abstract: This study employs CiteSpace software to conduct keyword co-occurrence and clustering analyses of 215 scholarly articles on the Youth Subculture of Despondency published between 2017 and 2024. The findings indicate that research on the Youth Subculture of Despondency in China began relatively late and is still in an early developmental stage. The existing literature mainly focuses on three aspects: the unique stylistic features of despondency culture, its dissemination mechanisms in the new-media environment, and its potential impact on youth values. Based on these results, future research should proceed along two main directions. First, scholars should develop an indigenous theoretical framework of Youth Subculture of Despondency that is tailored to China's socio-cultural context. Second, research should investigate the connections between despondency culture and the actual life conditions of youth. These efforts aim to more effectively guide young people toward positive outlooks on life and values.
Keywords: Youth Subculture of Despondency; CiteSpace; Knowledge mapping; Visual analysis

1 INTRODUCTION

In the context of China's sustained high-speed economic growth, mechanisms for individuals to relieve psychological stress have not developed in parallel. Moreover, the instability of the external economic environment has triggered widespread anxiety and other mental health issues. In such a social atmosphere, the youth demographic in particular faces multiple challenges: a widening gap between ideals and reality, a sense of powerlessness in addressing social problems, and limited social mobility. Against this backdrop, a Youth Subculture of Despondency has emerged. The emergence of any culture is closely tied to factors such as the dissemination environment, the media, and the social background, since cultural transmission inevitably requires media [1]. With the rise of new online media and the Internet's inherent anonymity and virtuality, an increasing number of young people have turned to online platforms to release stress, express their true selves, and construct entirely new personal identities within relatively free virtual spaces. They do so by participating in topic discussions, online communities, and related forums.

The Youth Subculture of Despondency manifests as a mode through which young people employ self-deprecating humor and irony to alleviate the embarrassment of unfulfilled ambitions, vent inner dissatisfaction, and obtain a form of spiritual consolation [2]. It also serves as a strategy for building group identity and achieving self-protection among youth, effectively functioning as a countercultural effort to claim discursive space within mainstream society [3]. For example, the "Ge You tang" (literally "Ge You's slouch," referring to a reclining posture popularized by actor Ge You) phenomenon went viral in 2016; the "Fo xi" (literally "Buddha-like," denoting a detached or indifferent attitude) phenomenon gained traction in 2019; and in 2022 the terms "nei juan" ("involution") and "tang ping" ("lying flat") became widespread in youth discourse. These examples are all typical expressions of the Youth Subculture of Despondency.

To analyze this emerging field, the present study employs CiteSpace software to generate visual maps analyzing publication trends, research keywords, and co-cited references in the Youth Subculture of Despondency literature. The goal is to provide a comprehensive overview of the current research landscape and to offer informed recommendations for future research in this field.

2 METHODS

This study used CiteSpace (a software developed on the basis of mathematical and statistical analysis) to construct a scientific knowledge map of the literature on the Youth Subculture of Despondency. We employed methods such as keyword co-occurrence analysis, keyword cluster analysis, and co-citation analysis. These methods reveal the central topics of the field and the relationships among them, thereby illustrating the current research status and hotspots in China's Youth Subculture of Despondency, and enabling analysis of future research directions.

The data for this study were sourced from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) journal database. We searched for articles in Chinese journals using themes related to youth despondency culture. First, we defined two levels of search terms: the primary thematic keywords "Youth Subculture of Despondency" and "subculture of despondency", and secondary keywords representing specific typical cultures of interest, including "youth Fo xi culture" and "youth tang ping culture". The discipline categories were restricted to *Journalism and Communication*, *Culture*, *Sociology and Statistics*, and *Psychology*. After filtering out irrelevant content (such as newspapers and conference proceedings), we

obtained a final set of 215 valid journal articles on youth despondency culture. These articles form the basis of our bibliometric analysis (see Figure 1).
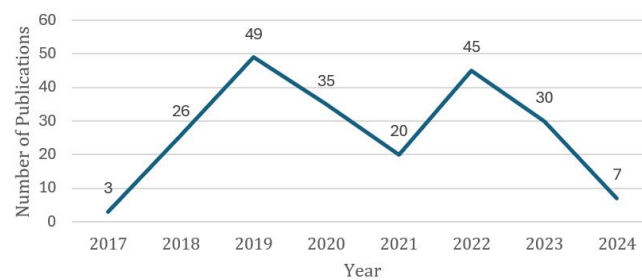

