

Academic abstract

“Lying flat” is manifested as opting out, often marked by aimlessness and a pessimistic outlook. While this raises clinical concerns, it may carry a positive meaning in Chinese culture, emphasizing the pursuit of inner calmness and fulfillment. Despite its growing prevalence on Chinese social media, its antecedents and implications are still unclear. To address this gap, we first define “lying flat” and trace its emergence in Chinese society. Next, we propose an integrative model that elucidates how Taoism and Buddhism, social expectations, and involution contribute to “lying flat.” By incorporating insights from Western theories, we aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of this culturally rooted lifestyle. Finally, we lay out a research agenda by proposing specific hypotheses regarding its effects on well-being and social functioning, with the goal of clarifying its potentially adaptive aspects in contrast to its clinical ones. We also discuss implications for mental health professionals and policymakers.

Public abstract

“Lying flat” outwardly manifests as opting out, often associated with a sense of passivity and lack of direction. Yet within Chinese culture, it might hold a deeper meaning: the pursuit of inner peace as a path to personal fulfillment. This lifestyle has recently gained widespread attention in China. Despite its increasing prevalence, much remains unknown about its origins and implications. In this article, we explain what “lying flat” is and how it has emerged in Chinese society. Our model demonstrates how factors, such as Taoism and Buddhism, social expectations, and involution drive this behavior. By integrating insights from Western theories, we aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of this culturally rooted lifestyle. We also present hypotheses about its effects on well-being and social functioning, aiming to clarify its potentially adaptive features in contrast to those that may raise clinical concerns. We propose practical strategies for mental health professionals and policymakers.

Keywords: lying flat, cultural traditions, social expectations, involution, Taoism

Introduction

In response to escalating social competition, Chinese youth increasingly adopt “lying flat” (*tang ping* in Chinese), characterized by a reluctance to make efforts to improve themselves or their situations (Chen et al., 2024; L. Lin & Gao, 2021). The concept has gained significant attention, earning a place among the “Top 10 Internet Terms of 2021” in China (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2021). “Lying flat” reflects a lack of motivation for self-improvement and low material desire, particularly among younger generations. This may lead to decreased productivity and lower consumption, potentially impacting long-term economic growth.

Given its prevalence and impact, “lying flat” has become an emerging topic in psychology and sociology. However, empirical findings are still limited. To the best of our knowledge, there are 11 empirical research papers related to “lying flat,” and all of them originate from China. Additionally, a unified conceptual framework that synthesizes insights from these disciplines remains absent. We propose that “lying flat” is deeply rooted in Chinese cultural traditions and encompasses more than mere passivity; it involves the pursuit of inner harmony, a peaceful state of mind, and a balanced approach to life. It reflects an individual’s evolving sense of life purpose, personal goals, and coping strategies in response to societal pressures. Exploring this phenomenon can provide global psychology with valuable perspectives on unconventional pathways to motivation, value, and coping strategies. Examining culturally embedded behaviors like “lying flat” through diverse theoretical lenses can gain valuable insights into the complexities of human behavior and cultural influences, ultimately advancing the field towards a more comprehensive and globally informed perspective.

To make a foundational step toward more integrative research on this topic, this review proposes an integrative model to analyze the antecedents of “lying flat” and the psychological mechanisms

underlying it. We begin by defining “lying flat,” then propose a conceptual model to synthesize previous studies, and finally discuss its potential implications.

Definition of “Lying Flat”

The concept of “lying flat” is deeply rooted in Chinese cultural traditions, particularly Taoism and Buddhism. In modern China, many young people are reconnecting with these philosophical foundations, especially as Taoist values are introduced in high school curricula since 2019. A widely studied text is “*Yang Sheng Zhu*” by the philosopher Zhuangzi, which argues that life is finite, knowledge is infinite, and thus the pursuit of the infinite by the finite is perilous (Zhuangzi, trans. 1968). It reflects the futility of boundless ambitions and the risks of relentless striving, advocating for a more balanced approach to life. Another recurring theme in Zhuangzi’s works is “the usefulness of being useless” (*wu yong zhi yong*) (Zhuangzi, trans. 1968), which closely resembles the philosophy behind “lying flat.” Zhuangzi illustrates this idea through two classic metaphors. In the first, he describes a tree so twisted and knotted that it is useless for timber, allowing it to a long life because no one bothers to harvest it. In the second, he claims that he would rather be a useless turtle living in the mud than a holy turtle whose remains are worshipped in a temple. These stories imply that perceived uselessness can lead to longevity and peace. Moreover, drawing upon the classical wisdom of Taoism, Joshi (2025) suggests that maintaining a proper work-life balance is essential for achieving simplicity and ensuring a healthy state of mind and body.

