



LUNDS
UNIVERSITET

We are Elites and Losers:

Constructing Community Identity and Seeking Social Capital in an
Online Subcultural Group in China

Hui Chen

MSc. in Media and Communication

Supervisor: Michael Bossetta

Examiner: Tobias Linné

Abstract

This thesis focuses on the combination of youth subculture and online community in the contemporary Chinese context. It aims to explore the characteristics of the Chinese online youth subculture and how members construct their collective identities and gain alternative social capital in an online subcultural group. To exert the power of a good example as Flyvbjerg (2001) emphasizes, this thesis chooses an atypical case—an online group “985 Feiwu Plan” in China. The number “985” means “Project 985” universities, which can be considered as “the Ivy League” in the Chinese context. The Chinese character “Feiwu” roughly means “loser”. This online group brings together individuals who come from Chinese top universities but self-proclaim as losers. The self-mocking expression has reflected one increasingly popular online youth subculture in China—the Sang culture, through which the Chinese youth express a set of gloomy emotions towards their personal life.

The thesis asks three overarching research questions: 1) In what ways do members perform a subculture in an online community? 2) What community identities do the subcultural group members construct? And, 3) how do members seek alternative sources of social capital through their expression and interaction in the subcultural online community? Through qualitative text analysis of data from semi-structured interviews with members of the group, this thesis has three key findings. First, the similarities of Sang culture performed by the group members include powerlessness, self-irony, and weak resistance; the variations are the group members distinguish themselves from “real Sang” people by their outstanding educational background and their use of the Sang culture as “defensive pessimism” to vent emotions. Second, the two conflicting social narratives “Involution” and “lying flat” in contemporary China, and their obsession with the halo of prestigious universities, have caused the group members to be torn between the two identities “985” and “Feiwu”. Third, the group member has gained a valuable but fleeting sense of belonging as an alternative social capital that is generated by the conversions of subcultural capital and emotional capital.

Overall, this thesis shows how Chinese youth use the Internet as a tool to express a weak resistance against the powerful official discourse and the role of new media play in the formation process of youth subculture identities. Also, this thesis has contributed to the literature on social capital by discussing how alternative social capital can be generated in an online subcultural community.

Keywords: Chinese online youth subculture, online community, identity, social capital, subcultural capital, emotional capital

Acknowledgements

It has been a real long journey for me, from dark Nordic winter nights to sunny summer days, sometimes I even ask myself: can I really reach the destination? Along the way, a lot of self-doubts, abandoned ideas, sleepless nights, but finally I am here, due to the warmth, encouragement, support, help from all of you:

My supervisor, Michael Bossetta, who has always been supportive, inspiring, responsible, and patient. Thanks for all the discussions with you, which gave me countless inspirations and help. From you, I know what a good scholar would be like.

All the interviewees in my thesis, thanks for your trust, vivid stories, and insightful thoughts. It is my honor to listen to and record those beautiful experiences, laughter, and tears in your life. Whether a “985” or a “Feiwu”, no label is enough to define you. Wish you all the best in the future.

My friend, Wen, I will remember all the moments we spent together, the movies we watched together, the dinners we ate together, the places we went together, and your sweet handmade cookies. My friends, Hua, Shunan, Mia, and Mingyi, thanks for all the joy and company you gave me during the two years in Lund.

My friends in China, I miss you. Delong, talking “nonsense” with you is the best way to cheer me up whenever I am down. Xizi and Huizi, your encouragement always helps me hold on and go further.

My parents and my sister, thank you for all the support. Whatever I choose to do and wherever I am, you always give me the unconditional trust and love.

All the staffs and friends at the Department of Communication and Media, I am so grateful and happy to spend the two years with you.

Special thanks to the wonderful summer in Lund, the road I took a walk every day, my lovely little bear, my mint on the windowsill, tulips, dandelions, cherry and apple trees, and other various plants. You gave me silent but warm company.

Table of Contents

1.Introduction.....	5
Aims and Objectives	6
Research Questions.....	8
2.Literature Review	9
2.1 Subculture and Sang subculture in China.....	9
2.2 Identity and othering.....	14
2.3 Online community	19
2.4 Social capital and the conversion of various capitals.....	24
3.Methodology and Methods.....	30
The case.....	30
Method and sampling	31
4.Analysis.....	34
4.1 The inheritance and development of Sang subculture in this online group.....	34
4.2 “985” (elite) and “Feiwu” (loser): being torn between two identities	43
4.3 Alternative sources of social capital in the online community	50
5.Conclusion	56
References.....	64
Appendices.....	70
Appendix 1: The demographics of the interviewees	70
Appendix 2: Interview guide	71
Appendix 3: A full transcript of one-to-one semi-structured interview	72
Appendix 4: Codebook for interview data	80
Appendix 5: Consent form.....	83

1. Introduction

“I would call myself a ‘Feiwu’. In my view, in fact people from ‘985’ who call themselves ‘Feiwu’ do not really think they are ‘Feiwu’. It is just a self-mocking and deconstruction. Calling myself ‘Feiwu’ is not a bad thing, actually it gives me more freedom to self-define.” (San, 24-year-old, female, student)

The two frequently mentioned labels above, “985” and “Feiwu”, have seemingly conflicting connotations in the Chinese context. Surprisingly, a group of Chinese young people are willing to embrace the two identities at the same time to define themselves.

According to the ways of ranking universities in China, the 39 universities that belong to “Project 985” can be regarded as “the Ivy League” in the Chinese context. Students who graduate from these universities are often considered “winners” in society. However, in May 2020, an online group named “985 Feiwu Plan” (“Feiwu 废物” means “loser”) was established on Douban, and it has more than 110,000 members so far. Douban is a popular interest-based social networking platform launched in 2005 in China. According to the data of the second quarter of 2019, Douban has 196 million registered users. Different from other Chinese social platforms, such as Twitter-like Weibo and WhatsApp-like WeChat that have imitated foreign application models to some extent, Douban is a platform with distinctive originality. Douban integrates many functions such as book reviews, movie reviews, and music reviews, and online forums (Douban Group), and it is famous for its abundant user-generated content. This research will focus on the “985 Feiwu Plan” group on Douban—the interest-based Douban Group include all kinds of topics such as food, travel, entertainment, lifestyle and so on. Douban users can create any specific theme for their group, which in some ways is similar to those discussion forums on Reddit. Individual Douban groups are based on small niche communities serving specific interests.

The “985 Feiwu Plan” group on Douban aims to provide an online communication space for young people who graduated from top universities but consider themselves to be “losers”. Calling themselves “losers” reflects a subculture that has prevailed on the Chinese Internet in recent years—“Sang” culture (“丧sang”, meaning “dejected, dispirited, loss or to lose”) (Lu and Fan, 2020; Tan and Cheng, 2020). In contrast to Chinese official propaganda of “positive energy”, Chinese youth are more willing to express the gloomy attitude on social media (Lu and Fan, 2020). Similar to Sang culture, there is another online subculture through which young people also express collective disappointed feelings—the Diaosi(屌丝,diaosi) culture. As

Szablewicz (2014) notes, the Chinese term Diaosi (屌丝), is roughly approximate to “loser” but in a more vulgar way, which more specifically expresses the self-mocking on lack of economic wealth and physical appearance such as “poor, short and ugly” (穷矮丑). The users of Diaosi culture are mainly ordinary Chinese young people especially males from disadvantaged social-economic backgrounds. From the Diaosi culture to the Sang culture of the “985 Feiwu Plan” group, we can see the expansion of negative emotions among Chinese young people—from “ordinary people” to “elite”. Why do young Chinese youth from prestigious universities embrace Sang subculture and label themselves with “losers”? Many Chinese mainstream media report that this is a group of young people who have not experienced setbacks and have poor psychological endurance. However, the posted content in the “985 Feiwu Plan” group shows that there may be structural problems behind this. For example, in this group, there is a subcategory named “Experience sharing and empathy” where many group members posted discussions such as “share the reason why you become a loser”, “experience as a low-class girl”. The increasing inequality, the class rigidity, the narrow mainstream definition of success criteria, have made Chinese youth and even these students from top universities hard to see the bright future. They use a negative narrative to voice themselves and express their dissatisfaction towards society. In this sense, the Sang culture of the younger generation is a kind of resistance to mainstream culture. China’s mainstream narratives create an incentive for these youth to seek out subculture spaces, perhaps as a way to find alternative sources of social capital. Based on the background of the “985 Feiwu Plan” online group and the Sang subculture, this research will try to explore why these Chinese young people come to the online group and how they express the Sang subculture, and what identities they construct and what alternative social capital they gain in the process.

Aims and Objectives

First, this research will examine the newly appearing Sang subculture in China through the online community “985 Feiwu Plan” to explore the evolution of this Sang subculture in China. As an increasingly popular narrative on Chinese online environments, the Sang subculture has not received enough academic attention. In the Douban group “985 Feiwu Plan”, Chinese youth from top universities construct a sense of belonging based on the Sang subculture. They deconstruct the narrow and pervasive mainstream narrative of an ideal life and positive attitude through expressing a feeling of loss with a gloomy tone. As Tan and Cheng

(2020, p. 96) claim, Sang subculture “parodies these idealized subject positions through sharing memes of defeatism, disenchantment and disconsolation, revealing in the process an affective identification of loss”. Different from expressing Sang subculture through sharing memes on social media, those young people in “985 Feiwu Plan” have more complex and contradictory features—these well-educated youth are viewed as “winners” by others, but they view themselves as “losers”, and unexpectedly they find a sense of belonging and build their identities in this online community based on Sang culture. Therefore, this research will pay more attention to immersing in this group to listen to these young people’s voice semi-structured interviews, depicting a vivid and detailed picture of how Chinese youths try to express their identities and find a sense of belonging through the Sang subculture to resist the positive mainstream discourse. Through the investigation of the online Sang subculture and its development in the context of online group, we can know how Chinese youth use Internet as a tool to express their different voice and resistance to the powerful official discourse in China, and the socio-economic reasons such as distribution inequality and diminishing possibilities for upward socio-economic mobility behind the Sang subculture.

Second, what this research wants to understand is the collective identities of those youth members express through Sang subculture in the group “985 Feiwu Plan”. It is worthwhile to explore them for providing a deep analysis of Chinese youth subculture and online community identity. The Sang youth subculture in China is becoming increasingly popular but there is scarce literature on the topic. The case of “985 Feiwu Plan” group is a new and unique space for examining Internet culture and community identities. The official state’s discourse of “positive energy” as a type of ideological re-positioning of Chinese youth, it requires youth to meet the collective and normative expectations of the family, school and state (Tan and Cheng, 2020). The appearance of this online group reflects the disjuncture between Chinese official consciousness of youth culture and the Sang subculture that youth are willing to embrace. To examine this online group, we can know how the collective “Sang” emotions has spread from general Chinese youth to a seemingly “elite” group of students from top university in China, which offers a particular perspective to reflect on the educational inequality and the limited definitions of success by the mainstream. In addition, by understanding the group members’ torn mentality between the two identities “985” (top university student) and “Feiwu” (loser), we can touch broader social narratives in contemporary China—to join the endless competition or withdraw from it to seek out another road?

Third, this research aims to rethink the concept of “social capital” in the special context of this subcultural online community. Social capital has been a controversial concept in academia. According to the definition of Williams (2006), different from those tangible scales such as goods or services for financial capital, the measurement of social capital are personal relationships and the benefits they create. More specifically, the production of social capital is through the process where some social actors interact and build a network of individuals—a “social network” that results in positive affective bonds, and these networks in turn “yield positive outcomes such as emotional support or the ability to mobilize others” (ibid. p.594). Back to this special subcultural online group “985 Feiwu Plan”, through sharing similar experiences of failures and communicating with each other, members gain emotional support and cultivate a sense of belonging, which can be considered as the alternative social capital that they are unable to acquire through the social interaction in daily life where mainstream narratives dominate. Besides, this thesis will explore what are the sources of this alternative social capital based on the conversions of various forms of capitals like subcultural capital. Therefore, this thesis can provide a new academic perspective for the concept social capital that is rarely discussed in an online subcultural community.

Research Questions

1. In what ways do members of “985 Feiwu Plan” group perform as part of the Sang subculture?
2. What community identities do the group members construct in the “985 Feiwu Plan” group?
3. How do members seek alternative sources of social capital through their expression and interaction in the subcultural online community?

2.Literature Review

This chapter consists of four parts: subculture and the Sang subculture in China, identity and othering, online community, and social capital and the conversion of various capitals. The four parts are linked together by the case—an online subculture community “985 Feiwu Plan” where the identities of group members are constructed by their similar educational background of Chinese top “985 Project “universities and their engagement of Sang subculture by labelling themselves as “Feiwu” (loser). This chapter begins with an examination of academic works on different stages of subculture in western context and the literature on subculture in Chinese context. The second part aims to explore the concept cultural identity in depth and try to consider it in the context of subculture. The third part focuses on the characteristics of online group a how online group provide a platform for group members to seek the sense of belonging and construct collective identities. The last part deals with the concept social capital and the certain meaning of social capital in the context of online subculture community.