Figure 1 Annual Publication Volume of Chinese Youth Subculture of Despondency Research (2017–2024)

Figure 1 shows it is evident that research in this field started relatively late and is still in its nascent stage. From 2017 to 2024, the publication count exhibits a fluctuating trend. The viral spread of the "Ge You lounge" meme in July 2016 is often cited as the initial spark that brought Youth Nihilism Culture into the academic spotlight [4]. From 2017 to 2019, the number of publications showed an upward trend, which also coincided with a period of intensified research on youth subcultures in China [5]. The years 2019 and 2022 marked two publication peaks to date, both of which coincide with the emergence of popular online phenomena. The surge in 2019 correlates with the spread of the "Fo xi" trend, and the surge in 2022 aligns with the "tang ping" (lying flat) and "nei juan" (involution) phenomena in Chinese youth culture. This suggests that shifts in popular discourse and social mood are reflected in scholarly interest and publication rates.

3.1 Keyword Co-occurrence Analysis

A keyword co-occurrence network (see Figure 2) was constructed from the 215 articles. This co-occurrence map reveals that terms such as "identity", "social expectation", "social mentality", "internet culture", "college student", and "style" appear as high-frequency keywords in recent years. This indicates that contemporary research on Chinese youth despondency culture has focused on the internal psychology of young individuals during the process of self-identity formation, as well as the latent contradictions between this process and societal expectations.

The prominence of the concept of "style" highlights scholarly interest in how youth express despondency culture through particular lifestyles and consumption patterns. Additionally, the strong presence of "college student" as a keyword suggests that many studies target university students as their subject population – possibly because this group is both demographically concentrated and relatively accessible for research purposes [6]. The keyword "internet culture" underscores that the dissemination of youth despondency culture predominantly occurs via online platforms. The frequency of "identity" as a keyword suggests scholarly focus on youth self-definition. Sociological research notes that youth often face an *"identity crisis"* amid rapid social change, so subcultural practices provide ways to forge collective identity and meaning. The prominence of "social expectation" highlights normative pressures on Chinese youth, who are often saddled with family and societal hopes for career successzqb.cyol.com. When such ideals collide with harsh reality, young people may experience anxiety and powerlessness, sometimes embracing despondent stances like *"tang ping"* as a coping strategy. Together, these keywords imply that researchers view youth despondency culture as a coping mechanism: young people negotiate between personal identity and social demands, finding solace in shared symbols and narratives.
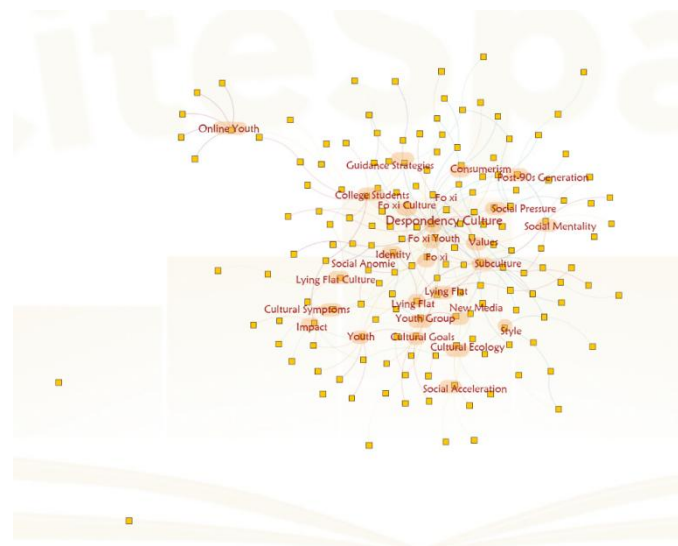
Figure 2 Keyword Co-occurrence Map of Chinese Youth Subculture of Despondency Research