Buddhism also profoundly influences Chinese culture and traditions (Mitchell, 2002). One noble truth mentioned in Buddhism is the cessation of *dukkha* (i.e., suffering in life) which can be achieved by letting go of craving (Mitchell, 2002). Individuals who relinquish cravings can attain *nirvana*, a state characterized by security and peacefulness (Mitchell, 2002). Those who reach this state are

“unmoved” by life events that typically trigger negative emotions, thus maintaining a “peaceful and calm” mindset even amidst life’s disturbances. These Buddhist values continue to shape modern Chinese attitudes towards life and work. “Buddha-like” mentality (*fó xi*), which preceded the “lying flat” trend and gained traction online in 2018, embodies an attitude of acceptance, detachment, and contentment free from excessive striving and material pursuits (Yan et al., 2024). Recent research suggests that adopting a “Buddha-like” mindset was positively associated with workplace well-being (Yan et al., 2024).

Some aspects of “lying flat” that overlap with “Buddha-like” mentality can be regarded as positive, as they reflect a disengagement from excessive ambition. However, “lying flat” may inherently carry a more negative connotation, often seen as a passive rejection of social expectations. Historically, withdrawing from work and leading a more relaxed lifestyle were relatively common among older adults, aligning with traditional social norms that expect them to retire from work and receive filial care from their children (Luo & Chui, 2016). This societal expectation is reflected in Hong Kong government statistics, which indicate that only 8.5% of individuals aged 65 and above remained in the labor market in 1995 (Chiu & Ngan, 1999). However, young adults face different social expectations. Confucianism, a fundamental aspect of traditional Chinese values, emphasizes hard work and contributing to society (Hwang, 2012). A well-known Confucian teaching from *The Analects* (Confucius, 1990), “At thirty, I stood firm,” suggests that by the age of thirty, individuals should have established themselves both in moral character and career. This belief continues to shape Chinese social norms, fostering high social expectations that young individuals should attain stability and career success in early adulthood (C. Yao et al., 2020). Furthermore, in contemporary Chinese culture, individuals are often expected to achieve financial stability—often through home

ownership—before marriage (Hu et al., 2023). Thus, when young people adopt “lying flat,” it directly contradicts these prevailing social norms, contributing to its widespread attention and negative perception in recent years.

Meanwhile, young people are facing intense competitions driven by involution. Originally, the term “involution” referred to a scenario where increased labor complexity does not result in a proportional rise in output (Geertz, 1969). The Chinese version of this term—“*nei juan*”—has gained traction on social media in 2020, denoting a process that turns inward, trapping participants in relentless and meaningless competitions (Qin & Dai, 2022). Involution is characterized by fierce in-group competitions where each member strives to outperform the others, resulting in a scenario where collective effort escalates beyond what is necessary or beneficial (W. Zhang et al., 2024). The competitive environment may contribute to stress and anxiety many young Chinese face today, particularly in a rapidly changing economic and social landscape. Hence, the widespread trend of “lying flat” online in 2021 could be interpreted as a passive response to the pressures arising from societal expectations of success and intense competitions.

Furthermore, the media may contribute to construct and amplify the “lying flat” phenomenon by generating concern about the younger generation to attract attention. The “lying flat” movement originated from a blog post in 2021 and gained momentum within the online community, particularly among youths (Z. Zhang & Li, 2023). Memes depicting the act of “lying flat” and videos showcasing the challenges faced by young adults may have fueled its proliferation (Z. Zhang & Li, 2023). Media framing of “lying flat” as a widespread trend may reinforce generational identity, shaping social norms and encouraging individuals to adopt this behavior to align with their peer group (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). By portraying “lying flat” as prevalent, the media may influence perceptions of social norms,

fostering conformity to this behavior. Although empirical evidence on how media shapes the “lying flat” phenomenon is limited, prior research shows that social media platforms can significantly influence public discourse. For example, a study found that Twitter users actively engaged in conversations about sexual assault, contributing to increased social awareness and calls for action (M. Li et al., 2021).

Sociologists have suggested active and passive types of “lying flat” (Qin & Dai, 2022; Song & Bie, 2022). Active “lying flat” involves a conscious decision to lower material desire, adjust coping strategies to alleviate pressure, and seek fulfillment in non-material aspects of life. In contrast, passive “lying flat” is characterized by suppressing inner needs, a sense of hopelessness, and an absence of life purpose. To empirically examine the concept of “lying flat,” two different teams have developed distinct conceptualizations and measurement approaches. Lu et al. (2023) have defined “lying flat” as a single-factor construct and developed the “Lying Flat” Tendency Scale, which exclusively measures passive “lying flat.” Key characteristics include a lack of self-improvement motivation, low desire, opting out of the rat race, a lack of purpose in life, a negative belief about life, and not striving (Lu et al., 2023; Zheng et al., 2023). In contrast, Li et al. (2022) have taken an initial step toward distinguishing between different forms of “lying flat” by developing the “Lying Flat” Questionnaire, which proposes a two-factor structure. However, there remains a need to refine content validity, particularly in differentiating between two types of “lying flat.” For instance, the item “The fast pace of modern life is hard to cope with, so I choose to live a regular, slow-paced life” may reflect a conscious choice, yet it is currently classified as passive “lying flat” in the questionnaire.