2.1 Subculture and Sang subculture in China

In this section I will first briefly introduce the development of the term “subculture”, which mainly includes three stages—the Chicago School of Sociology at the University of Chicago during the 1920, Birmingham University’s Centre for Contemporary Cultural Research (CCCS) during the 1970’s, and Post-Subcultural theory since the 1990s. Then I will explore the development of subculture in the Chinese context and its connection with youth culture. Finally, I will elaborate the Sang subculture and try to position it in the boarder background of Chinese youth culture.

2.1.1 Subculture: from the Chicago School to the Birmingham School to post-subculture

The Chicago School defined subcultures by using a deviance framework with a heavy emphasis on an ethnographic and empirical approach to their research (Williams, 2007). The sociology scholars at the Chicago School first disciplined subcultural studies in the 1920s. and formally coined the concept of subculture. They explored the existence of deviant behavior of young people and discussed deviance as a product of social problems within society. Albert Cohen, one of the most prominent figures of the Chicago School, explored the deviant behavior of urban gangs in his influential book *Delinquent Boys: Culture of the Gang* (1955). Cohen proposed two basic ideologies -- status frustration and reaction formation -- to understand how such gangs attempted to “replace” society's common norms and values with their own sub-

cultures. In this sense, the subculture is used in a process of “(re)negotiation of status, and a subversive effort to reach a solution” (Cohen, 1955, p. 47). When examining subculture, The Chicago School focused on factors such as class and race and they saw subculture as a form of resistance to mainstream society.

The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham established in the mid 1960s, and it mainly focused on the emergence of youth subcultures in post-World War II Britain, such as Teddy boys, Mods, Skinheads, and Rockers. CCCS theorists argued that it was important to examine youth subcultures based on the concepts class, resistance, rituals, and styles. They suggested that subculturists together was a collective desire to “act out” in resistance to hegemonic, mainstream cultural values, and such resistance manifested itself most clearly in the group members’ spectacular styles and rituals (Haenfler, 2013). Instead of using any ethnographic research methods to approach subculturists, CCCS scholars conducted their research via semiotic analyses of someone’s style and practice.

Since the 1990s, some scholars proposed the concept of post-subculture (Redhead, 1990; Muggleton, 2000), emphasizing the discrete and fluid nature of subcultures in the Internet era, and argued that there is a need to reconsider the applicability of the term subculture. Some scholars have proposed new concepts such as neo-tribe based on the new characteristics of online subculture. At the same time, the online subcultural groups have become more fluid, loose, and fleeting. Subcultures within online communities are different from those traditional subcultures centered around music which has been discussed frequently in the previous literature. As McArthur (2009, p. 69) mentioned, the reinscription of elements of traditional subcultures such as the physical interaction and the tangible sense of style in the digital space is happening, allowing style to become digital and personal interaction to focus on Internet access rather than physical proximity. Due to the increasing procreation of youth styles, and the new postmodern sensibilities of style in which individualism has more influences, young people seek out for more places and ways to construct their sociocultural identities (Bennett, 2011).

According to Maffesoli, the neo-tribe is ‘without the rigidity of the forms of organization with which we are familiar, it refers more to a certain ambience, a state of mind, and is preferably to be expressed through lifestyles that favour appearance and form’ (1996, p. 98). The concept neo-tribe provides new understandings of how and why young people are brought together in collective affiliations. Different from what subcultural theory suggests that individuals are “held” together in subcultural groups by the fact of class, community, race or

gender, neo-tribal theory allows for the function of taste, aesthetics and affectivity as primary drivers for participation in forms of collective youth cultural activity (Bennett,1999). Drawing on neo-tribal theory, Andy Bennett considers the implications of the Internet for our understanding and application of subculture. As she points out, the Internet provides new avenues for collective youth cultural practice which transcend both space and time, giving rise to new forms of subcultural activity.

With the birth of the Internet and the rise of online social networking sites, the mobility of groups has increased, and individuals can belong to different online groups at the same time, which makes the identity of subculturalists more fluid. In her 2004 article *Virtual Subculture? Youth, Identity and the Internet*, Bennett views this uncertainty and fluidity of identity provided by the Internet as a creative strategy of virtual subculture. She argues that Internet as an interactive medium provides young people the opportunity to create a reflexive understanding of subculture and its everyday use in local contexts. Youth can construct and collectively display its reflexively understood ‘subcultural’ status through Internet (ibid.). In sum, the post-subculture theory provides new perspectives to understand youth culture in a new context (such as the emergence of internet and social media), where young people have more possibilities and reasons to join or create their special culture.

2.1.2 The subculture in China and Sang subculture

The development of subcultures mentioned above is mainly dependent on the Western context. In general, subculture can be understood as a set of cultural ideas shared within a specific group where members use a series of objectified and embodied symbols, through which they demonstrate a distinct stylistic identity, and as a resistance against the dominant culture to some extent. Subculture often includes the following elements: a certain group of members mostly involving young people; a type of shared culture based on activity, behavior, and values; a distinct subcultural identity recognized by group members. These characteristics of subculture are expressed in the development of the western context such as studies conducted by scholars of the Chicago School and the Birmingham School.

However, culture is deeply influenced by context. Edward T. Hall introduced the concept of high and low context cultures in his 1976 book *Beyond Culture* as a way to understand various cultural orientations and the ways cultures communicate. In high context cultures, the context is more important than the actual words; in low context cultures,

communication is more explicit, and the information is clearly expressed through words. The research (Kim, Pan, Park, 1998) on a comparison of Chinese, Korean, and American cultures shows the Chinese and Korean are consistent with Hall's description of high-context cultures, and the American subjects are consistent with low-context cultures. High and low context should be seen as a continuum on which countries may be placed to represent the extent to which “contexting” occurs in the culture (ibid.). Therefore, it is important to explore the concept subculture from a low-context western culture to a high-context Chinese culture.

Compared with the number of studies on subculture under the western context, there is quite few English literature on subculture in the Chinese context. The academic topic of youth subculture in China has not received enough attention, the topics of available literature are limited. Most of the current articles focus on the relationship between subculture and delinquency, and the group of “deviant” students in China (Ren et al. 2016; Liu and Xie, 2017). Some articles pay attention to the development of Hip-hop subculture (Zhao and Lin, 2020) or punk music (Xiao, 2017) in China. Those articles on Chinese online subculture mainly study Egao (online parody) subculture (Zou, 2020) or Diaosi (losers, more specifically, “poor, short and ugly”, with emphasis on material wealth, physical appearance, and sexual stereotypes, different from “Feiwu”) subculture through Internet memes (Szablewicz, 2014).

The study of subculture in the Western context has basically gone through two stages: the first stage is the formation of the concept of "subculture" and its continuous development, as well as the theoretical and empirical studies around many subcultural phenomena; the second stage is the challenge and critique of post-subculture theory to the previous subculture theory and the attempts for new conceptualization. Due to its late start and inheritance from the Western paradigm of subculture theories, the themes of subculture studies in the current Chinese context presents a situation where two stages are intertwined and mixed—on the one hand, like the CCCS focus on socio-economic structural factors such as class, resistance, rituals, and styles; on the other hand, like the post-subculture theory focus on the fluid nature of subcultures on the Internet.

The Sang culture took off on the Chinese Internet five years ago, and its connotations have been enriched over time. The Chinese character Sang (丧) is associated with the word “funeral (葬礼)”, describes the negative feeling of being disappointed, dispirited, dejected, and hopeless. The Sang culture emerged in July 2016, influenced by the one buzzword of the year “Ge You Slouch”. The meme “Ge You Slouch” comes from a 1993 sitcom “I Love My Family”,

in which Chinese actor Ge You plays a young idler who is in a state of muddling through. A stage photo from more than 20 years ago, with the young idler played by Ge You exhaustedly slouching on a sofa, went viral on Chinese social media among the youth without any media marketing or hype in 2016. At the same time, more and more young people compared the actor Ge You's lying down state to their own decadent state and made such a decadent state entertaining and self-deprecating. With the popularity of “Ge You Slouch”, the Sang culture has been re-signified into memes by urban youths to represent themselves in a defeatist and pessimistic style (Tan and Cheng, 2020).

Even though it is an increasingly popular online culture, the Sang culture has not got enough academic attention in English academia. The current English literature on Sang subculture are very few and they still base on Sang memes' users (Lu and Fan, 2020; Tan and Cheng, 2020). Tan and Cheng's (2020) article uses Raymond Williams' concept of 'structures of feeling' within a semiotic framework to analyze three sets of Sang memes to understand the processes of subjectivity formation and the affective significance to its participants, and they find that Sang subculture is a current of thought-feeling due to a perceived incapacity by Chinese youths to live up to the ideological re-positioning within official consciousness. Through the lens of self-mocking memes, Lu and Fan (2020) attempts to understand the psychological mechanisms and social meanings behind sang culture. They conduct a survey research of Chinses college students to examine the uses and gratifications of self-mocking memes and the effects on psychological well-being. The result shows a mixed effect of self-mocking meme usage on Chinese youths' psychological well-being: it is positively related to the harmonious interpersonal relationship while negatively related to self-acceptance. Both studies focus on the usage of Sang memes participants on Chinese social media, expressing the psychological and social meaning behind Sang culture and how Chinese youth use it to construct their subjectivity. However, the development and popularity of Sang culture is continuing and the usage is beyond its origins of memes on social media. The Sang culture has become a prevailing narrative shared and re-created by Chinese youth on social media, thus I argue it is necessary to explore the Sang culture in a broader context such as the online community to see if it has emerged new characteristics.

As an emerging youth subculture based on the Internet, the Sang culture has been popular for a short period of time, and the current research on Sang culture in Chinese academia is relatively homogeneous—mainly focusing on the field of social psychology, exploring the characteristics of Sang culture and the psychosocial reasons for its popularity through textual

analysis. For example, some scholars (Xiao, Chang, Sun, 2017) analyze the Sang culture from the psychosocial perspective and they argue that it reflects the social psychology of post-90s youth in the current social transition. The research shows that the reasons for the popularity of Sang culture are: first, a large number of young people use the Internet platform to indirectly express their negative emotions that cannot be resolved in daily life; second, the Sang culture is the “active stigmatization” of young people, which is a resistance against the "stigmatization" from the mainstream culture; third, the popularity of Sang culture is the result of the unconscious influence of the collective and society, as well as the awakening of the consciousness of the youth group; fourth, the new media such as WeChat and Weibo accelerate the spread of Sang culture by deliberately selecting information to cause emotional infection.

In addition, Du (2017) examines the Sang subculture through the concept “Learned Helplessness” and “Self-Irony” from the psychosocial perspective and combines it with subculture theories. He suggests that the Sang culture exemplifies the learned helplessness theory and represents itself in “self-irony”—a special way of self-mocking and it has become a popular way for young people to express their identities and to participate in cyber culture. He also argues that the Sang culture has complicated "subculture features" including the decadence and numb, self-reinforcement, carnival, quipping, protest, deconstruction, reflection, and self-deny. These studies on Sang culture from the social psychology provide a view to examine “sang” as a collective social mindset of contemporary Chinese young people. However, there are quite few literature analyzing the Sang culture from the perspective of online subculture. The Sang culture has received lots of criticize from the state-run media representing the official ideology and dominant culture in china, which can be considered as a subculture. Its development mainly relies on Internet especially social media, offering an opportunity to explore the role of new media play in the formation process of a youth subculture in contemporary china. Therefore, this thesis aims to investigate the development of the Sang subculture in a context of a youth online community.

2.2 Identity and othering

In this section, I will start by briefly introducing the development of the theories on identity. Based on this, I will explore the concept cultural identity in depth and try to consider it in the context of subculture to discuss the term subcultural identity. I will also use the concept of othering to analyze the process of identity formation among subcultural community.

2.2.1 Identity: from who you are to where you belong

The concept of identity derives mainly from psychologist Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development in 1950s. In his book *Identity and Life Cycle*, Erikson (1959) described the eight different stages of life, from infancy to adulthood, showing the impact of social interaction and relationships on across the whole lifespan of human beings. He also introduced the term "ego identity", which he defined as a continuous and stable sense of who they are for individuals (ibid., p. 22). The sameness and continuity of ego identity provides individuals with the perception of having a personal identity. From this, we can tell that the research on identity in psychology field focuses more on the subjective aspect of identity, that is, the awareness of the self.

The subsequent studies of identity began to explore this concept in a larger context where social and cultural elements are involved. The research focus on identity has expanded from the sense of who we are to the sense of where we belong. Since early 1970s, the social identity theory, with a strong focus on how the social context affects intergroup relations, has provided a significant perspective to explore the relationship between self and group. Based on the investigation of intergroup conflicts, social psychologists Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979) introduced the social identity theory, which suggests that a group or an organization can shape or modify the group members' self-concept, attitudes, and behaviours based on the individuals' knowledge and emotional attachment to the group.