3.2 Keyword Clustering Analysis

Building on the co-occurrence analysis, we employed the Log-Likelihood Ratio (LLR) method to perform keyword clustering, yielding a cluster map as shown in Figure 3. In total, nine key clusters were identified: #0 (despondency culture), #1 (youth group), #2 (lying flat), #3 (Fo xi youth), #4 (college student), #5 (social mentality), #6 (youth), #7 (style), and #8 (media dissemination) (see Figure 3).
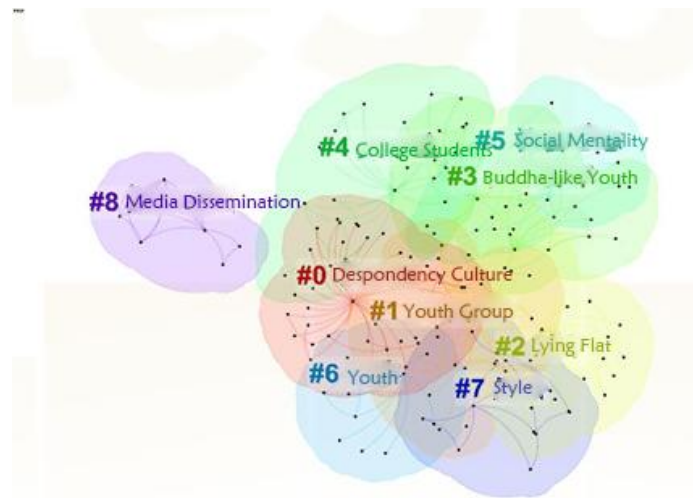
Figure 3 Keyword Cluster Map of Chinese Youth Subculture of Despondency Research

These clusters encapsulate the main thematic areas of current research. To clarify the thematic content of each cluster, we extracted representative keywords within each cluster and compiled them in Table 1.

Table 1 Research Topics or Fields Closely Associated with the Clusters

Cluster	Research Topics Closely Related to the Cluster
Despondency Culture	Youth groups, social pressure, college students, new media, consumerism
Youth Group	Despondency culture, Fo xi, values, identity, cultural goals
Tang Ping	Deep alienation, cultural symptoms, social acceleration, individualization, social anomie
Fo xi Youth	Religious mentality, religious nihilism, cultural ecology, ideological dilemma
College Students	Reflection, outlook on life, guidance, mental health, implicit attitudes
Social Mentality	College students, Fo xi youth, tang ping, post-90s generation
Style	Value orientation, meaning, identity, value confusion
Media Dissemination	Policy research, social work, cause analysis

To clarify the meaning of each cluster, we extracted representative keywords and summarized the key research content associated with each cluster. Removing redundant categories, we grouped the research focus into three main areas:

• **Style:** Stuart Hall, the father of contemporary cultural studies, argued that interpreting style is essentially interpreting a subculture. In the Chinese context, Youth Subculture of Despondency is an emerging youth subcultural phenomenon with a distinctive "nihilistic" style that sets it apart from other youth subcultures [4]. This style is manifested through creative remixing and collage of online elements such as text, images, and videos. It serves as a means for youth to express inner dissatisfaction and to "resist" the mainstream culture of positivity. Youth participants spread, mock, and imitate these contents, using self-mockery and carnival to vent their dissatisfaction and to find psychological comfort [2].

• **Cultural Identity and Resistance:** Youth Nihilism Culture functions to highlight the subjectivity of the youth group through self-expression and to build similarity and connection within the group. In doing so, youth construct a sense of identity and self-protection for themselves [7], effectively establishing a "third identity" in cyberspace beyond the realms of reality and imagination. This cultural identity is not a mere form of passive inaction. The popular nihilistic expressions among Chinese youth are often imbued with entertainment value; the verbal or even behavioral "giving up"

seen in Youth Nihilism Culture has not evolved into a Western-style group-level "withdrawal" [8]. Its essence is not opposition to mainstream values, but rather an attempt to find a harmonious coexistence with mainstream values through deconstruction. In other words, Youth Nihilism Culture represents a process of adapting within resistance and assimilating during deconstruction [9].

• **New Media:** In the new media era, advances in online technology and mobile devices – especially rapid improvements in graphic and video editing tools – have greatly lowered the barriers to creating Youth Nihilism Culture content. Under this backdrop, nihilistic cultural content is no longer tied to the ritualistic formality of older subcultures; it spreads more easily, with ever-lower entry thresholds and expanding reach. The broad reach and relative anonymity of new media platforms provide young people with a virtual space to simulate real life[9], enabling them to construct identities and forms of expression that may be difficult to achieve offline. This online space not only offers youth an outlet to vent suppressed or decadent emotions, but also becomes a venue for exploring self and social identity [10]. Commercial interests also exploit the influence of new media by promoting "giving up" and "lying flat" narratives. Some businesses attempt to leverage consumerism, materialism, and pessimistic worldviews to attract traffic and profit, potentially leading some youth to lose faith in the idea that "labor creates happiness and value," and to become swept up in restless consumer trends [8]. Furthermore, Digital media platforms serve as catalysts that accelerate the visibility and cultural diffusion of such subcultures by amplifying youth narratives that challenge dominant discourses of success and productivity [11].

