

# Lying Flat: Accelerating Society's "Refusal" and "Welcome"

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**Abstract:** "Lying flat" refers to the attitude and behavior of young people towards life and the future, adopting a state of no desire, no pursuit, and no resistance. Rosa's theory of social acceleration is an important social critical theory in contemporary Western society, with significant influence. According to Rosa's theory, one of the main characteristics of modern social life is acceleration, which is characterized by the acceleration of technology, social change, and pace of life. In accelerating society, people generally face fierce competition, and the logic of competition is the driving force of social acceleration, then ultimately it leads to alienation, where people are not close to but far away from the good life. This article attempts to use Rosa's social acceleration theory to analyze the phenomenon of lying flat, pointing out that lying flat is a rejection of sustained competitive pressure in life by young people, which manifested as two different types: intentional deceleration and forced lying flat, but it also demonstrates new thinking and pursuit of a good life. The theory of social acceleration helps to understand the phenomenon of lying flat among young people and has important implications for China's goal of building a good life for the people.

**Keywords:** lying flat, social acceleration theory, competition, alienation, good life

## 1. Introduction

Due to a post titled "Lying flat is justice", lying flat became a hot topic on the internet in 2021 and gradually became a lifestyle phenomenon and attitude among young people. Lying flat has been redefined from the original meaning of lying flat on the body, describing an individual's choice of "lying flat" in response to various external pressures, adopting an attitude and behavior of no desire, no pursuit, no sadness, no joy, and no resistance towards life and the future<sup>[1]</sup>. Lv Qixuan (2023) believed that lying flat is a resistance attitude of young people in the face of a stressful life situation, as well as a way to think and pursue various lifestyles and alleviate mental stress<sup>[2]</sup>. However, there is still vagueness and ambiguity in its definition in the academic field<sup>[3]</sup>. In this article, we define lying flat as the attitude and behavior of young people who face life and the future with no desires, no pursuit, and no resistance.

People have different attitudes towards lying flat. Supporters believe that lying flat is a new affirmation of people's inner pursuit and self-worth. "Lying flat is justice" has become a declaration of this attitude. They view lying flat as a soft resistance to real-life issues such as materialism and social injustice, and a result of conscious rational choice<sup>[4]</sup>. They even developed a so-called 'lying flat-ology' as a new value orientation and became a new spiritual outlet for young people. In this so-called new life philosophy, it advocates giving up high-intensity work and consumption and living in a low desire way to alleviate survival pressure and psychological burden. Critics point out that lying flat is an escape from social competition, lacking the enthusiasm and self-pursuit that life should have, and jointly point out the harm of lying flat to society. Wang Yilin (2023) referred to lying flat as a state of decadence among young people and an "unhealthy tendency" that affects the development of the youth and the country<sup>[5]</sup>. Wang Jinlin (2021) pointed out that people who lie flat often lack the awareness of self-reliance and self-sufficiency, and are prone to falling into a state of "giving up self-reliance and independent self-esteem". He believes that lying flat violates the basic principles of modern society, is not conducive to individual and social development, and does not have resistance spirit. The ultimate result is that lying flat will only lead people into nothingness<sup>[6]</sup>. Zhang Zihui et al. (2022) argued that the internal cause behind lying flat is the lack of life meaning and spiritual crisis in young people. Lying flat poses serious

harm to both individuals and society. They believe that a life that lies flat is "lifeless" and a society that lies flat is just like a pool of "stagnant water"<sup>[7]</sup>. Some scholars have also emphasized the positive and negative effects of lying flat<sup>[8]</sup>, or have revealed and explained lying flat with a relatively neutral attitude<sup>[9]</sup>.