Building on the distinctions, we propose that active and passive “lying flat” can be differentiated

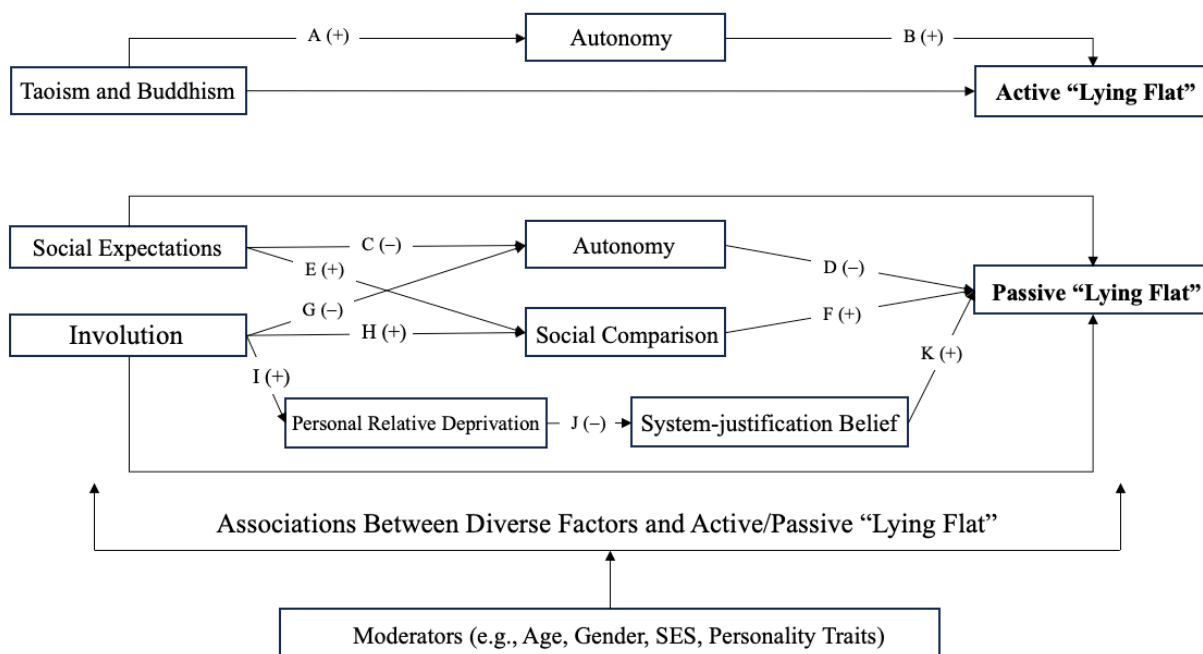
in three aspects. First, “lying flat” may offer insights into individuals’ values and life perceptions. Those who adopt active “lying flat” may view life’s meaning as rooted in balance and contentment. Conversely, individuals embracing passive “lying flat” often become disillusioned by intense competition, potentially fostering negative views about life. Second, regarding goals, active “lying flat” may emphasize the pursuit of inner peace and harmony, whereas passive “lying flat” might signify a lack of purpose. Finally, “lying flat” can serve as a coping strategy for life difficulties. Active “lying flat” may represent a meaning-focused coping (Park & Folkman, 1997), shifting from traditional success pursuits to seeking a peaceful and balanced life to reduce the gap between current situations and personal aspirations. In contrast, passive “lying flat” might align with an avoidant coping strategy, specifically behavioral disengagement (Carver et al., 1989), where individuals disengage from actively addressing stressors. The most urgent work for future research is to validate the two-factor model of “lying flat” and create a corresponding scale.

Theoretical Framework: Hypotheses on Antecedents to and Mechanisms of “Lying Flat”

Following the discussion on the nature of the “lying flat,” we propose an integrative model to provide a comprehensive understanding of its antecedents and the underlying psychological mechanisms within the Chinese context (see Figure 1). Given the limited empirical findings on “lying flat,” most of our work involves proposing hypotheses. We will begin by presenting hypotheses regarding the antecedents of active “lying flat,” along with associated mediating and moderating mechanisms and potential cultural differences, followed by a similar exploration of passive “lying flat.” It should be noted that existing studies have primarily focused on passive “lying flat,” likely due to its association with mental health concerns. Consequently, our model includes more hypotheses related to passive than active “lying flat.”

Figure 1

The Integrative Model of “Lying Flat”



Note. SES = Socio-economic Status; Letters along the paths represent specific relationships and are explained in detail in the main text. Symbols in parentheses represent the expected direction of effects. Autonomy serves as a mediator in the relationships between various factors and both passive and active “lying flat.” For passive “lying flat,” other potential mediators are also considered. Moderators shown at the bottom of the figure affect the relationships between various factors and passive and active “lying flat.”

Active “Lying Flat”: Potential Mediating Mechanisms and Moderators

In this section, we will first discuss autonomy as a potential mediator in the relationship between Taoism and Buddhism and active “lying flat.” Next, we will explore potential moderators, including demographic variables, personality traits, and regional differences within China. Finally, we will examine potential cultural differences in active “lying flat.”