While these three thematic areas—style, cultural identity and resistance, and new media—capture the core content foci of existing studies, they also reveal a tendency to treat each dimension in relative isolation. In the next step, a closer look at the overall clustering structure shows that research on youth subculture of despondency remains somewhat fragmented, with little integration across clusters or engagement with root-cause analysis.

Several clusters focus on narrow topics or specific phenomena – for example, cluster #2 ("tang ping") and #3 ("Fo xi youth") correspond to particular viral terms, while cluster #4 ("college student") isolates a demographic subgroup. Other clusters cover overlapping concepts (e.g. a general 'youth' cluster versus a more specific 'youth group' cluster), indicating segmented foci. This pattern implies that studies often examine these trends in isolation. Also, the absence of any cluster explicitly dedicated to root causes (such as economic or educational pressures) or to outcomes (such as well-being or career development) suggests that research has emphasized descriptive labels and identities over causal analysis.

4 CONCLUSIONS

This study provides a comprehensive bibliometric overview of research on the Youth Subculture of Despondency in China from 2017 through 2024. The analysis shows that the field is still emerging, with publications focusing on thematic aspects such as cultural style, media dissemination, and youth values. Key findings include the identification of major research topics (identity, social mentality, internet culture, etc.) and thematic clusters (style, identity/resistance, new media, and countermeasures). The publication trend reveals an initial rise in studies coinciding with viral youth cultural phenomena and a generally fluctuating but growing interest over time. Based on these insights, future research should advance along two primary lines:

Constructing Indigenous Theoretical Frameworks: Current scholarship on Chinese youth subcultures often relies on Western theories, which may not fully capture China's socio-cultural background. Future scholars should build comprehensive theories of youth subculture that integrate perspectives from sociology, anthropology, communication, psychology, education, and aesthetics. In doing so, attention should be paid to the unique aspects of Chinese youth culture – for example, how terms like "bai lan" (a passive "give-up" attitude) and "tang ping" may outwardly express negativity yet often mask an underlying desire for personal development. Research indicates that even China's post-90s generation, while pursuing a higher quality of life, generally maintains a spirit of self-improvement and pragmatism. By uncovering the Chinese spirit and resilience within youth subcultures, scholars can establish a research approach distinctive to China, help amplify China's voice in international academia and portray a more positive image of Chinese youth. This will enable a more accurate grasp of developmental trends and facilitate strategies that promote the healthy development of youth culture.

Exploring Links to Youths' Real-Life Conditions: While considerable work has analyzed the symbolic expressions of despondency culture, it is crucial to investigate whether these online phenomena accurately reflect young people's offline experiences and life circumstances. Understanding the real-world impact of despondency culture requires tightly linking research to the actual lives of youth. Since 2016, the evolution of this culture – from "Ge You tang" to "Fo xi," then "tang ping," and most recently "bai lan" – suggests a deepening level of disillusionment and a shift of influence from purely psychological attitudes to behavioral change. Each stage represents a strategic adaptation to evolving pressures on labor, mobility, and identity within China's digital economy. This lineage reveals how online subcultures have become important spaces for meaning-making, collective disillusionment, and symbolic withdrawal from high-intensity competition [12].

Moreover, the distinctive allure of internet subcultures can potentially divert attention away from mainstream positive values, indicating a need for innovative education and communication strategies. Such strategies should convey constructive values and life attitudes in ways that resonate with youth. By grounding analyses in the existing literature and social context, researchers and policymakers can develop evidence-based approaches to guide the Youth Subculture of Despondency toward healthier, more positive development paths.

In conclusion, the Youth Subculture of Despondency is a complex social phenomenon intertwined with contemporary Chinese society. A data-driven mapping of the literature shows emerging patterns and focal points in current scholarship. Moving forward, a combination of indigenous theory-building and attention to the lived realities of young people will be essential for fully understanding and responsibly guiding this cultural trend.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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