In the analysis of lying flat, Li Yi and Li Guoda (2023) believed that lying flat is an alternative posture to resist internal competition<sup>[9]</sup>. Youth use lying flat to relieve external pressure and discipline themselves, attempting to "reduce stress" in the reality of pressure and competition. Qin Xinyuan and Dai Yuqi (2022) divided it into three categories: escapist lying flat, self-deprecating lying flat, and helpless lying flat<sup>[10]</sup>. Each category of lying flat has its own reasons and attitudes towards life. There are also a few empirical studies on lying flat. Guan Youcheng (2023) conducted semi-structured interviews with young students in an attempt to understand their knowledge and attitude towards lying flat, reveal the reasons for the spread of the lying flat phenomenon, and draw conclusions from interviews with students that lying flat is a leisure for young people in the struggle journey, and deceleration is a strategy for acceleration<sup>[11]</sup>. Li Shuai et al. (2022) developed a youth lying flat questionnaire with good reliability and validity, which can be used to measure lying flat behavior<sup>[12]</sup>. The scale includes two factors: "awakening lying flat" and "avoiding lying flat". The former is a self reconciliation style "lying flat" after examining reality, while the latter is a "lying flat" that loses fighting spirit and is idle in competition. Peng Jun and Yu Tao (2023) conducted a survey and research on nearly 10000 college students, analyzing the reasons for the phenomenon of college students lying flat from four aspects: willingness, structure, behavior and frequency, etc.<sup>[13]</sup>. In terms of willingness, the youth group exhibits a combination of passive and active characteristics; In terms of structure, the trend of stratification is obvious, family environment, the location of registered residence (urban or rural) and educational level all have an impact, and college students who lie flat also reflect their concern about marginalization; In terms of behavior, it manifests as slow rhythm and low desire; In terms of frequency, it manifests as a behavior that sees lying flat more as short-term and occasional, and still chooses to strive in the long run.

However, in previous research, theoretical analysis was relatively lacking. Among them, the theory of social acceleration has attracted the attention of some scholars<sup>[11, 14, 15]</sup>. The theory of social acceleration was proposed by German sociologist Hartmut Rosa and described in detail in his representative work *The Birth of New Alienation: An Outline of Critical Theory of Social Acceleration*<sup>[16]</sup>. Rosa proposed that one of the main characteristics of modern social life is acceleration. With the progress of science and technology, social changes and the pace of life have also accelerated. The progress of technology is particularly evident in modern society, for example, people can travel across regions more quickly, communicate information with others more conveniently, and so on. While Rosa pointed out that technological progress has not saved time or slowed down the pace of people's lives. On the contrary, the continuous acceleration of modern society is squeezing people's living time, and people feel troubled in the constantly accelerating pace of life. In order to alleviate the pressure of faster pace and time scarcity, people in turn demand technological innovation, which brings about a new cycle.

Even if it's just based on common sense, we all believe a good life is always the result of struggle, and lying flat cannot lead to a good life. In this study, we attempt to use the acceleration theory to analyze the phenomenon of youth lying flat and its causes. This work is of great significance as it helps young people discover their role in contemporary society, avoiding excessive social anxiety while also avoiding negative lying flat and stay away from real life. This study attempts to point out the "rejection" and "welcome" exhibited by lying flat among young people, and to point out their meanings and influences. It also suggests that people should pursue a good life as their life goal and actually approach this goal.

## 2. "Refusal" and "welcome" to lie flat

### 2.1. Refusal to lie flat

Rosa pointed out that accelerating society generally faces fierce competition<sup>[16]</sup>. Competition manifests as a greater pursuit of completing tasks within a unit of time, a common societal mindset of "not advancing or retreating", and the pursuit of improvement based on "quantity" in everything. In the capitalist economic system, competition has become the theme, and "time is money" has become a common belief among people in modern society. In order to gain a competitive advantage, capitalist economies strive to produce more products per unit of time, sell products faster, and more efficient production methods, faster transportation, communication networks, and sustained social innovation constitute the story of modernity. But sometimes, before the emergence of new technologies, capital owners may force workers to work more intensively at the current level of technology in order to

maintain competitiveness in terms of time. As a result, the pace of life for workers has not gradually slowed down due to the acceleration of technology, but rather due to the increasing competition. In the power structure and promotion in the workplace, the logic of competition also leads people to have to increase competition. In order to maintain competitiveness and avoid being eliminated in fields such as learning and work, people are required to strictly follow a time plan to arrange their actions, and each action is given a "deadline" - one day, one week, one year, or four years, etc. Therefore, the principle of time limit becomes the highest principle for arranging personal affairs. In order to avoid losing in competition, or even to stay in place, people must take various actions to enhance their competitiveness. The "absolutely necessary behavior" of individuals has greatly increased: they must participate in longer periods of knowledge learning to meet the continuous requirements of the competitive society for academic qualifications; It is necessary to continuously participate in various skill training to meet the demand for abilities in a competitive society. Rosa often cites the image of a hamster wheel to illustrate this competitive acceleration logic, where people need to constantly move forward to stay in place<sup>[16, 17]</sup>.