Mediation via Autonomy (Figure 1, Path A-B). Embracing Zhuangzi’s ideas of the peril of chasing the infinite (e.g., knowledge and success) with the finite (e.g., human life) and “the

usefulness of being useless” (*wu yong zhi yong*), individuals may come to recognize the limitations of relentless striving and the value of embracing “uselessness.” Adopting the Buddhism’s emphasis on the detachment of desires and a peaceful mindset towards life changes, individuals may consciously lower material desires and maintain a peaceful state of mind. These values may promote autonomy by fostering self-reflection on one’s authentic desires and reducing the pressure to constantly seek external validation. According to self-determination theory (SDT), autonomy is a fundamental psychological need, and its satisfaction can lead to psychological growth (Ryan & Deci, 2000). By making choices aligned with their true selves, individuals can assert their autonomy, thereby embracing active “lying flat” as a path to inner fulfillment and authenticity.

Demographic Variables as Moderators. As individuals age, their priorities often shift towards seeking inner harmony and calmness (Carreno et al., 2021). This shift aligns closely with Taoist and Buddhist philosophies, potentially encouraging older individuals to adopt active “lying flat” as a means of achieving a balanced and contented life. Individuals with higher socioeconomic status (SES) typically enjoy greater financial stability (Berkman & Macintyre, 1997), which provides them with the flexibility to prioritize personal well-being. Financial security may enable individuals to consciously adopt active “lying flat” as a strategic approach to maintain a healthy work-life balance. Conversely, individuals with low SES may be more likely to adopt Buddhist philosophies as a coping mechanism for life’s challenges, potentially using it as a stress buffer (Raines, 2002). Thus, they may exhibit a stronger tendency to engage in active “lie flat.” Future research should explore the moderating role of SES on the relationship between Taoist and Buddhist beliefs and active “lying flat.”

Personality Traits as Moderators. Individuals with high levels of neuroticism are prone to

experience persistent negative thoughts and emotions (Costa & McCrae, 2008). This tendency often results in rumination on worries and fears, which depletes mental energy (Thomsen et al., 2003).

Thus, it might be difficult for them to adopt active “lying flat,” a practice that may require a calm and peaceful state of mind. In contrast, individuals high in openness are more receptive to novel ideas and experiences (McCrae & Costa, 1997). This receptiveness may enhance their willingness to embrace Taoist and Buddhist values, increasing the likelihood of engaging in active “lying flat” as an alternative pathway to well-being.

Regional Differences within China as Moderators. Prior research suggests that Taoism and Buddhism have been more extensively practiced in rural areas than urban areas in China from 1949 to 2020 (Tang et al., 2023). Therefore, rural residents may be more inclined to embrace these values and adopt active “lying flat.” However, this hypothesis warrants future empirical investigation into the regional differences in active “lying flat.”

Potential Cultural Differences. Active “lying flat” and its analogous forms may be expressed and motivated differently across societies. In societies with lower socioeconomic pressures or robust welfare systems—such as Finland or Switzerland—individuals may experience less external stress and greater freedom to prioritize self-actualization (Holte et al., 2019; Y. Wu & Sun, 2024). Here, active “lying flat” can be seen as a conscious choice to pursue well-being and personal fulfillment, enabled by economic security. In the U.S., an analogous sentiment of the “back-to-the-land” movement, where people leave industrialized environments to pursue a simpler, rural lifestyle that aligns with their personal values and desire for simplicity (Agnew, 2004). In China, active “lying flat” may be rooted in Taoist and Buddhist philosophies, shaping its unique meaning and practice. Future cross-cultural research is needed to examine how socio-economic and cultural dynamics

influence the prevalence of active “lying flat” across different regions.

Religious beliefs may also contribute to differences in the tendency toward active “lying flat.” For instance, among Western religious groups, research suggests that Protestants, compared to Catholics, typically exhibit stronger achievement motivation and place greater intrinsic value on work—a perspective shaped by Protestant beliefs and norms (Bouma, 1973; Giorgi & Marsh, 1990). This Protestant work ethic emphasizes personal fulfillment derived from one’s occupation, potentially making adherents less likely to actively “lie flat.” In contrast, Catholics may be less driven by achievement-related values in this context (Bouma, 1973). Future research could further explore how religious backgrounds, including differences among major Western denominations, related to active “lying flat.”

Passive “Lying Flat”: Potential Mediating Mechanisms and Moderators

In this section, we will first posit two mediating mechanisms linking social expectations to passive “lying flat”: autonomy and social comparison. Next, we will propose three mediating mechanisms linking involuntariness to passive “lying flat”: autonomy, social comparison, and personal relative deprivation (PRD) and system-justification belief. Then, we will examine potential moderators, including demographic variables, personality traits, materialism and sense of power, and regional differences within China. Finally, we will discuss the potential cultural differences in passive “lying flat.”