According to Tajfel and Turner, social identity consists of "those aspects of an individual's self-image that derive from the social categories to which he perceives himself as belonging" (ibid, p.59). The social identity of individuals mainly means a shared sense of social category membership and the sense of belonging of a group. Therefore, social identity, social categorization, and social comparison are closely related. By a process of social categorisation individuals choose and decide which social group they belong to, through this they distinguish 'us' and 'them' (the in-group and the out-group). By a process of social comparison, the in-group people compare their groups with others and try to get positive evaluations in terms of their social identity and self-concept. Tajfel and Wilkes's 1963 study (cited in Hornsey 2008) argued that the process of making obvious distinctions of "us and them" can change the way people see each other and the way people see themselves. When category distinctions are obvious, people strengthen similarities within the group ('we are all much the same') and enhance differences among the group ('we are different from them'). Turner (1975) has explored the relationship between perceived social identity and social comparison, and he

argued that social comparison engenders the mutual differentiation between different groups which can be viewed as a type of social competition—for this competition people’s motive seems to be comparison but rather than the rewards or group interests in the normal sense. The process of social categorization and social comparison involves the distinction between us and them, this can be understood with the concept othering which will be mentioned later.

2.2.2 Cultural identity and subculture

In addition to examining identity in the context of social groups where the individual’s self is embedded, some scholars analyze the concept cultural identity to explore how individuals identify themselves into a particular group based on diverse cultural categories, enriching the meaning of identity. According to Stuart Hall (1989, p. 69-70), there are two different ways to think about cultural identity. The first way is to define cultural identity as “the idea of one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common.” The second way is to view cultural identity as a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’, which belongs to both the future and the past and undergoes constant transformation. In his 1996 essay ‘Who needs identity’, Hall responds to the question by clarifying the deconstructive critique and the irreducibility of the concept identity. From Hall's perspective, identity is not the stable core of the self, not the that collective or true self hiding inside, not unified but fragmented, not singular but multiple (ibid.). As Bauman (1996, p.18) states, if the modern 'problem of identity' was how to construct an identity and keep it solid and stable, the postmodern 'problem of identity' is primarily how to avoid fixation and keep the options open. In the context of postmodern, the meaning of identity has become more flexible and fluid, which means individuals has more autonomy to choose and define their own identities including the core of the self, the role of a social group or cultural categories.

In my view, the fluidity of identity can be understood in two ways—horizontal and vertical. Horizontal fluidity of identity is when comparing oneself with different subjects in different social groups or cultural categories, then there will be the distinction of mainstream and marginal; vertical fluidity of identity is that one's identity will change when comparing the different stages of one's life - for example, from a student at university to an employee in a workplace. In this sense, identity is in a constant process of becoming rather than being. (Hall and Gay, 1996). How can we understand “the process of becoming” of in the context of

subcultural identity? The formation of subcultural identity reflects the horizontal fluidity of identity, that is, when a small group of people define themselves or share the common sense of belonging by a type of marginal cultural category (such as club culture in Thornton's 1995 book, or negative emotion/education level in this thesis). For those members of a subculture, they choose a culture category with the shared characteristics of a group and gain a new identity, so the subcultural identity for them is newly becoming rather than being born with.

The existing literature on subcultural identity can be tracked back to 1990s, some scholars choose different topics and contexts to analyze it. Wheaton (2000) focused on the fluid and fragmented characteristics of identities in the context of sport and leisure lifestyles. She examines windsurfing subcultures especially the ways in which participants created and perform their subcultural identities. Drawing on ethnographic work on windsurfing subcultures, her research shows that the windsurfers make their own subculture and contribute to the construction of the subcultural identities through their commitment and engagement to this sport rather than the display of equipment or subcultural style. When analyzing the windsurfers' identity, she argues that identity is about similarity and difference and focuses on the essential elements that distinguish insiders from outsiders to the subculture (ibid., p.25). Therefore, the distinctions between subculturalists and the outsiders play a crucial role in the process of the subcultural identities---through comparing themselves with outsiders, the subculture members confirm "who we are"; through distinguishing themselves from others and expressing the collective identities in the subculture group, they declare "where we belong".

2.2.3 Othering: a way to construct subcultural identity

As Sarah Thornton's (1995) research on club cultures in the UK discusses, "Although judgments of value are made as a matter of course, few scholars have empirically examined the systems of social and cultural distinction that divide and demarcate contemporary culture, particularly youth culture" (p. 7). The social and cultural distinction is worthy to be considered when it comes to identity and subculture. Both the definitions of identity and subculture imply a distinction between "us" and "them" that is used to draw the line. According to the social theorist Weeks' (1990, p. 88) definitions of identity:

“[A]bout belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others. At its most basic it gives you a sense of personal location, the stable core to your individuality...At the centre, however, are the

values we share or wish to share with others.”

If we understand “identity” as the values we share or wish to share with others, and the sense of belonging to a social or cultural group, then it is easier for us to know why it is so important to explore the “othering” among the process of subcultural identity information. When choosing one subculture group or one label to identify ourselves, at the same time we refuse some other identities, the concept “subculture” itself includes the difference or even resistance with the so-called “mainstream” culture. In Jensen’s (2011) article that examines the potentials of the concept of othering to describe identity formation among ethnic minorities, he outlines the history and the contemporary use of the concept “othering”, as well as some criticisms. He defines othering as “discursive processes” by which the powerful groups define subordinate groups in a reductionist way that attribute inferior features to the subordinate groups (p. 65). He claims that such discursive processes affirm “the legitimacy and superiority of the powerful and condition identity formation among the subordinate” (ibid.).

In this sense, the process of othering often involves the inequality in power relations, which has represented in other scholars’ definitions of othering. According to Lister, othering is the “process of differentiation and demarcation, by which the line is drawn between ‘us’ and ‘them’ – between the more and the less powerful – and through which social distance is established and maintained” (2004, p. 101). Both Jensen and Lister define the concept othering from a critical and negative perspective where the less powerful group are generally depicted as passive objects rather than subjects with agency. To provide a more comprehensive understanding of this concept of othering, Jensen also points out the limitations of othering as “it is based on the dichotomy of the first and the other, rather than that which transcends these binaries” (Gingrich, 2004, cited in Jensen, 2011, p.66). He argues that theoretical considerations about agency which he defines as the ability to act within and up against social structures should gain more attention. As he claims, resistance is central to agency, there are two forms of agency, one is “capitalization”, which means the agency does not rely on refusing othering discourses but by using some elements of the discourses to acquire symbolic values as part of a subcultural style or the deconstruction and reproduction of those stereotypical images; another one is “refusal”, which means the agency relies on expressing distance from the category of the other or refusing to accept the position of the other.

What I want to give more discussions and reflections here is the first form of agency “capitalization” (Jensen, 2011). He argues that the core of capitalization agency is the resistance against devaluation—the other is always being depicted as the less powerful and

inferior groups, by the means of capitalization agency, those group can exercise their cultural agency and redefine the criteria of what it valuable by appropriating some elements of otherness to achieve the stylization of self. As Jensen (Jensen, 2011, p. 70) points out:

“The empirical examples above illustrate a type of reaction to othering, which can be termed capitalization. This type of reaction works not by resisting to occupy the position of the other per se, but by resisting the devaluation and attempting to capitalize locally on being in the position of the other, by accentuating those dimensions within the ambivalent gaze of the majority which can be ascribed value.”

The process of resisting the devaluation and capitalizing on the position of the other can be understood as a strategy to gain subcultural capital (Thornton, 1995). Based on Bourdieu's (1984) work of cultural capital and distinction, Thornton (1995, p.25) argues that clubs are refuges for the young people where they can construct their subcultural capital through turning popular “distinctions” from the club culture into “capitals”. Thornton has compared the term subcultural capital with cultural capital in her 1995's book *Club Cultures*, “Subcultural capital can be objectified or embodied. Just as books and paintings display cultural capital in the family home, so subcultural capital is objectified in the form of fashionable haircuts and well-assembled record collections” (p.25). Thus, members of subcultural groups can show distinctions from others by performing an objectified subcultural style such as clothes, haircuts, or record collections. At the same time, subcultural capital can be embodied in the form of being “in the know”, that is, members who have specific knowledge of the subculture such as club music or dancing styles can distinguish themselves from the outsiders. Based on the analysis of Jensen's capitalization form of agency and Thornton's subcultural capital, I argue that is worth to analyze othering from a more positive perspective—how “the other” group exercise their agency and convert the distinctions from the mainstream into a subcultural capital. This positive perspective of othering is also reflected in some scholars' articles. According to Charon (1992, p.107), “It is through others that we come to see and define self, and it is our ability to role take that allows us to see ourselves through others”. Realizing the difference between ourselves and others is a way to help us understand the self and our role. In this sense, in the process of being seen as the other or seeing people as the other, our identities have been chosen and constructed by ourselves.

2.3 Online community

In this section, I will examine the difference between online community and traditional offline community, especially the new characteristics of online community. I will also explore

the dynamics and user engagement of online community. In addition, I will analyze how online group as subcultural media provide a new platform for group members to seek the sense of belonging and construct collective identities.

2.3.1 Traditional offline group and online group

The current literature on online community has provided some viewpoints of the difference between online and offline community. Some scholars (Lehdonvirta and Räsänen, 2011) examine how young people identify themselves with diverse online and offline peer groups in the UK, Spain and Japan, and how socio-demographic position and individual sociability characteristics have influence on youth's identification experiences. Their findings show participants identify as stronger with their online communities than they do with offline groups. They also claim that the online group provides a more socio-demographically inclusive source of identification for youth than traditional offline groups; young people's affinity towards online groups reflects high sociability and online networking sites should be seen as more crucial contexts for today's youth's socialisation and identification experiences. From this, we can know online community has become an increasingly significant place for young people to seek group identity and practice sociability. Compared with offline groups, online groups have more advantages in these aspects—more flexibility for online users to choose without the limit of time and space (Rheingold, 1993), less requirements of social skills needed in face-to-face interaction, and more freedom for marginalized individuals such as political dissidents or sexual minorities, who are excluded from the traditional structures of their societies (Mehra, 2004).

According to research conducted in different countries around the world, young people are more likely to try new technologies and services than older people (e.g., Wei 2006, Willis and Tranter 2006). When exploring the institutional implications of technology usage disparity and the socio-psychological significance of a technology to its users, scholars (Näsi, Räsänen, and Lehdonvirta, 2011) find that identification mediated by technology is as crucial as the actual quantity and quality of people's usage of technology. They compare more than 1200 participants' identification with online and offline communities, and they argue that young Finnish people identify with online communities significantly more strongly than their elders do. From this, we can see young people are the main members of online groups, so it is important to combine the research on online community with the youth culture (the youth subculture in this article).

Group memberships and social networks of the groups and communities remain a fundamental building block in society, and they play an important role in individuals' daily life as well—providing individuals with a source of ontological security and self-esteem (Lehdonvirta and Räsänen, 2011). In developmental psychology, peer groups, groups of individuals sharing a similar age, background, and social status, are particularly important for children and young people (ibid.). Peer groups have impacts on individuals' values and behaviors through the process of social comparison such as the observation that individuals evaluate themselves according to the performance of their closest peers (Festinger, 1954). This article focuses on the online group with members from similar educational and social background, age, and similar life experiences, which can be considered as an online peer group. For those group members, they not only compare themselves with the peers in the groups to position themselves, but also form a sense of belonging and community identity with their peers through the engagement and interaction in the group.

2.3.2 Online community and subculture

As motioned above, young people are the main groups of both subculture groups and online groups, so it is worth exploring how young people use online group as a more free and flexible space to construct subculture and differences between online and offline subcultural groups. Thornton (1995) has stressed the significant role of media as a platform for subculture members to promote their values and acquire subcultural capital. She criticizes the ignorance of the role of media by the previous subculture scholars such as the Birmingham tradition and sociologies of 'moral panic'. In her 1995's book *Club Cultures*, Thornton analyzes how various media makes a difference in the gathering of youth and the formation of subcultures through examining the media of three layers—micro, niche and mass media. Thornton argues that various types of media are integral participants in the process of subcultural formation. As she (Thornton, 1995, p. 180-181) has pointed out:

“I examine how various media are integral to youth's social and ideological formations. Local micro-media like flyers and listings are means by which club organizers bring the crowd together. Niche media like the music press construct subcultures as much as they document them. National mass media, such as the tabloids, develop youth movements as much as they distort them. Contrary to youth subcultural ideologies, 'subcultures' do not germinate from a seed and grow by force of their own energy into mysterious 'movements' only to be belatedly digested by the media. Rather, media and

other culture industries are there and effective right from the start. They are central to the process of subcultural formation, integral to the way we ‘create groups with words’.

Thornton highlights that a “systematic investigation of their media consumption” is critical to analyze and understand the “distinctions” of youth subculture. (Thornton, 1995, p.14). Based on the three layers of media, she differentiates them as the mass media (such as national television and newspaper) and specialist media (such as micro and niche media) and argues these forms of media have different cultural connotations for the club culture members. The mass media is more likely to put negative labelling such as “moral panic” on subculture, thus the subculturalists see the media as a “colonizing co-opting” force “against which subcultural credibilities are measured”, however, the specialist niche media may provide more space for subculture members to create and share their cultural knowledge (Thornton 1995, cited in Wheaton and Beal, 2003, p.157). Therefore, we can see the niche media (such as subcultural consumer magazines in club culture context) as a form of subcultural media “give definition to vague cultural formations, pull together and reify the disparate materials which become subcultural homologies...they do not just cover subcultures, they help construct them” (Thornton, 1995, p.230-231). From this, subcultural media can be defined as those media that provide more space for subcultural group members to construct their subcultural identities and to positively presented the subculture, or those media forms that are created or employed by subcultural group members to attract more audiences. Thus, I argue that we can consider subcultural media as a form of media that help express the cultural knowledge and style of subculture and construct the subcultural identities of members.