The acceleration of technology, social change, and the pace of life constitute the landscape of modern social life. But the benefits of competition are becoming increasingly scarce in today's society, which is becoming increasingly rigid. An obvious phenomenon is wealth concentration. Dong Lixia's study (2023) pointed out that in 2017, the wealth share of the highest 10% households in China was 51.07%, while the wealth share of the lowest 50% households was only 6.39%<sup>[18]</sup>. Nowadays, with the unattainable high housing prices, the economic downturn, and the sluggish job market, people have doubts and rejections about past competition success standards. The most obvious manifestation of this doubt and rejection is people's negation of past spirit of struggle and hard work. Many people once believed in the belief that "striving to change life" and "enduring hardship is the key to success". But on today's internet, people tend to agree with expressions like "as long as you can endure hardship, you have endless suffering" that are anti hardship and anti struggle; more young people agree with the similar statement that "impoverished families can hardly nurture rich sons, and power has been monopolized"; anti PUA skills in the workplace have become a must-have for some newcomers. They refuse to work overtime, compare with others, and suffer from mental exhaustion. They adopt a hostile attitude towards 996 or the promotion of the spirit of hard work in the workplace.

According to Rosa's social acceleration theory, we can distinguish between two different types of lying flat. One approach is to consider lying flat as (1) intentional deceleration, which is a deliberate form of deceleration taken after consideration. Rosa analyzed two forms of deliberate deceleration: one is functional or accelerative deceleration, which aims to rest and rest in limited or temporary deceleration in order to continue operating or further accelerate in the acceleration system. Therefore, we can understand this form as temporary strategic lying flat, which is only for better starting; There is also an ideological deceleration, which is a form of anti modern ideology. For example, extreme religions, ecological environmentalists, or political extreme protectionists exhibit hostility towards modernization. But in the depictions of many lying flat individuals, in addition to the intentional deceleration mentioned above, we seem to be more likely to see (2) young people being forced to lie flat. This is in line with Rosa's statement of "deceleration resulting from the dysfunction of social deceleration". Rosa pointed out that in modern society, individuals experience deceleration reactions due to excessive accelerated stress, and depression and fatigue are pathological consequences of deceleration. Fortunately, lying flat is not psychiatric illnesses at least, but we also see the life pressure faced by young people, and how lying flat becomes a stress response and a negative psychological self-defense mechanism under this pressure. These lying flat individuals exhibit a "withdrawal" from the ongoing competition in their daily lives, as they become tired of excessive internal competition and the loss of internal competition on themselves. When internal competition cannot bring about a change in identity, a crossing of social classes, or even the difficulty of maintaining survival, this kind of lying flat seems to become a thorough resistance.

## **2.2. Welcome to lie flat**

While teenagers choose to lie flat and refuse competition, they also show great enthusiasm for a different dimension of modern society, that is, their yearning and pursuit of new forms of life. Even at the beginning of the popularity of the term "lying flat", its proponents sang praises of self pursuit, "Only by lying flat can one be the scale of all things". So, while lying flat says no to competition, they also embrace their own needs and values.

This kind of "welcoming" is manifested as a embrace of rapid modern life experience, as well as a great enrichment of life experience content for young people - they want to do or experience more, so that the pace of their life is constantly accelerating or they are always busy, and time becomes an endless resource. The scarcity of time constitutes the acceleration of Rosa's subjective pace of life. Objectively