Mediation via Autonomy: Social Expectation as Predictor (Figure 1, Path C-D). Individuals in tight cultures may experience heightened pressure to conform to social expectations, potentially leading to a reduced sense of autonomy. According to tightness-looseness theory (Gelfand et al., 2017), East Asian cultures, particularly China, exemplify tight cultures with stronger social

constraints in everyday life. Individuals in these societies are more inclined to conform to social norms. Moreover, Chinese individuals often prioritize external goals imposed by significant others or society at large (Yu & Yang, 1987). This external pressure can undermine personal autonomy, as individuals may feel compelled to prioritize others' expectations over their own aspirations. The resulting frustration of autonomy needs can foster disillusionment and helplessness, potentially leading to passive disengagement—a hallmark of passive “lying flat.”

Mediation via Social Comparison: Social Expectation as Predictor (Figure 1, Path E-F).

Social comparison theory suggests that individuals evaluate their opinions and abilities by comparing themselves to their peers (Festinger, 1954). According to upward comparison theory (Collins, 1996), people are motivated by self-improvement and self-evaluation, often benchmarking against those who are more successful. However, social comparison also interacts with self-regulation processes related to motivation. The motivational framework of social comparison (Diel et al., 2021) proposes a nonlinear relationship between self-discrepancy assessment and motivation: Upward comparison can boost effort, but only to a certain point. Once the perceived gap becomes too large, individuals may disengage, reducing their effort and ultimately abandoning unattainable goals.

In Chinese society, high social expectations set ambitious standard for financial stability and social status. However, rapid urbanization and economic growth have driven up living costs, particularly in major cities, substantially increasing financial burdens, especially in terms of housing (S. Yao et al., 2014). Furthermore, limited social mobility creates additional barriers to achieving higher social status (L. Lin & Gao, 2021). These unachievable societal expectations, compounded by economic pressures and structural barriers, may contribute to the rise of passive “lying flat,” as individuals disengage from the pursuit of unrealistic goals.

Mediation via Autonomy: Involution as Predictor (Figure 1, Path G-D). Involution refers to a cycle of escalating internal competition that traps individuals in relentless and ultimately unproductive contests for limited resources (W. Zhang et al., 2024). This phenomenon is prevalent in educational and workplace settings. In modern China, the growing trend among youths to pursue higher education and the expansion of higher education institutions may have resulted in an oversupply of graduates, with the National Bureau of Statistics reporting approximately 10.59 million undergraduates in 2024, which is 1.6 times the number in 2014 (Statista, 2025). The oversupply has intensified competition for a limited number of jobs that align with graduates’ qualifications (Xiong, 2022). This competitive environment has gradually evolved into involution, where individuals feel compelled to pursue higher degrees to meet rising entry-level requirements that previously only required a bachelor’s degree (L. Lin & Gao, 2021). To secure employment, many are forced into grueling work schedules, such as the “996” (9 AM to 9 PM, six days a week) or even the “007” (24/7) schedules enforced by some large tech firms (Qin & Dai, 2022). This involutionary climate may constrain individuals’ sense of autonomy, potentially leading to disillusionment as efforts fail to yield proportional rewards. Repeated failures to improve their circumstances can erode their perceived control over outcomes, resulting in learned helplessness—a state where individuals stop trying to avoid an unpleasant situation because they believe outcomes are uncontrollable (Abramson et al., 1978). Consequently, individuals may relinquish goal-setting effort and adopt passive “lying flat” to disengage from relentless competition.

Mediation via Social Comparison: Involution as Predictor (Figure 1, Path H-F). Within the context of involution, individuals engage in relentless comparisons with peers within the same social circle, striving to enhance their status to keep up with their peers (L. Lin & Gao, 2021). Despite these

efforts, the highly competitive nature of involution often results in increased efforts without corresponding rewards. This mismatch between effort and outcomes amplifies feelings of futility and unattainability. Consequently, individuals may lose motivation to pursue their ambitions, possibly leading them to adopt passive “lying flat” as a means of disengaging from the relentless social comparisons (Liu, 2025; Yin et al., 2023).

Mediation via Personal Relative Deprivation and System-justification Belief: Involution as Predictor (Figure 1, Path I-J-K). Despite efforts to match peers’ achievements, involution often results in disproportionate rewards and recognition. Thus, the disconnect intensifies perceptions of unfairness and inequality, heightening feelings of personal relative deprivation (PRD)—the subjective feeling that one is not receiving what they deserve compared to others, often accompanied by anger and resentment (Smith et al., 2012). System justification theory (Jost & Hunyady, 2003) posits that people inclined to perceive the social system as fair and legitimate, which helps them justify and accept the status quo and maintain social stability. However, heightened PRD can erode confidence in the system’s legitimacy, leading to a decline in system-justification beliefs. This may, in turn, foster social cynicism—a negative belief involving a mistrust of social institutions (Leung & Bond, 2004). Supporting this notion, Zheng et al. (2023) found that PRD negatively predicts self-improvement motivation by weakening system-justification belief. When individuals perceived themselves as being treated unfairly, their confidence in the system’s legitimacy and trust in social institutions diminishes. This erosion of trust leads them to believe their efforts will not yield meaningful rewards, thereby reducing their motivation for self-improvement. Consequently, involution may increase PRD and decrease belief in system justification, possibly leading to a greater tendency to passively “lie flat” to disengage from unproductive efforts.