The definition of subcultural media has expanded over the time. Based on specific time of 1990s, those media examined by Thornton in her book are mainly traditional media such as paper flyers and listings, television, consumer magazines, national public service radio and mass circulation tabloid newspapers. After more than twenty years, considering the complexity of contemporary communications, the changes brought by Internet should be paid more attention to it. In my opinion, for subcultural members who have rare access to control the mainstream media such as newspaper and television, online group has provided a platform for them to let their voice be heard. Therefore, online groups can be seen as a new form of subcultural media.

What is the difference between online group and other traditional subcultural media form such as niche consumer magazines? As mentioned before, online groups break down physical and geographical limitations, providing anonymity and security for Internet users form

all the world to create a public place to communicate with people have common grounds or hobbies. For those marginalized individuals who are likely to be criticized and negatively labeled by the mass media and be excluded by the traditional structures, such as political dissidents or sexual minorities, online groups can be considered as a free space (Mehra, 2004). It is worth mentioning that the appearance of online forums social networking website such as Reddit has offered people more opportunities to create their own forums based on diverse topic, which brings more flexibility and lowers the threshold for subculturalists to construct their community identities.

The difference between online subcultural groups and offline subcultural groups has rarely been discussed in the current literature on subculture. I argue there are two key differences: first, offline subculture groups tend to be related to a type of activity such as club culture (Thornton,1995) or windsurfing culture (Wheaton,2000), while the topics of online subcultural groups are more flexible and fluid, and tend to focus on specific behavior or values such as “straightedge” music subculture (Williams, 2003), the argot of male heterosexual clients of sex workers(Blevins and Holt, 2009), and the online Involuntary Celibate (Incel) community (O’Malley, Holt, K., and Holt, T. J., 2020). Second, offline subcultural groups members often have some common material objects or styles such as haircuts or clothes or sports equipment, while online subcultural groups rely on symbolic or language styles such as memes. Due to these differences, I think that compared with offline subcultural groups, online subcultural groups can provide a more open and unconfined platform for people to construct their subcultural identities through more digital forms such as memes. Therefore, next I want to discuss the concept online community identity in the context of subculture.

2.3.3 Online community identity

The field of online community identity is important to understand community dynamics and user engagement. The meaning of a community’s identity is defined through its users' common interests and their shared experiences, and the identity in turn impacts on diverse aspects of the social dynamics within the community (Zhang, Justine, et al.,2017). For a systematic exploration of the nature of the relation between community identity and community dynamics across a wide variety of online communities, Zhang, Justine, et al. (2017) mapped around 300 Reddit communities to examine how patterns of user engagement vary with the characteristics of a community. The results show that user engagement tightly depends

on the nature of the collective identity and those communities with distinctive and highly dynamic identities are more likely to retain their users (ibid.). Besides, some researchers (Ren, Kraut, and Kiesler, 2007) emphasize the importance of combining common identity theory with common bond theory to analyze and evaluate the design of communities, and they find that the common identity or interpersonal bonds among community members can motivate the different levels and forms of community participation of group members. Therefore, it is worthwhile to explore the relationship between the group members engagement (such as their experience sharing or subcultural expression) and the community identities in Douban group “985 Feiwu Plan”.

It is also important to analyze online community identity within the context of subculture. Different from other online community such as health group or online learning group that members are connected by some practical purpose and aims (study together or have access to healthcare knowledge), subcultural group members gather for seeking a sense of cultural belonging and to express their identities. Ren et al. (2004) conduct a research on how online communities develop member attachment by strengthening either group identity or interpersonal bonds. The result shows that community features aim to foster identity-based attachment have stronger effects than features aim to foster bond-based attachment for the success of community; participants who have identity-based attachment to the group and repeated exposure to their group's activities visit the online community more frequently. From this, I argue the shared subcultural identities of online subcultural groups members contribute to the success of the groups and to the formation of group members' identity-based attachment to the group. As I mentioned before when discussing the literature of identity, members of a subculture online group choose a culture category with the shared characteristics of a group and gain a new identity, so the subcultural identity for them is newly becoming rather than being born with. The flexibility of the newly becoming identities at the same time means vulnerability and instability—some online group members may leave the group when their assumptions towards their identities have changed or they have found another more suitable new identities, which also reflects the post-subculture turn.

2.4 Social capital and the conversion of various capitals

In this section, I will briefly introduce the different opinions of the slippery concept social capital. My assumption is subculturalists try to seek out an alternative social capital through online interaction to complement their daily offline interpersonal communication. Also,

I will explore the possibility of the interconversion of different types of capitals in the online subculture community, such as from subcultural capital to social capital through emotional capital as an intermediary.

2.4.1 Social capital and online community

Social capital has been a controversial concept in academia. Pierre Bourdieu (1986) defines social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition or in other words, to membership in a group” (p.248). From this, we can know social capital is based on a network of connections which provides each group member with “the backing of the collectivity-owned capital” (p.249). Bourdieu’s definition shows the inherent interrelation between the term social capital with community where the social network linked by each group member. According to the definition of Williams (2006), different from those tangible scales such as goods or services for financial capital, the measurement of social capital are personal relationships and the benefits they create. More specifically, the production of social capital is through the process where some social actors interact and build a network of individuals—a ‘social network’ that results in positive affective bonds, and these networks in turn “yield positive outcomes such as emotional support or the ability to mobilize others” (ibid. p.594).

The definition of social capital is diverse in literature with different research backgrounds. The research (Wu, et al.,2010) of the effect of social capital on the depression of urban Chinese adolescents shows how to apply this concept into social and psychologic contexts, and the results indicate that social capital embedded in the family and the community, together with family human capital and financial capital, have significant impacts on the level of adolescent depressive symptoms—higher community social capital is associated with a lower depressive level. Social capital is usually related to the attributes and quality of social relationships in a variety of social contexts (ibid.). Social capital “provides a conceptual link between the attributes of individual actors and their immediate social contexts, most notably the household, school, and neighborhood” (Furstenberg and Hughes 1995, p.582). In this sense, it is worthwhile to analyze social capital in the scale of the community where there are diverse individual actors and various forms of interaction. Different social networks and interactions in different communities produce different types and levels of social capital.

According to William (2006)'s interpretation of the ideas from Putnam (2000), there are two types of social capital: bonding social capital and bridging social capital. Bonding social capital occurs in those networks with close personal connections such as family and close friends, and it provides strong emotional and substantive support, and the downside is there are homogenous backgrounds of individuals or even insularity (William, 2006). Bridging social capital is more inclusive and it appears in those heterogeneous communities with more diversity but weak ties between individuals. The advantage of bridging social capital is that it may bring more broadened social horizons and views and offer information or new resources, but it lacks in strong connection such as emotional support (ibid.). However, with the rapid development of social networking sites (SNSs), the boundary between bonding social capital and bridging capital has become blurred in those interest-based online communities where they have both strong ties and weak ties between individuals. Back to this special subcultural online group “985 Feiwu Plan”, through sharing experiences and communicating with each other, users cultivate the alternative social capital that they are unable to acquire through the social interaction in daily life where mainstream narratives dominate.

2.4.2 The interconversion of various capitals: subcultural capital and emotional capital

In his book *Distinction* (1984), Pierre Bourdieu extensively writes the idea of different forms of capitals in our society to explore the links between taste and the social structure. Bourdieu (1986, p.241) suggests that capital is “accumulated labor” in its materialized form or embodied form which can be appropriated by private and exclusive groups of agents and enable them to seize social energy. As capital takes time to accumulate and it can be seen as a potential capacity to produce profits and to reproduce itself, he states that capital is a force “inscribed in the objectivity of things” so that we can understand how inequality is produced and reproduced in society from the perspective of capital (ibid.). To account for the structure and functioning of the social world, Bourdieu reintroduces capital in all its forms not solely in the form recognized by economic theory. According to him, there are three major types of capital—cultural, economic, and social, he also elaborates many subcategories of capital such as linguistic, academic, intellectual, information and artistic capital. In term of the conversions of different types of capitals, Bourdieu argues that economic capital is at the root of all the other types of capital and the principle of the conversion is “profits in one area are necessarily paid for by costs in another” (1986, p.253). The process of the conservation of different types of capitals provides people the opportunity to supplement one specific form of capital by

accumulating another and exchanging, which help them maintain and improve their social positions in the stratified society.

Based on Bourdieu's work, some scholars have come up with more creative forms of capital in various and broader contexts, such as Thornton (1995)'s subcultural capital. As mentioned before in the section of identity and othering, based on Bourdieu's concept cultural capital, Thornton (1995, p.26) creates the term subcultural capital to analyze the club culture and she provides a new perspective of capital—we can consider the popular “distinctions” as capitals. According to Bourdieu (1986, p.243), cultural capital can exist in three forms—the embodied state (the longstanding nature of the mind and body), the objectified state (cultural goods such as book and pictures), and the institutionalized state (educational qualifications). Bourdieu states that cultural capital constitutes the familiarity with the dominant culture within a society and the main sites for the transmission of cultural capital are the family and education system, which makes cultural capital closely related to class. Thornton also thinks that subcultural capital can be objectified and embodied in various forms, but she argues that youthful subcultural capital is not class-bound because class is “wilfully obfuscated by subcultural distinctions” (1995, p.28).

Two years earlier than Bourdieu's book *Distinction*, Nowotny (1981) first theorizes the concept emotional capital in her work on Austrian women in public life. According to Nowotny, emotional capital consists of “knowledge, contacts and relations as well as access to emotionally valued skills and assets, which hold within any social network characterised at least partly by affective ties” (Nowotny, 1981, p.148). She considers emotional capital as a variant of social capital in the context of Austria where women had limited political right in the public life, and they tried to transfer emotional capital from the private sphere to the public sphere to gain more political voice. Emotional capital can be seen as a narrowed version of social capital and it is restricted to the affective ties of social network such as family members and friends. Another characteristic of emotional capital is it tightly related to gender—women have more emotional resources than men. I think it is an inspirational combination if we examine Raymond Williams' framework of “structure of feeling” based on the concept of emotional capital to demonstrate how emotions might participate in the reproduction of culture. Williams considers structure of feeling as ‘the felt sense of the quality of life at a particular place and time’ (1975, p.47). The structure of feeling expresses the different ways of thinking competing to emerge at a specific time in history.

It appears in the gap between the official discourse and the popular response to official discourse and the discourse appropriated in cultural texts. Some scholars claim that the concept “structure of feeling” opens up significant theoretical possibilities, as through this concept Williams “represents emotions as rich, complex sociocultural practices with productive or causal functions. That is, emotions produce culture and are not simply the reverberations of other social formations and power relations” (Harding and Pribram, 2002, p.417). From my view, culture and emotion interact with each other—the ways people should feel in certain situations and the ways people should express their emotions are deeply influenced and shaped by the dominant culture in a given cultural context, in turn, the collective emotions and feelings emerging in the society can be considered as a specific cultural phenomenon in an epoch.

Some scholars have discussed the interconversion between cultural capital, social capital, and economic capital, such as the research on how and why entrepreneurs convert their available economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital (Pret, Shaw, Drakopoulou Dodd, 2015), and the relation between the conversion of social and community development in Australian context (Onyx, Leonard, 2010). However, comparatively little attention has been paid to the interconversion of the newer and more specific forms of capital like emotion capital and subcultural capital. What is the connection between social capital, emotional capital, and subcultural capital? On the one hand, emotional capital can be understood as a narrowed version of social capital, and it can be converted to social capital when individuals expanding the influence of affective ties of family or private sphere to a broad public sphere. In this sense, emotion is a type of social resources. On the other hand, drawing on Raymond Williams's conceptualization of “structure of feeling” that states the emotions are culturally constituted and culturally shared, I argue that an influential collective emotion demonstrated by a specific group of people can produce or create a type of culture. The power relations invisibly and influentially construct the official discourse of appropriate and inappropriate emotions in a society, shaping the structure of feeling of living within a specific social and cultural context, which can be understood as “the official consciousness of an epoch – codified in its doctrines and legislation” (Williams, 1979, p.159). Considering the context of this thesis—the Sang subculture expressing a collection of negative emotions such as disappointment, frustration, and powerlessness of young people in China, the subcultural capital in this sense can be seen as a form of emotional resources acquired by venting negative emotions in public space to resist the official discourse of “positive energy” in China.

In this section, I first traced the development of the concepts of subcultures, from the Chicago School to the Contemporary Cultural Research (CCCS) during the 1970's, and Post-Subcultural theory since the 1990s. Then, I argued that studies on subcultures are lacking in the Chinese context and examined the current literature on one popular online subculture in China—the Sang subculture. To address this gap in Chinese online culture, I applied two concepts identity and online community to make the argument that online group can provide a more flexible and free space for members to construct their subcultural identities and subcultural capital. Finally, I discussed the concept social capital because social capital plays a crucial role in the formation of dynamics in the online group and the concept social capital is explored a lot in online platforms, but seldom discussed in a subcultural community.