speaking, the acceleration of the pace of life is manifested in two aspects: firstly, the time spent on events or actions is being compressed; The second is to tend to do more and experience things within a given time. A typical example of the former is the popular Special Forces-style tourism among young people, which manifests as spending less time and expenses to achieve so-called check-in to a certain city or tourist attraction. The use of the internet or smartphones has become the main living space for young people, and it seems that there is no young person who does not know how to use smartphones. Smartphones, games, and social software have become their main audience, as excessive use of the internet and addiction to mobile phones and games have become a social disorder of the new era. In addition, in terms of the length of sleep, it can be seen that with the use of intelligent electronic products, people spend more time on it, but less time on sleep - college students who sleep before midnight have almost become out of place. "The deepest night they endure, the most expensive facial mask they wear" describes the living conditions of many young people. This lack of time seems to explain why young people nowadays exhibit greater impatience when dealing with romantic life. They are not easily involved in a single relationship, or on the contrary, some people are involved in multiple relationships at the same time. Similarly, Rosa also described in his work the fact that divorce rates are increasing rapidly in society, and that people in modern life may experience multiple periods of family life throughout their lives; Or at the other extreme, the number of people who maintain celibacy is also increasing. The latter manifests as people engaging in more multitasking operations, such as doing multiple things at the same time, so we often see people being able to look at their phones while eating or browsing and watching short videos while driving.

While people exhibit hedonism and *carpe diem*, we also need to see that this acceptance of life experiences actually reflects people's universal pursuit of a good life. And a good life is also the research theme of Rosa's social acceleration theory. Rosa and Henning (2018) viewed the good life as a fulfilled life that is rooted in social relations and peacefully coexisting with nature, and unrelated to increasing resources<sup>[19]</sup>. They pointed out that in post-growth society, people's understanding of happiness or a good life is no longer based on competitive logic, and goes beyond the simple connection between economic development and subjective well-being. Especially in the context of economic crises, there has been an increase in people's widespread questioning of the good concept of capitalism and a good life, prompting people to rethink and define a good life. Reflecting on the past and analyzing the current situation, people have found that accelerating society has not made people's lives better, but has instead led to human alienation, bringing increasingly serious problems to people's lives and plunging them into the design and pressure of continuous competition. Therefore, in the event of economic crisis or lack of innovation drive, it does not mean that the good life will also leave. On the contrary, people will more agree that the good life will no longer rely on economic growth, but will focus on social relations of equality and respect, as well as new quality of life and sense of fulfillment, including harmonious relations with nature. People in postmodern life may be more inclined to agree that happiness or a good life should be a broader experience of the world, trying to experience more fresh and trendy things within a limited life time - whether it is traveling or wandering in the online world, or being a person, a forest, or a concert. These encounters with the other create what Rosa (2018) called "resonance", relating to the world in which the subject feels touched, moved or addressed by the people, places, objects, etc.<sup>[17]</sup>. So, in a sense, lying flat is a refusal to accelerate the alienation of people, and a self awakening and discovery of people in postmodern society. This emphasis on self needs is a pursuit of self actualization, a pursuit of autonomy in life, and "I make my own decisions" has become a declaration of independence for postmodern people, even in which our lives become unpredictable and uncontrollable. But these constitute the conditions for creating a good life, or these pursuits themselves constitute the actual content of a good life.

### 3. Conclusion

This article attempts to analyze lying flat using the theory of social acceleration, but this is still limited to simple theoretical applications; This kind of application may have its rationality. Considering the impact of globalization and digital revolution, the thinking gap between China and the West is increasingly narrowing. We may draw on Western sociological theories to analyze the social phenomena that have emerged in China. Obviously, we still need to explore the deep-seated reasons for the phenomenon of lying flat in China. We need to combine the specific social, cultural and historical background of our country, grasp this universal social psychology, and achieve correct guidance for young people.

The pursuit of a better life in this guidance seems to have become a common topic among educators and young people, including the emphasis on youth's sense of achievement; The cultivation of youth's sense of responsibility and spirit of struggle. This guidance includes improving the educational content for young people, especially college students, by changing meaningless teaching methods that only emphasize student attendance and focus on completing so-called teaching tasks, but are not beneficial for students' knowledge learning, especially among groups with a profound understanding of the value of

time, this meaningless teaching makes them disgusted and angry. But we need to realistically see that even with lower material needs, the pursuit of a range of life experiences is increasing people's need for money. When parents who support young people no longer provide this kind of support, it is difficult for them to sustain their lying flat. The so-called beautiful life is just a temporary illusion built on the exploitation of parents, but a temporary self-deception. Rosa and Henning (2018) also pointed out the danger of shifting towards "immaterial" values, coping strategies, and compensatory imaginative views of happiness<sup>[19]</sup>.

## Acknowledgments

Fund project: 2019 Doctor Scientific Research Start Fund Project of Jiangxi University of Chinese Medicine (Project No.: 2019BSRW005).

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