Demographic Variables as Moderators. We hypothesize that passive “lying flat” is more prevalent among the younger generation. There are broader generational trends in China, where millennials increasingly prioritize personal well-being over traditional values that emphasize relentless work and career success (Yi et al., 2010). Thus, passive “lying flat” may serve as a form of disengagement from societal pressures. Prior research suggests a negative association between age and engagement in free-time learning (Zheng et al., 2023), though this measure does not differentiate between passive and active “lying flat.” Findings on gender differences in passive “lying flat” remain inconsistent. A large-scale study of 3,399 participants across China found that women were more likely to engage in passive “lying flat” than men (Zheng et al., 2023). However, Lu et al. (2023), using a smaller sample of 607 Chinese youths, did not observe significant gender differences. These inconsistencies may arise from variations in sample characteristics and measurement approaches. Further research is warranted to clarify the role of gender in passive “lying flat.”

Using indicators such as the frequency of learning during free time and self-improvement motivation, Zheng et al. (2023) found that individuals with higher objective and subjective SES and education were less likely to engage in passive “lying flat.” This tendency is likely due to stronger achievement motivation which corresponds with societal norms emphasizing hard work and career success (Chien et al., 2022; L. Wu et al., 2021). As a result, they might be more inclined to adhere to social expectations and are less likely to passively “lie flat.”

Personality Traits as Moderators. We examine four personality traits—neuroticism, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and intellect—in relation to passive “lying flat.” Neuroticism is characterized by heightened stress reactivity and susceptibility to negative emotions (Uliaszek et al., 2010), which may increase vulnerability to social pressures and thus the likelihood of adopting

passive “lying flat.” In contrast, conscientiousness reflects organization, responsibility, and goal orientation (Goldberg, 1992), and is negatively associated with passive “lying flat” (Zheng et al., 2023). This suggests that conscientious individuals are more inclined toward self-improvement and less likely to disengage from societal expectations. We further hypothesize that agreeableness and intellect are negatively associated with passive “lying flat.” Agreeable individuals, who tend to be cooperative and socially attuned (Volk et al., 2011), may be less likely to engage in passive “lying flat,” as it contradicts prevailing social norms. Similarly, individuals high in intellect typically possess a strong intrinsic motivation for learning and development (Krumrei-Mancuso et al., 2020), which may drive them to remain engaged in work or academic pursuits rather than passively “lying flat.”

Materialism and Sense of Power as Inhibitory Moderators. Individuals who place a high value on materialism constantly pursue wealth and possessions (Richins, 2017). Thus, they are generally more motivated to pursue self-improvement and exhibit a lower tendency to passively “lie flat” (Zheng et al., 2023). Likewise, a strong sense of power negatively predicts “lying flat,” suggesting that those who perceive themselves as powerful are more likely to focus on consolidating their social position through continuous self-improvement (Zheng et al., 2023). For these individuals, the pursuit of external markers of success shapes their responses to societal expectations and inolution. Rather than passively “lying flat,” they are driven to persist in self-improvement, as these achievements align with their core values.

Regional Differences within China as Moderators. Residents of major cities face higher living costs and more intense competition. For instance, there is a considerable housing price gap between first- and second-tier cities, with Beijing’s average price in 2018 about four times higher than

Wuhan’s (Y. Lin et al., 2021). Furthermore, employees in major cities usually experience 996 culture originating from tech companies but now influencing other sectors as well (Liang, 2022). Therefore, high housing prices and widespread overwork in major cities may intensify societal pressures, potentially compelling individuals to adopt passive “lying flat.”

Potential Cultural Differences. Analogous behaviors of passive “lying flat” have emerged in other societies. In Japan, for instance, the “Satori Generation” describes youth with low material desires, limited ambition, and minimal interest in earning money or pursuing romantic relationships (Nae, 2017). The term “NEET” (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), originating in the U.K., refers to young people disconnected from these core activities (Furlong, 2006). In the U.S., “slackers”—popularized in the 1990s—capture a youth subculture marked by apathy and aimlessness (Oxford English Dictionary, 2012). The notion of “quiet quitting” gained prominence during the COVID-19 pandemic. This behavior, characterized by employees adhering strictly to their job descriptions while rejecting overwork, reflects a resistance to the “passion culture” that links personal identity with professional achievement (Cal Newport, 2022). It may be a passive response to the pressures of overwork and high workplace expectations (Galanis et al., 2023; Newsweek, 2023). In 2022, “goblin mode” was named the Oxford’s Word of the Year, referring to “a type of behavior which is unapologetically self-indulgent, lazy, slovenly, or greedy, typically in a way that rejects social norms or expectations” (Oxford Languages, 2022, para. 1). Another related concept in literature within individualistic cultures is work disengagement, which is driven by work resources or demands, such as stress and exhaustion (Afrahi et al., 2022). These behaviors share surface-level similarities with passive “lying flat,” including resistance to traditional success and response to social pressures. Future research should examine passive “lying flat” across diverse populations, investigate

its relationships with these analogous constructs, and assess the extent to which it represents a culturally specific versus a globally resonant response to de-motivating social conditions.