3. Methodology and Methods

To answer the study's research questions, this thesis employs a qualitative methodology. According to Bazeley (2013, p.5), qualitative analysis is case oriented, the data and the analysis is centered around case. Therefore, the first part of this chapter is to introduce the case based on some methodological ideas. Then, the method of this research—qualitative semi-structured interviews and the process of sampling will be discussed.

The case

To acquire phronetic knowledge (Flyvbjerg, 2001), it is essential to explain and interpret human behaviours and power operations behind the social phenomenon. The combination of Sang subculture and the case “985 Feiwu Plan” is a good way to examine youth subculture in an online community and the reasons for its appearance. As an Internet youth subculture in China, the Sang culture has not got enough academic attention, but it does provide a window to understand the youth culture in contemporary Chinese context. Considering the increasing social problems emerged with the rapid economic development such as unequal distribution, severe income disparity, diminishing possibilities for upward socio-economic mobility, and extraordinary high house prices, the Sang culture reflects a collective gloomy mood.

As Flyvbjerg (2001, p.77-78) emphasizes the power of a good example, this atypical case may reveal more information and “activate more actors and more basic mechanisms in the situation studied”. Thus, this research will offer more insights into the development of Chinese youth subculture, the construction of online community identities, and how they seek special social capital from this process. The current English literature on Sang culture mainly focused on the usage of self-mocking memes (Lu and Fan, 2020; Tan and Cheng, 2020). The case of “985 Feiwu Plan” online group provides a new perspective to examine the Sang culture—when a group of people come to an online community to express the “Sang” culture together and share their experiences of as a “Feiwu” (loser), it is worthy to analyze how the Sang subculture develop in the context of online group. In addition, before the appearance of Sang culture, another online culture Diaosi (屌丝) culture shows the similar collective pessimistic emotions as Sang culture does. However, different from the member from the “985 Feiwu Plan” group who have excellent educational background, the users of Diaosi culture are mainly youth from underclass with low education level. Therefore, the case of “985 Feiwu” also provides the

opportunity to explore the behind socioeconomic reasons why the collective self-mocking gloomy mentality of young people has spread from underclass to top university students.

As Baert (2005, p.8) points out, one important possibility of social science is aimed at “self-referential knowledge acquisition”. Through examining and questioning “deep-seated presuppositions prevalent in contemporary culture”, Baert strives to explore and become aware of other forms of life (ibid.). In this sense, it is similar to the pragmatist perspective to view social sciences, that language and knowledge should allow people to broaden the scope of human possibilities and the imagination of diverse forms of their daily life (ibid.). This fits the research intention of this thesis—through the description, interpretation, analysis of a subcultural online community where Chinese youth express themselves and share experiences to reflect, resist and enrich the single official narrative of “what a successful life should be like—to provide more various understanding of online community culture and social capital.

Method and sampling

This study employs qualitative analysis that aims to observe, describe, interpret, and analyze the way that people “experience, act on, or think about themselves and the world around them” (Bazeley, 2013, p.4). The aim of the study is to explore why young people from top universities in China come to an online group “985 Feiwu Plan” to perform the Sang subculture and to express their disappointed feelings towards personal life. More specifically, this study wants to examine how the Chinese youth subculture—Sang culture further develops in an online subculture community and what are the socioeconomic reasons behind it. At the same time, this study also aims to explore what community identities are constructed by the group members and what kind of social capital is generated through the interpersonal interaction in the group. Therefore, it is important to know why the group members define themselves as “985 Feiwu” and how they perceive how they perceive the two labels, Sang subculture, and the interpersonal interaction in this group.

As an online group with more than 110,000 members, there are a large number of daily posts in the “985 Feiwu Plan” group, which makes it is difficult to collect and analyze every post and hear the voice from every group member. Therefore, I first apply an inductive categorization on sample of 100 posts, in order to narrow down and select users to interview. Based on the group setting and my observation, the posts are categorized by five main categories— “Regulations and Notices”, “Experience and Resonance”, “Discussions and

Q&A”, “Learning Materials Share” “Entertainment and fun”. Through reading more than 100 posts in this group, I find that the posts belonging to the “Experience and Resonance” categories can provide the richest insights for my research aims. In posts under the “Experience and Resonance” category, the authors tend to give detailed descriptions of their failure experiences on how to become a “Feiwu” (loser) and express their opinions about the definitions of “Feiwu” and their reflections on the identities as being a “985 Feiwu”. Therefore, I decide to contact authors under the “Experience and Resonance” category to recruit as interviewees.

When it comes to selection and number of participants, quantitative method and qualitative method have different focus. To achieve the research purpose of understanding a social phenomenon, qualitative method (such as the semi-structured interview I use) do not necessarily demand a large sample size but a data saturation (Sargeant,2012). Therefore, I used the purposive sampling approach, which means selecting the participants based on the characteristics of the “985 Feiwu Plan” group members and my research questions. There are more than 110,000 members of this online group and it is impossible to have in-depth interview all of them. As I want to explore how the group members perform as part of the Sang subculture and what kind of identities do the group members construct, so I choose those active members who have posted at least an article under the “Experience and Resonance” category where they expressed their own opinions about the identity of “Feiwu” (loser) or Sang subculture in this group. After reading over 100 posts under the “Experience and Resonance” category, I choose 20 posts with more than 1000 words (in Chinese) and contact the posts authors. I also contact the moderator of the group for the interview, but I do not get any reply. Finally, only 12 posts authors from the “Experience and Resonance” category in the “985 Feiwu Plan” group are willing to join the semi-structured interviews. Thus, the dataset of this research mainly includes the texts of the 12 interview transcripts with the post authors. It is worth mentioning that the posts from the 12 interviewees and other posts from the online group also play a role in the research process. Those insights I get from the posts help me to have a general understanding of this online group and group members. I come up with some interview questions and some ideas for the structure of analysis based on these posts. Before interviewing every participant, I have read their posts under the “Experience and Resonance” category and I ask different questions based on the details of their post articles, which benefits to the semi-structured interview. The 12 interviews have been done by WeChat voice call during this March and April. Except for one interview which is 45 minutes, all the other 11 interviews are over an hour which provide rich information.

All those materials from different actors in “985 Feiwu Plan” group are analyzed through qualitative text analysis (Kuckartz, 2014) to give an overall perspective of the online community and the Sang youth subculture. The qualitative content analysis of these textual materials provides an interpretive form of analysis. Based on interpretation, classification, and analysis of the texts, the coding process is implemented through NVivo 12. In total, NVivo is used to code 12 interview transcripts. For analytical strategy of coding, I choose ethnographic content analysis (ECA). Compared with traditional quantitative content analysis, the most apparent characteristic of ECA is that it focuses more on patterns of human action and narrative description rather than frequency and figures. When document analysis is conceptualized as a special kind of field work, the ethnographic method can be applied to deepening the interaction between the researcher and those documents. Therefore, the core of ECA is the complex and reflexive interaction process of analyzing those documents (Altheide and Schneider, 2013). When coding the 12 interview transcripts, I firstly come up with four main codes such as Definition of “Sang”, Definition of “Feiwu”, Community identities, and Interpersonal interaction in the group based on the three research questions on the key concepts such as identity and social capital. Then three more main codes such as Reason for being “Sang”, Opposite of “Feiwu”, Mainstream values in China gradually emerge as the coding process goes on, which provides more insights to understand the unique subcultural identity and the valuable sense of belonging in this group. Under the seven main codes, there are a lot of subcodes that contain richer details (see at Appendix 4).

Regarding the ethical concern, all participants of the interviews are informed the research aim and process through the digital consent form (see at Appendix5). The consent form ensures the anonymity of the participants’ personal information and clarifies that they can decide to answer or not answer any questions during the whole process. In addition, the content of the posts in the online group is open to all according to the settings on Douban, which provides the research more freedom and enriched information to analyze this online group.

4. Analysis

This chapter will answer the three research questions of this research through three sections. The first section will explain the reason why the Sang culture can be viewed as a type of subculture based on the Chinese context. Also, the development of the Sang subculture in the “985 Feiwu” group, including the similarities and variations will be explored in the first part. The second section will consist of the discussion on community identities of the “985 Feiwu” group, that is, the two seemingly conflicting identities “985” (top university elite) and “Feiwu” (loser). The final section will articulate how the group members seek alternative sources of social capital and what is the conversions of other forms of capitals in this online community.

4.1 The inheritance and development of Sang subculture in this online group

To answer the first research question (“In what ways do members of ‘985 Feiwu Plan’ perform as part of the Sang subculture?”), this section of the analysis will focus on the characteristics of the Sang culture in China and explore the reason why the Sang culture can be considered as a form of subculture in China. In addition, this section will analyze the development of the Sang culture in the “985 Feiwu Plan” group, including the similarities and variations.

4.1.1 Sang as subculture in China: a voice challenges the mainstream values

The current literature has given various definitions on Sang subculture in China. According to Tan and Cheng (2020, p.86-87), the Chinese character “Sang” expresses various negative feelings such as “defeatism, disenchantment and disconsolation”, has been used by Chinese urban youths to describe themselves. As Lu and Fan (2018, p.35) state, “Sang” means “dejected and dispirited”, which conflicts with the Chinese leaders’ promotion of “positive energy”. Even though these scholars use different adjective words to explain the sentiments of “Sang” in detail, both of their definitions demonstrate that the Sang culture embodies some negative emotions of pessimism, disappointment, and powerlessness.

In this sense, the Sang culture is different from other subcultures discussed in those typical subculture studies in the West. The subculture theory in western context can be mainly summarized as: a group of members who share similar behavioral traits, or who have common interests and special knowledge of a particular field, or who embody a particular style that comes together to form a certain culture that different from the mainstream culture. However,

“Sang” is a psychological state that is common to all human beings, transcending geographical boundaries, and it is so closely associated with negative emotions. Why is the Sang culture defined as a subculture? To answer this, question, we need to take the unique social context of China into account.

Chinese youths express the Sang subculture as “a form of affective identification to communicate their sense of disenchantment with the “main melody” of official discourse in post-reform China” (Tan and Cheng, 2020, p). What does the “main melody” (Zhu Xuanlv, 主旋律) mean in Chinese context? Conceison (1994, p.191) analogizes this concept to the Chinese political context and suggests “main melody” implies that “Chinese society consists of a cacophony of voices, but the loudest and clearest of these should be the CCP and socialism, just as a piece of music has many components but the most prevalent should be the main melody” (ibid.). Thus, the “main melody” can be considered as a product from the political ideology and nationalism propaganda in China. To understand the specific meaning of the “main melody” in the contemporary China, it is important to combine it with other term “positive energy”. Some scholars examine the term “positive energy” (Zheng Nengliang, 正能量) as a significant case of the Chinese Party-state’s intervention in online media discourse, and they argue that “positive energy” refers to positive or optimistic attitudes or emotions “that are aligned with the ideological or value systems of the party-state, or any discourses that promote such an alignment” (Yang and Tang, 2018).

Based on the terms “main melody” and “positive energy”, we can gain a clear understanding of the powerful mainstream narrative and official discourse in China—the “positive energy” such as optimistic, uplifting emotions is considered as respectable and normal, while the “negative energy” such as pessimistic emotions is often not welcomed to appear in the mainstream discourse. For instance, after an accident that resulted in a death, the typical writing style of the official news reports is to stress that “the families of the deceased are emotionally stable”(sizhe jiashu qingxu wending, 死者家属情绪稳定).¹ Another typical style of Chinese disaster news report is to encourage and reassure the public by saying “much

¹ See the article in Chinese from the CPC news website, which criticizes the typical writing style to say “the families of the deceased are emotionally stable”< <http://cpc.people.com.cn/pinglun/n/2015/0907/c78779-27550326.html>> [7 September 2015].

And the website in English that explains the phrase “emotionally stable” in the Chinese context, <<https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2013/06/phrase-of-the-week-emotionally-stable-2/>>, [19 January 2013].

hardships may awaken a nation” (duo nan xing bang, 多难兴邦) . After a heartbreaking disaster like the COVID-19 pandemic, the official media will still choose a positive angle to report and redefine the meaning of the disaster, such as “In the ‘big test’ of responding to the COVID-19 epidemic, China has taken practical action to demonstrate the role, ability and contribution of a responsible power, and has won the full recognition of people around the world” .² From this, we can see the dominant official discourse in China tends to interpret all events even disasters in a positive tone. When asked about their views on the mainstream values of Chinese society, some participants gave similar answers:

“The mainstream values are to be striving; working hard for ourselves and for the collective well-being, and for the development of China; being positive and dedicated, as we have been taught and told.” (Ting, 27-year-old, female, content marketer)

“Stability, no mistakes, always on the right track. In general, it's about stability in personal development. What I understand by "on the right track" is: having a life that is accepted by the majority, doing what one should do at a certain age, getting good grades in school, getting a good job after graduation, getting married and having children, and then having their children repeat the path. For the small family, this is a kind of stability. For the nation too. However, the freedom, the diversity of choice for the individual, is suppressed under the stability. ”(Sage, 23-year-old, female, student)

“The mainstream value is the Chinese dream. To be striving and diligent. How can China stop when it has not yet achieved great rejuvenation?” (Henry, 23-year-old, male, teacher)

The first interviewee Ting and the third interviewee Henry both mentioned that to be striving and hard-working for the development of individuals and the nation is the significant component of the mainstream values, which corresponds with the “patriotism” and “dedication” of official interpretations of “Core Socialist Values” mentioned above. The second interviewee Sage expresses a more critical attitude towards the mainstream values—the diversity of choice and individual freedom may be restricted and suppressed because of the unquestionable pursuit of stability of the mainstream values. Through these descriptions of mainstream values, I argue that the Sang culture expressing the inappropriate sadness can be viewed as a subculture which is conflicted with the mainstream and official discourse in a place like China where negative emotions are usually hidden and stigmatized at a national and individual level.

² See the article in Chinese from the news website “china.com.cn”(中国网), http://news.china.com.cn/world/2020-04/01/content_76036006.htm, [1 April 2020].

4.1.2 The similarities: powerlessness, self-irony, and weak resistance

The current literature examines the meaning, forms, and reasons of “Sang” from various perspectives (see Lu and Fan, 2020; Tan and Cheng, 2020; Xiao, Chang, Sun, 2017; Du, 2017). In general, these studies on the Sang subculture define “Sang” as a set of negative emotions such as dejected, dispirited, disappointed, hopeless, and disillusioned. Based on the analysis of the empirical data from the interviews with members from the “985 Feiwu Plan” group, I argue that the members this group perform as part of the Sang subculture in some similar ways mentioned in the previous studies. More specifically, they perform the Sang subculture as the obvious feeling of powerlessness, and they use self-irony as a method to vent these negative emotions and to seek out resonance. At the same time, they embrace the Sang subculture to express the weak resistance to the structural forces.

According to Tan and Cheng (2020, p.96), the sense of defeatism and loss of “Sang” shared by Chinese youth may come from a general feeling that the current economic success is due to structural reforms, and that “the post-1990s generation had lost out on the once-in-a-generation opportunity no matter how hard they might work to achieve a similar expectation of success”. This points out the structural factors that cause the feeling of powerlessness for young people, which also mentioned by some interviewees:

“I think the Sang culture is kind of a microcosm of the current youth culture phenomenon in China, which represents the emotional catharsis for everyone—an emotional expression of the lack of avenues for upward socio-economic mobility, or even the difficulty of living a normal life (a life that was easily achieved by previous generations in the past). I think not just the group of “985” students, but many young people may resonate with the Sang culture. People do find that in the current era, many things have become more difficult, such as the prevalence of the 996-working culture (work from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., six days a week), and it is difficult to even get off work on time normally like the older generation.” (Ting, 27-year-old, female, content marketer)

“When the economy slows down, you want to do what people used to do—go to a top university, get a good job and buy a house, to make such a class leap from scratch, it's very difficult. Like I said, if you buy a house in Xi'an in 2016, the price is 9,000 yuan a square meter, now it is 30,000 yuan, the price of a 100 square meters apartment in five years has gone up 2 million yuan. Let's imagine your annual salary is 100,000 yuan, which already considered a lot, even so, you need twenty years of life to make up for the price gap. ”(Henry, 23-year-old, male, teacher)

From what the two interviewees said, we can understand the popularity of Sang culture for Chinese youth— on the one hand, they have to face the reality that the increasingly intense

competitions in many aspects such as education and working; on the other hand, they cannot freely express their feelings of powerlessness and disillusion due to the official discourse filled with “positive energy” and “main melody”. Besides the powerlessness from the national and social structural factors, some interviewees feel pessimistic and hopeless about themselves too. Some group members have been experienced difficulties for a long time in their studies and job search, so they have low self-efficacy and think they lack capability to do anything.

“At this stage, I'm quite a loser. I also don't know what to do next in life, being in a permanent state of confusion. At this stage it seems that I have not achieved the popularly defined success, I am confused, I have no direction and am in a state of powerlessness. I seem to have done something in university but without visible results and I feel incompetent, for example, when attending the autumn job fair, I was worried that I would not get any offer and would be unemployed. In terms of the academic success, I am also struggling to write my thesis. Overall, I have been chronically in a state of incompetence and with little positive feedback.” (Sage, 23-year-old, female, student)

The experience of the interviewee Sage reflects the psychological state of “learned helplessness” (Maier and Seligman, 1976) that occurs after a person has experienced a stressful and depressing situation repeatedly, which may cause people to believe that it is impossible for them to control or change the situation and they give up the chance to try--even when opportunities for change are available. Therefore, the powerlessness of “Sang” also reflects at the personal level when young people lose the confidence in self and the hope for the future. Du (2017) examines the Sang subculture through the concept “learned helplessness”. He suggests that, in terms of its representations and the negative emotions it conveys, the Sang culture can be considered as a social or cultural phenomenon arising from the “learned helplessness” of young people, which is psychologically induced by the highly competitive environment and the pressures of life.

Du (2017) also explains the Sang culture from the perspective of “self-irony” and he argues that self-irony may be its true cultural core in the process of mass communication of the Sang culture. According to Brooks (1951), the definition of irony is “the obvious wrapping of the statement by the context”, it shows that the irony is created because of the pressure of the context. When using irony, a statement may mean quite the opposite of what it purports to say. Du (2017) thinks, with the discourse of an originally self-critical, the Sang culture can easily move towards “self-irony”, that is, to express a denial of self-denial through the “Sang” texts such as “I am a Feiwu (loser)”, and it is this type of self-irony that appeals to the young

audiences of Sang culture. When making attributions about failure in the daily life, members of the Sang culture tend to make an absolute self-attribution of the failure---such as “I am a total feiwu(loser), I cannot do anything well”, which provides the deconstructive effect of an apparently irrational discourse through the self-irony, shifting the focus from the internal to the external attribution, that is, providing a space for people to reflect on the external social structural factors that results in the appearance and popularity of the Sang culture such as class stratification and generational differences.

The self-irony of the Sang culture also create a certain type of humor by dramatical self-mocking. This type of humor can be considered as a hidden and weak resistance to the powerful mainstream and official discourse such as “positive energy”. In his article on jokes, Freud (1960) argues that jokes allow us to express cynical thoughts and feelings that would otherwise remain repressed and censored. Drawing on Freud’s ideas of jokes and their relation to the unconscious, Newirth (2006) points out, this perspective on jokes and humor allows us to enter a view of the unconscious as a transformational system that addresses issues of powerlessness, meaninglessness. In this sense, the humor of Sang culture provides a safe space for its members to speak out those sensitive thoughts and emotions, that is, a weak resistance. As one interviewee explained:

“I think ‘Sang’ is a common emotion in life, a kind of self-mocking and self-irony. In the context of ‘Sang’, people can find a connection with each other, maybe you are in ‘Sang’ mood and I am too, then we can find a common sense of belonging in the Sang culture. In addition, ‘Sang’ is also a small and powerless struggle for ordinary people in a society that is now full of pressure and increasingly rigid rules. I may not be able to do what people say about ‘positive energy’, hard work, but I am ‘Sang’, so I am different from you. It is like a weak sense of resistance, which is also a general social psychology.” (Sage, 23-year-old, female, student)

What Sage said shows the relation between the self-irony and the subcultural capital of Sang culture. Through this self-irony, members of Sang culture are connected, constructing a discourse that is different from the mainstream “positive energy”, and at the same time accumulating a unique subcultural capital. This subcultural capital contains clever, cynical humor, but also expresses a passive and weak resistance to towards the social reality that one is powerless to change.

4.1.3 The Variations: the difference between “Feiwu” and “Sang”

In addition to the similarities mentioned above, the Sang subculture in the “985 Feiwu Plan” also shows new characteristics. The previous studies of the Sang culture (see Lu and Fan, 2018; Tan and Cheng, 2020) have focused on young people who use the Sang memes on the internet whose background information such as education level are very diverse, while the members of the “985 Feiwu Plan” group reflect a commonality: an outstanding educational background. This provides a perspective that allows us to view youth culture in relation to the topic of education. As a type of online youth subculture, the Sang subculture demonstrates similar characteristics to other subcultures—the main audience is young people; originated from the Internet; the expressions and styles is mostly through memes or catchphrases on the Internet; and there is the distinction between the core members who know the knowledge and outsiders who just try hard to follow the trend. When examining the Sang subculture in the context of the education system in China, we find the identity of the group members has something in common—they are students from the “985 Project” universities, which limits the members of Sang culture to a smaller scope.

There is another online subculture in China, the Diaosi (屌丝) culture, which demonstrates the similar self-mocking and disappointed emotions through the humorous and playful Internet meme as the Sang culture. It is important to compare the two seemingly similar online subcultures to explore why the youth subcultures expressing pessimistic emotions frequently and continuously appear in China. According to Szablewicz (2014, p.260), the popularity of Diaosi meme originated from a phenomenon of young people who self-mockingly call themselves diaosi (屌丝), a term that is roughly approximate to “loser”—more specifically, “poor, short and ugly” (穷矮丑), being the opposite of an ideal male figure “tall, rich and handsome” (高富帅) on Chinese social media. The result of the research shows that Diaosi meme signals “young netizens’ disillusionment with the apparent lack of possibilities for upward socio-economic mobility in contemporary China”, and the Diaosi phenomenon can be viewed as an emerging form of “affective identification” through which alternative desires and forms of socio-economic mobility may be imagined and enacted. (ibid.). Szablewicz (2014) also points out, the Diaosi meme’s emphasis on material wealth, physical appearance and sexual stereotypes may ultimately reinforce many of the norms and values that it seemingly

intends to mock. From this we can see, the members of Diaosi culture are mostly males who are from a lower socioeconomic status and desires to improve their situations and move upward.

From the Diaosi culture to the Sang culture of the “985 Feiwu Plan” group, we can see the similar disappointment and disillusionment of the Chinese youth have spread from the relatively bottom class to the socially relatively advantaged college students in terms of education. However, the two different types of audiences, the members of Diaosi culture and the members of Sang culture, show the subtle tension and distinction. As one interviewee emphasizes:

“even though I call myself Feiwu (loser), I am different from those ‘real Sang’ people—since I still think life is very interesting and I am still hopeful. I do not think those ‘real Sang’ people feel that life is very hopeful” (Henry, 23-year-old, male, teacher).

As mentioned before, the knowledge of the Sang culture, and the outstanding educational background both provide the members from the “985 Feiwu group” a sense of superiority and uniqueness. First, they acquire the subcultural capital of Sang culture to distinguish themselves from the mainstream people. One interviewee points out, “for me, calling myself ‘Feiwu’ is like a humorous self-irony joke, but this type of joke relies on a context, this thing (self-proclaimed ‘Feiwu’) is like using an Internet meme, you have to speak with people who understand it, for those people who do not understand it, it is not necessary to speak with them in this way” (Valen, 25-year-old, male, hotel operator). For them, the knowledge of how to use the Sang subculture in a proper way can distinguish themselves from those outsiders. Second, among all the members of Sang subculture, their high educational level makes them different from the ordinary “real Sang” people. As the group name “985 Feiwu” shows, they are not only Feiwu(losers), but they are also the students from the prestigious “985” universities.

The factor of high education level has a deep influence on how the group members think of themselves and other “real Sang” people. For these group members, the fact that they got good grades in the competitive Gaokao (The National College Entrance Examination) and gained the qualification of entering prestigious universities in China has proved their capability, which is different from those real Sang people who are unable to make any achievements. In this sense, what is the difference between “985 Feiwu” with the “real Sang” people? As one interviewee mentioned:

“It is acceptable for me to say I am a Feiwu (loser) as a self-irony, if others say I am a Feiwu, then I will not accept it. Feiwu is a label for me to self-mock. When I label

myself as a Feiwu, it means I did not become what I first wanted to be, the kind of person who is successful in the mainstream sense. When others define me as a Feiwu, they probably mean a real loser in the objective sense. But although I didn't live up to my ideal standards, I am still not bad, at least not in the objective sense of being a loser—unable to do anything and not contributing anything to society.” (Henry, 23-year-old, male, teacher)

What the interviewee said has reflected the concept “defensive pessimism” (Norem and Cantor, 1986) from psychology. The research of some psychologist shows that individuals may sometimes use low expectations to cope with their anxiety so that it does not become debilitating (ibid.). There are times when pessimism and negative thinking are indeed positive psychology, as they lead to better performance and personal growth (Norem and Chang, 2002). Some interviewees do adopt Sang subculture as a weapon to defend themselves from the judgement from others—they think, if they mock themselves, then others may lower the expectations towards them, which provides them more freedom and space to accept their failure and handle it. One interviewee’s attitude towards the Sang culture reflects the “defensive pessimism”:

“I think there is also a positive meaning behind the Sang culture. It has given ourselves a way to ventilate our negative emotions and provides me an explanation for I am not doing a very good job at this stage. Anyway, if I am willing to do the self-irony to say I am a “Feiwu”, it means that I still have hope for my lives”. (Ting, 27-year-old, female, content marketer)

In short, the variations of Sang culture in this “985 Feiwu Plan” online group mainly reflects two aspects: their outstanding educational background of prestigious university and their use of the Sang culture as “defensive pessimism” to vent emotions and seek empathy. On the one hand, a high level of education is an important criterion that distinguishes them from other audiences of Sang culture. There are ongoing debates about who is eligible to join the group in terms of academic qualifications in the “985 Feiwu Plan” group—Anyone? The students from “211” and “985” universities? Or only students from “985” universities? About the threshold for joining the group, one interviewee gives the opinion: “It is best if only people from “985” universities are allowed to come in. Since it is very difficult for people from other universities to understand the dilemma of “985” students because the things they have experienced and the social expectations they face are too different” (Seven, 23-year-old, female, student). On the other hand, the members of the group think that they remain positive in terms of their substantive attitudes. They express their negative feelings through “defensive pessimism” and self-deprecate as “Feiwu”, but their aim is to learn from their failures and to

encourage and share their experiences with each other to help themselves out of the mire. As the introduction of “985 Feiwu Plan” on Douban explains, “this is a new campus for the unemployed and the school dropouts from “985” and “211” universities, welcome to share stories of failure and discuss how to get out of predicament”.