Another important area for future research is how cultural values shape perceptions of passive “lying flat.” In collectivist cultures like China, which emphasize group cohesion and social harmony (Hofstede, 2011), behaviors that reject traditional success metrics may face strong societal resistance. In Hsu’s (2022) study, Chinese respondents frequently characterized “lying flat” as morally questionable, likely due to its perceived rejection of collective duty and conventional ideals of diligence and contribution. Conversely, in individualistic societies that prioritize personal autonomy and self-expression, “lying flat” may be interpreted as a valid, nonconforming response to modern life pressures. For instance, BBC (2021) coverage of passive “lying flat” framed it as a “spiritual movement,” praising its emphasis on not overworking, embracing contentment with attainable achievements, and allowing time for personal well-being. Examining these cultural variations may enhance our insight into how societal norms either restrict or endorse disengagement behaviors such as passive “lying flat.”

Potential Implications of “Lying Flat”

Active “Lying Flat” May Enhance Well-Being, While Passive “Lying Flat” May Diminish It.

This section proposes hypotheses regarding the associations between active and passive “lying flat” and various aspects of well-being, including depression and anxiety. According to the stress and coping theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), individuals employ two primary coping strategies in stressful environments: problem-focused coping (actively addressing the stressor) and emotion-focused coping (managing emotional distress). Expanding on this framework, Park and Folkman (1997) introduced meaning-making, which occurs when an individual experiences incongruence

between a situation’s appraised meaning and their core beliefs, values, or life goals. To restore psychological coherence, individuals engage in meaning-making processes, such as reinterpreting an event or adjusting their goals and beliefs. Successfully resolving this incongruence fosters acceptance and reduced stress, whereas unresolved disparities can lead to continued reappraisal and rumination.

Based on the theory, we propose that active “lying flat” may enhance well-being, while passive “lying flat” may diminish well-being. Active “lying flat” can be viewed as a meaning-focused coping, helping individuals bridge the gap between current situations and personal aspirations by moving from traditional success pursuits to prioritize a peaceful life. The meaning-focused coping was associated with decreased depression and anxiety (Chen Sung et al., 2024; Dominguez-Espinosa & Fontaine, 2023). Conversely, passive “lying flat” may align with an avoidant coping, particularly behavioral disengagement (Carver et al., 1989), arising from persistent incongruence between unattainable success standards and personal importance placed on professional accomplishments. Avoidant coping has been associated with increased depression and anxiety (Grant et al., 2013). Thus, active “lying flat” may function as a form of self-care or mental health management, enhancing well-being, whereas passive “lying flat” may contribute to negative psychological outcomes. Supporting this perspective, the active participant in a qualitative study said, “We own our home debt-free, have no car, and live happily on 20,000 a year for two people” (Qin & Dai, 2022). In contrast, another qualitative study found that passive participants exhibited avoidance coping, such as avoiding competitions (Cheng et al., 2024). Previous studies employing cross-sectional and longitudinal designs have found negative associations between passive “lying flat” and well-being

(Lu et al., 2023, 2024). More research is necessary to explore the psychological implications of “lying flat.”

Active “Lying Flat” May Promote Social Functioning, While Passive “Lying Flat” May Undermine It.

This section provides hypotheses on how active and passive “lying flat” relate to various aspects of social functioning, including family dynamics and prosocial behaviors. We propose that active “lying flat” may promote social functioning. As mentioned earlier, active “lying flat” may involve practicing self-care and self-kindness, potentially fostering greater self-acceptance. This mindset can cultivate higher self-compassion, characterized by a non-judgmental, supportive awareness of one’s experiences (Neff, 2003). Self-compassionate individuals tend to view themselves with warmth and understanding during difficulties times, which may positively influence their interpersonal relationships. For instance, self-compassion has been associated with positive family interactions and improved communication, ultimately enhancing family functioning (Fan & Yang, 2025).

Furthermore, individuals who adopt active “lying flat” may experience a heightened sense of autonomy, which has been linked to greater engagement in prosocial behavior (Tang et al., 2023). By actively choosing a manageable and meaningful life pace, they may feel more in control, allowing them to align their actions with their values including helping others. Future research should examine the potential benefits of active “lying flat” on family dynamics and prosocial behaviors, as these are crucial for fostering societal harmony.

However, passive “lying flat” may undermine social functioning. Because passive “lying flat” may be characterized by a negative perspective on life, it may reduce positive emotions like gratitude, which is fundamental to daily family interactions (McNeil & Repetti, 2021). Research showed that

more perceived gratitude from children has been linked to lower parenting stress, while more perceived gratitude from romantic partner has been associated with greater relationship satisfaction (Barton & Gong, 2024). Thus, individuals with less gratitude may undervalue family support, potentially fostering disconnection and diminishing overall family relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, this detachment may reduce their prosocial behaviors (Twenge et al., 2007), which may further impact social cohesion and community support. Future research could examine how passive “lying flat” affects various aspects of family dynamics—such as family interaction, family relationship satisfaction, and perceived family support—which may, in turn, influence prosocial behaviors.