4.2 “985” (elite) and “Feiwu” (loser): being torn between two identities

To answer the second research question “What community identities do the group members construct in the ‘985 Feiwu Plan’ group?”, this section will move to the discussion on community identities of the “985 Feiwu” group, that is, the two seemingly conflicting identities “985” (top university elite) and “Feiwu” (loser). Based on this, this section will try to explore the two conflicting social narrative behind the two identities—to engage in “Involution”(内卷) or to withdraw from the fierce competition.

4.2.1 We and the others: the halo and shackles of prestigious universities

As the name of this online group “985 Feiwu” shows, the two seemingly conflicting terms “985” (top university students) and “Feiwu” (loser) depict the group members’ struggle between the two identities. On the one hand, they distinguish themselves from others through the halo of prestigious universities. On the other hand, they are stuck in the gap between their ideal image of an educational elite and the reality of being a “Feiwu” (loser).

To understand their dilemma, we need to know what the connotation of being a “985” student is in the Chinese context where educational success plays a crucial role in the definition of success by the mainstream society. First, as the foundation of Chinese traditional culture, Confucianism has influenced and shaped Chinese educational thought and practice since 200 BCE when the ancient Chinese education system (太学, Taixue) was established to train civil servants (Deng, 2011). When analyzing the evolution of modern chinese educational institutions, Hayhoe (2017) suggests that the central focus of the curriculum in traditional China was on the principles and techniques of good government and it still has influence on contemporary Chinese education system. As a Confucian slogan for education emphasizes, “The student who excels in study can follow an official career” (学而优则仕, Xue er you ze shi)³,

³ This saying is from The Analects of Confucius, see more details at the Wiktionary website: <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/%E5%AD%B8%E8%80%8C%E5%84%AA%E5%89%87%E4%BB%95>

in this sense, the educated are usually viewed as a successful group with higher social status in Chinese society. Second, Gaokao (The National College Entrance Examination), considered as a test that could mythically “determine the course of [one’s] life” in China, (Wong, 2012). For Chinese youth, Gaokao is not only constructed as a chance to change fate and climb up the social ladder but also a filial duty to their parents and even for the whole nation’s development—“Learning for the Rise of China”.⁴ Therefore, it is not hard to imagine what a good grade in Gaokao and the qualification of entering a “985” university means in China.

For those group members in the “985 Feiwu Plan”, even though they call themselves “Feiwu” (loser), they still tightly embrace the halo of prestigious universities at the same time, which are reflected on the group’s posts with ongoing debate on the qualification of entering in the group. It is common to see some group members complain why those “non-985” people can gain the membership and post or comment “annoying” content. For example, an interviewee mentioned:

“I didn't receive many responses to the article I posted in the group. I was hoping to get some support and guidance, but there was an annoying comment, ‘How could you fail the CET-6 (College English Test Band 6, which examines the English proficiency of undergraduate and postgraduate students in China) as a student for such a top University?’ I don't think this is a question that a ‘real 985 Feiwu’ would ask, the person could have been someone from ‘non-985’ universities who had sneaked into the group.” (Tai, 21-year-old, female, student).

From what Tai said, we can see she makes a clear distinction between “we” (985 Feiwu) and “others” (non-985 people). When analyzing the windsurfers’ identity, Wheaton (2000) suggests that identity is about similarity and difference and she focuses on the essential elements that distinguish insiders from outsiders to the subculture group. Back to the case of “985 Feiwu Plan” group, the members of Sang culture in this group use educational background (“985” or not) as the essential element to distinguish themselves from other ordinary people -- who are not from the top universities as them. By differentiating themselves from others, they gradually construct their certain group identity, that is, the subcultural identity. “Othering” plays a crucial role in this process of subcultural identity information.

According to Jensen (2011, p.65), othering is “discursive processes” by which the powerful or mainstream groups define the marginalized or subordinate groups in a reductionist

⁴ It is a famous quote from the China's first premier and foreign minister Zhou Enlai, see at: <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-06/07/content_25636968.htm>

way that attribute inferior features to the subordinate groups (p.65). To complement much literature's neglect of "agency" in the process of "othering", Jensen (2011) argues that there is one form of agency that relies on "capitalization" – the resistance against devaluation by redefining the criteria of what is valuable such as to acquire symbolic values as part of a subcultural style. The process of resisting the devaluation and capitalizing on the position of the other can be understood as a strategy to gain subcultural capital (Thornton, 1995). As analyzed in previous section, when facing with the mainstream official discourse such as "positive energy", these "Feiwu" (loser) members of the group who express a "Sang" negative attitudes are less powerful, and they are "othered" by the mainstream and are depicted as inferior. However, they use the Sang subculture to add more capital to the identity of being a "Feiwu". In turn when they become the more powerful group in terms of the education background. Besides capitalizing the identity of "Feiwu", they also gain more subcultural capitals from the obvious powerful educational background. Therefore, we can see them express their agency and subjectivity to use the power of "othering" rather than be a passive and powerless object.

Through making reasonable use of the process of othering, they gain a certain type of subcultural capital: it is not only derived from the Sang culture when they self-mock as "Feiwu" (loser), but also from their educational background as "985" students. However, when using their educational background as a unique and powerful identity to distinguish themselves from other "non-985" people, these group members also find it is hard to cast off the shackles of prestigious universities. How can the halo become shackles? We can answer this question by considering the fluidity of identity. When the member of "985 Feiwu Plan" group overly rely on the superiority and uniqueness that their education background provides them, they may find it more difficult to deal with the pressure to keep the identity of being a "985" student. One reason for some group members to refuse the "non-985" people to gain the membership is because they do not think people without the same educational background can really understand them. As one interviewee emphasized:

"I think the group is a place where we "985 Feiwu" can find resonance. Can "non-985" people really resonate with us? We have similar experiences as "985" students, such as the better grades in high school, the high demands and expectations of ourselves. So, we label us as 'Feiwu' because we feel the sense of disparity after we enter college. I do not think "non-985" people can share this sense of disparity that we have". (Tai, 21-year-old, female, student)

The interviewee Tai's opinion reflects the struggle that some members of the group face—try to keep the identity of being an outstanding student who always gain excellent grades in high school even after they enter a new environment where there are more diverse evaluation criteria other than only academic performance. For most students who work hard to go through Gaokao and enter “985” universities, they tend to use a single standard of success to evaluate themselves, just as the way their parents and the society do. According to Hall and Gay (1996), Identity is in a constant process of becoming rather than being. It means, identity is a fluid and changeable state of becoming rather than an eternal state of being. However, the reason why they feel pessimistic and label themselves as “Feiwu” (loser) is that they are not ready to get rid of the obsession with the label of “985” students and to accept new changes in identities—maybe just an ordinary person rather than an elite in the society.

One interviewee has expressed her desire to embrace the fluidity of identities in different stages of life— “After graduation, I won't keep mentioning that I come from a ‘985’ university, because even if I'm not a ‘985’ student, I could still be a loser, and a loser could still be doing well. In general, I hope my life will be a bit more vibrant and I can see the bigger world. I hope I won't be confined by a certain identity label, and that I can have a happy life, support myself, and maybe achieve some values in the future. (Sage, 23-year-old, female, student)

4.2.2 Mainstream and outcast : to engage in “Involution” or to withdraw from competition

Behind the two conflicting identities between “985” and “Feiwu”, there are two influential social narratives—to engage in “Involution” (neijuan,内卷) or to withdraw from the fierce competition to “lie flat” that reflected in this online group. The two social narratives have impacts on the Sang culture and construct their community identities to some extent. What are the community identities like? Some of the interviewees give various answers, such as:

“I think the ‘985 Feiwu Plan’ group is indeed a community formed under the development of Sang subculture in China in these years, and it is very representative—after the group gains more media attention, the term ‘small-town swot’(xiao zhen zuotijia, 小镇做题家)⁵ generated from this group also becomes a buzzword. One

⁵ The English translation of this term is derived from the article of the economist, on how the hukou system of household registration exacerbates a huge educational divide in China, in which the “985 Feiwu Plan” group is mentioned to show the inequality.

reason is many young people have resonance with the term, and the other is that it provides the media a new perspective to understand the youth culture—nowadays the state and mentality of young people is like this.” (Ting, 27-year-old, female, content marketer)

“A group of people who have all suffered some setbacks, probably due to having scored high marks in exams before and now facing a gap between expectations and the current situation. The group members present diverse identities, encounter different problems, and have different definitions of ‘Feiwu’.” (Ming, 22-year-old, female, student)

“These people in the group may have some similarities—they are used to be excellent and have relatively high expectations of themselves. For some reasons, they are currently at a relatively low stage of life, either long or short. However, all of them do not give up but try to save themselves from the dilemma. From my observations, many group members may have good grades and their parents realize the importance of education, but perhaps because they come from small towns, with lower socioeconomic status, and their parents are improvident, they are prone to make unwise choices at some crucial moments.” (Nan, 24-year-old, female, student)

I have observed four types of people in the group. The first kind of people are those who are objectively excellent, but because of some practical reasons they are unable to achieve such high goals, so they feel they are ‘Feiwu’; the second kind, realize that working hard is useless at this era, want to give up and to ‘lie flat’, but still very torn; the third kind, ‘small-town swot’; the fourth kind, some strange people who don't fit the identity of this group. such as ‘non-985’ people. (Henry, 23-year-old, male, teacher)

The second interviewee Ming points out the individual differences of the large number of group members in terms of their diverse personal conditions. The first interviewee Ting and the third interviewee Nan describe the similarities of the group members—good test takers who encounter some setbacks after entering university where the scores are no longer the only criteria. On Chinese social media, the term ‘small-town swot’(xiao zhen zuotijia, 小镇做题家) represents this group to some extent. The self-mocking term implies the increasingly widening educational inequality in China due to social structural factors such as the hukou system (the household registration system) which makes it very difficult to gain free access to state-provided educational resources outside the place where one’s household is registered. For students with a small-town hukou, it is much more competitive for them to enter a “985” university than other peers from large and developed cities such as Beijing, Shanghai in China. Compared with other “985” students from city with high education quality and better family background, the “small-town swot” is more likely to become “Feiwu”.

See at: < <https://www.economist.com/china/2021/05/27/education-in-china-is-becoming-increasingly-unfair-to-the-poor>>

The fourth interviewee Henry depicts a group portrait of the “985 Feiwu Plan” group with four typical types of members. Based on my observation in the group and data analysis, I suggest that the torn mentality of the second type of people accurately reflects the group members’ oscillation between two states—to engage in “Involution” (neijuan, 内卷) to keep the glory of being a “985” elite, or to withdraw from the fierce competition to be a “Feiwu”.

Behind the two choices, there are two popular but conflicting social narratives in contemporary China. The first one is “Involution” (neijuan, 内卷), which is originally an anthropological term that comes from a work by Clifford Geertz titled *Agricultural Involution – The Processes of Ecological Change in Indonesia* (1963). In this book, Geertz describes the agricultural involution in Indonesia when the population growth does not result in productivity or improved innovation but a static system with invalid repetition. The Chinese translation of Involution, neijuan, literally means “an inward curling” (Fan and Yitsing, 2021), expressing a collective feeling of burn out under vicious competition. The term “involution” has been used high frequently on Chinese social media since mid-2020 and it has already gone beyond its original context. In Chinese context, “involution” is meant to explain the social dynamics of China’s growing middle class—China’s ever-expanding middle class is now facing the question of “how they and their children can remain in the middle class in a situation where everyone is continuously working harder and doing all they can to rise above the rest” (Manya, 2021). Besides the worries from the middle class, the discussion on “Involution” related to the competitive “996” working system and education system in China. The term “Tsinghua Inversion” (清华内卷) comes from a famous image of a student of the Chinese top university Tsinghua riding his bike while also working on his laptop, using every moment to study (ibid.). For the group member from “985” universities where the competition is so intense, they can relate to the feeling of “Tsinghua Inversion” – they must double their efforts to catch up with others just as the student operating on his laptop while riding a bike.