Potential Implications for Mental Health Professionals.

While Lu et al. (2024) reported that an inspirational video intervention significantly reduced passive “lying flat” and improved well-being, further exploration is needed to mitigate the negative psychological effects associated with this behavior. Despite empirical findings are still lacking, we propose potential avenues for mental health professionals to explore in addressing this issue. Firstly, practitioners can intervene in the cognitive patterns of individuals engaged in passive “lying flat” by implementing cognitive-behavioral strategies to cultivate a positive mindset. Secondly, enhancing clients’ emotion regulation skills can empower them to recognize, understand, and manage their emotions more effectively, thereby reducing the emotional burden of disengagement. Thirdly, practitioners can support these individuals in developing a diverse set of coping strategies, increasing their adaptability to challenging situations. Taken together, these strategies underscore the need for tailored interventions aimed at alleviating the adverse effect of passive “lying flat” on well-being and equipping individuals with tools to cope with its impact on mental health. Further research is needed

to test the effectiveness of these strategies.

Potential Implications for Policymakers.

“Lying flat” is characterized by withdrawing from work, which may present significant challenges for workforce participation and productivity, particularly in industries dependent on a stable and motivated labor force. In addition, if work withdrawal becomes more widespread, it could shift societal attitudes away from ambition and fulfillment, possibly challenging traditional norms that prioritize external achievements and economic productivity. To address these dynamics, policymakers could enhance access to upward mobility and alleviate barriers such as unaffordable living costs through measures like housing price regulation and education reforms, creating a more equitable environment that fosters hope and ambition. Efforts to mitigate involuntory pressures, including labor policy reforms promoting healthier work-life balance and expanded access to mental health resources, could also alleviate the societal stressors driving disengagement. Notably, Germany’s trial of a four-day workweek demonstrated that reducing working hours improved overall employee satisfaction without negatively impacting revenue or profit (Backmann et al., 2024). Furthermore, empowering individuals through flexible work arrangements could restore autonomy. For instance, in the UK, eligible employees can formally request adjustments to their working hours, schedule, or location and most requests are approved unless business concerns justify rejection (Advisory Conciliation and Arbitration Service, 2023). According to the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (2021), over 60% of employers reported flexible work arrangements improved employee relationships and engagement. By promoting equity, autonomy, and well-being, policymakers can address the societal challenges posed by work withdrawal, helping to build a more inclusive and resilient society.

Conclusion

This review proposes an integrative framework to understand how Taoist and Buddhist values, social expectations, and involution contribute to the emergence of the “lying flat” phenomenon. To explain the psychological mechanisms linking these antecedents to “lying flat,” we draw on several theoretical perspectives, including self-determination theory, social comparison theory, and system justification theory. In particular, we highlight autonomy as a key mediator in relationships between various factors and both active and passive “lying flat.” Future research should expand on this framework by exploring cultural variations and psychological implications of “lying flat.” By advancing our understanding of “lying flat,” we can develop more effective strategies to help individuals navigate pressures, ultimately promoting more balanced and fulfilling lives in the context of modern challenges.

Constraints on Generality Statement

The concept of “lying flat” is originated in Mainland China, and existing studies on this phenomenon primarily involve Chinese participants. This cultural context inspired us to bridge Eastern and Western perspectives, thereby providing a more nuanced analysis. However, the cultural specificity may limit the generalizability of our conclusions to other demographic groups, particularly those from different races, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. We acknowledge that the experiences and interpretation of “lying flat” may vary significantly across cultures and demographics. Future research should aim to examine “lying flat” across diverse populations to broaden the applicability and generalizability of findings.

Citations Statement

Given that “lying flat” is a trend rooted in Chinese culture, our main sources of reference are Chinese scholars. That said, we have included citations from scholars in other countries, such as

Japan and the U.S. to highlight the broader impacts of the social and group dynamics. We have also incorporated theories developed by scholars worldwide and described similar phenomena in different societies, recognizing the importance of diversity in academic research. We encourage scholars from various countries and cultural backgrounds to engage in the discussion.

Positionality Statement

All authors were socialized and conduct research within the East Asian cultural context. Our shared background provides us with a deep understanding of the cultural nuances relevant to “lying flat.” Despite this shared background, the scarcity of empirical studies on “lying flat” leads us to acknowledge the potential influence of a specific ideological perspective on our interpretation of this phenomenon, potentially biasing our analysis. To mitigate this bias, we incorporate viewpoints from authors with diverse cultural backgrounds. Notably, the corresponding and senior authors have experience living and conducting research in Western cultural contexts, such as the U.K. and the U.S. This diverse cultural exposure allows us to incorporate a broader perspective into our analysis and reduce the impact of potential bias. We endeavor to systematically and even-handedly describe existing literature and identify important gaps. By integrating insights from both Eastern and Western cultural contexts, we aim to provide a balanced and comprehensive view of “lying flat.”

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