Contrary to “Involution”, there is another buzzword “lie flat” (or lying flat, tang ping, 躺平) on Chinese social media. This word “lying flat” went popular in this April when a post on Baidu titled “Lying Flat Is Justice” went viral on the platform.⁶ The forum user stated that

⁶ This website in Chinese explains the origin of “lie flat” and compares the two buzzwords “involution” and “lie flat”. See at < <https://www.tmtpost.com/5358483.html> > . This article in English from the New York Times with the interview with the forum user who posted the article about “lie flat”. See at < <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/03/world/asia/china-slackers-tangping.html> > .

although he had not been working for the past two years, he did not see this as a problem, and he argued that there was no need to follow society's ideals towards success. "Only by lying flat can one become the measure of all things," he wrote - and thus the concept of "lying flat" was born (Fan and Yitsing, 2021). For some people, "lying flat" calls on young workers and professionals to opt out of the struggle for workplace success, and to reject the promise of consumer fulfilment which promises release from the crush of life and work in a fast-paced society (David, 2021). The trend induced by "lying flat" is so influential that some consider it as a philosophical thought and doctrine against the mainstream discourse. As David (2021) explains:

"Lying flat-ism" is seen by some as the only possible form of resistance to this cycle of exploitation. One of the dominant slogans of the "lying flat" movement has been, "Don't buy property; don't buy a car; don't get married; don't have children; and don't consume." For this reason, calls to "lie flat" have doubly concerned China's leadership, as they threaten both to sap the country of the ambition to innovate and to knock down the second leg of the country's long-term development strategy—the drive to consume.(David, 2021, excerpt from the online article)

The "Lying flat-ism" has received harsh criticism from the state media. In one article published on *Guang Ming Daily*⁷, a national Chinese-language daily newspaper specializing in cultural matters, the author criticized the "lie-flatists" as possibly harmful to the country's economy and society. In another commentary from *Nanfang Daily*⁸, the writer called the latest "lying flat" trend "unjust and shameful" (Fan and Yitsing, 2021). These criticisms against "lying flat" is similar to the objections towards the Sang culture—the powerful official discourse that encourages positive emotions and strive consider these youth who call on escape from "involution" and "lying flat" as the inferior and outcast with moral turpitude.

To engage in "involution" and win the fierce competition reflects the expectations from the mainstream discourse such as "positive energy" and "Chinese dream" where being hard-working is taken for granted. However, for those people who accidentally deviate from "the right track" and start to doubt the meaningless of the never-ending competition, such as these group members who self-mock as "Feiwu" (loser), there is a dilemma—to work harder to gain a position in the mainstream, or escape from "involution" and to "lie flat"? The answer is bitter. Even though they seemingly accept the label of loser, but they are clearly aware of the fact is withdrawing from competition to "lie flat" is considered as morally wrong by the Chinese

⁷ The article is in Chinese, see at: https://epaper.gmw.cn/gmrb/html/2021-05/20/nw.D110000gmrB_20210520_2-11.htm

⁸ The article is in Chinese, see at: http://epaper.southcn.com/nfdaily/html/2021-05/20/content_7944231.htm

mainstream social values. It takes courage to be an “outcast”, and that is something not everyone has. As one interviewee said:

“The current anxious, “involution” environment in the country encourages development and progress, and everyone wants to strive for the success. I don't think the people in the ‘985 Feiwu Plan’ group could really ‘lying flat’. The ‘lie-flatists’ may be more concerned about what kind of person they are rather than the labels. They may not even come to the group and label themselves a Feiwu (loser), much less a ‘985 Feiwu’. They may think, I am myself, I do myself just fine, they may not care about the mainstream values. I envy and admire those who can really ‘lie flat’. It takes a lot of courage to express that I only care about myself, to reconcile with myself and the world. I can't do that; I'm still influenced by mainstream values.” (Nan, 24-year-old, female, student)

4.3 Alternative sources of social capital in the online community

To answer the third research question “How do members seek alternative sources of social capital through their expression and interaction in the subcultural online community?”, this section will first examine the reason why members join the group and what forms of social capital they gain from the group. Then, it will move to the discussions about how different forms of capitals such as emotional capital and subcultural capital convert to alternative social capital in this group.

4.3.1 A valuable but fleeting sense of belonging

As mentioned above, the members of the “985 Feiwu Plan” group have enriched and complicated identities; on the one hand, they are students from the “985” top universities, and on the other hand, they are a group of people who self-proclaim as “Feiwu” (loser), and the tension between these two identities makes it difficult for them to confide in or seek a sense of belonging from those around them. For the reason why they chose to join the online group, several interviewees have similar opinions, to seek a sense of belonging which is hard to find in their daily life.

“When I joined the group, I thought the name of the group ‘985 Feiwu’ was very apt - you may be an excellent person in the eyes of your friends and relatives because you went to a ‘985’ university, but you know you are a ‘Feiwu’(loser). This label fit my own mentality at that time. When I meet others in the group I have the feeling that we are fellow-creatures.” (Seren, 21-year-old, female, student)

“I joined the group last July, when I was facing the problem of where to go after graduation, and I was very anxious. Reading the posts in the group resonated with me,

and I joined the group with the mindset that we can stay together, help each other, and get warm.” (Ming, 22-year-old, female, student)

“I think this group is a very sincere group, reflecting the real situation of contemporary college students and providing a reliable communication platform.” (San, 24-year-old, female, student)

All these interviewees think that the online group provide them a place to communicate with other people who have the similar educational background and emotional experience as a “985 Feiwu”. Compared with offline group, online groups have more flexibility for users to choose without the limit of time and space (Rheingold, 1993), which gives people more freedom to create and join the community where they can find people who share the same identity and hobbies, and to gain the sense of belonging. For Young people, they often use online social networks to broaden their social relationships beyond geographical limits and to explore their interests with people that are not part of their local community (Miño-Puigcercós et al., 2019). A research on how virtual communities as safe spaces created by young feminists shows that a shared sense of belonging to a community that encourages members’ personal expression in the face of repression may make their social bonds stronger (ibid.). Back to the case of “985 Feiwu Plan” group, the difference between this online group and other groups established by hobbies (such as music or dance) is that the biggest common ground of the group members is their identity— “985” universities students and the Sang subculturalists who define themselves as “Feiwu” (loser) and the shared experience that accompanies that identity. As one interviewee mentioned:

“I do not see this group as a natural subculture group, but rather a group of people with the same identity coming together, mocking themselves as losers, sharing their stories of failure, and encouraging each other. Through their mutual communication, a special style, a way of expression that be considered as a type of subculture gradually emerged.” (Lu, 23-year-old, female, student)

Their identity as students from prestigious universities can be considered as a kind of cultural and symbolic capital according to Bourdieu(1986)’s definitions. However, the expansion of Chinese higher education since 1998 has put pressures on Chinese higher education to further reform its structure, curricula, and administration, and it has brought the issue of equity to the front (Wan, 2006). In addition, the social problems such as sharply increasing housing price and the devaluation of degrees have made it more difficult for them to convert the cultural capital of educational qualifications into social and economic capital as smoothly as their parents' generation, which brings them a sense of loss. Therefore, a group of students from prestigious universities with a similar sense of loss come to this group, and

through communication with each other, they seek out an alternative social capital that is hard to find in real life, which is different from the type of social capital that occurs in those offline networks with close personal connections such as family and close friends. The social capital they gain in the online group is more of a type of emotional support, a feeling of being seen and understood by the fellow-creatures.

In the book *Better Together: Restoring the American Community*, Putnam et al. (2004) explore the two forms of social capital: bonding social capital and bridging social capital. Bonding social capital is produced in the situation where some networks link people who have similar crucial aspects and tend to be inward-looking; bridging social capital appears when some networks include comprehensively various types of people and tend to be outward-looking (idid., p2). They also argue that a society with only bonding social capital is more likely to be segregated, so bridging social capital plays a significant role in a pluralist democracy society. They explore the two forms of social capital based on the case of American offline community where bonding social capital is easier to be generated by people with geographically homogenous backgrounds than bridging social capital.

The situation has changed due to the development of Internet and online communities—the boundary between bonding social capital and bridging capital has become blurred in the interest-based online communities where members have both strong ties and weak ties, and both homogenous and heterogeneous backgrounds. For the members of “985 Feiwu Plan” group, they have the similar identities as being a top university student and a “Feiwu” (loser) at the same time which makes them feel isolated since it is hard for them to share the helpless and disappointed feeling with people around them. In this sense, they get together in the online group based on their similarities and gain the rare and valuable sense of belonging as those interviewees mentioned above. They get strong emotional support that often provide by family or close friends from other group members, which can be considered as a type of bonding social capital.

However, the sense of belonging that this online group provide is at the same time fleeting and fragile. On the one hand, as the number of group members increases, the percentage of disagreements between members arises, and the atmosphere and patterns of interaction within the group change, leaving some members feeling that the group has become a disappointing place (one interviewee Henry said he once dropped out of the group after receiving many criticisms and he joined again later). On the other hand, as the life stages of group members may change—for example, from a student at university to an employee in

working environment, they may change the life focus and the group that is mostly on student's life may be no longer attractive to them. Some interviewees mentioned that when they first joined the group, they visited it very often, feeling that they had found fellow-creatures and had a sense of belonging and empathy. However, as the group became more and more famous, the group's members increased, and those posts in the group became more controversial, they felt like the group's sincere atmosphere seemed to "tarnish". As some interviewees said:

"This group has no longer been what it supposed to, and I will visit it less in the future. It will probably be when people reply to my posts that I will come back." (Ming, 22-year-old, female, student)

"If I get a job after graduation and enter the workforce, I won't come back to this group. For example, now, I often visit other Douban groups where people share job hunting experience, I'm going to seek life experience elsewhere. The topics I focus on won't be the ones discussed in the '985 Feiwu' group anymore." (Lu, 23-year-old, female, student)

The two interviewees' attitudes towards the group show the sense of belonging in this online group is short-lived and there is a weak tie between group members. Identity is fluid, for them, the identity as "985 Feiwu" will change over time. Besides the similarity of being a "985 Feiwu", the group members have heterogeneous backgrounds such as different career plans. Therefore, the social capital they gain from the interpersonal interaction in this group can also be considered as a bridging social capital that often happens in a diverse community.

4.3.2 Conversions of various forms of capital: emotional capital and subcultural capital

In this section, I explore how the alternative sources of social capital are generated. My assumption is that it is achieved through the conversions of different capitals—emotional capital and subcultural capital are transformed into alternative social capital in this group.

The Sang culture, as a subculture, has its own unique stylistic features—such as the use of self-mocking memes that express pessimistic and disappointing emotions, such as the self-irony by calling oneself as loser. As mentioned above, in the face of powerful Chinese official values such as "positive energy" and "main melody", the Sang culture can be seen as a kind of weak resistance of Chinese youth—to express a different voice and to show another possibility of life such as "lying flat" and escaping from the "involution". According to Thornton (1997, p236), subcultural ideologies are "a means by which youth imagine their own and other social groups, asserts their distinctive character and affirm that they are not anonymous members of an undifferentiated mass". Distinctions are the core of subcultural ideologies that requires some

claim to authority and assume others as inferior (ibid.). It is the distinctions of subcultural ideologies that produce subcultural identity and subcultural capital.

Thornton thinks that subcultural capital can be objectified and embodied in various forms just as cultural capital does. Back to the Sang subculture, different from the club culture which is based on specific activities or art forms such as dance and music, the core of Sang subculture is the self-mocking expression of a set of negative emotions such as powerlessness and disillusion. The subcultural distinctions of Sang subculture rely on those negative emotions that are rejected and criticized by the official discourse in China. Through expressing those typical “Sang” emotions and labelling themselves as “Feiwu” (losers), the members of “985 Feiwu Plan” has constructed a certain type of collective subcultural identities and accumulate the subcultural capital based on collective expression of emotions. As the subcultural capital of Sang culture is tightly related to emotions, it provides a bridge for the conversions between subcultural capital and emotional capital in this online community.

Emotional capital may be understood as the emotional resources—such as support, patience, and commitment—built over time particularly within family sphere (Zembylas, 2007). Zembylas explores the term emotional capital with educational context and how emotional capital is built over time within classrooms and schools, he suggests that emotional capital, which is expressed through the circulation of emotional resources among teachers and students, is converted into social and cultural capital such as “stronger relations in the classroom and empowered feelings in the school community” (2007, p454). He also argues that the various meanings of emotional capital reflect particular historical, cultural and social manifestations. In my opinion, emotional capital can be seen as a narrowed version of social capital and it is restricted to the affective ties of social network within specific sphere such as families. The core of emotional capital are the affective ties and emotional investment between individuals in a community. In the “985 Feiwu Plan” group, members share their experiences of failures and give encouragement and emotional support to each other, which provides a specific sincere atmosphere and the sense of belonging for group members. When they are asked the difference between the interpersonal interaction of “985 Feiwu Plan” group and other social media platform, some interviewees expressed their appreciation:

“The ‘985 Feiwu Plan’ group brings together a group of people with similar experiences, so it’s easy for everyone to understand each other. For example, if you post the similar content on Weibo to express your disappointed feeling as a ‘985’ student, many people cannot understand. If the group is different, you really can’t communicate about these issues.” (San, 24-year-old, female, student)

“The atmosphere in the group is relatively warm and friendly. It's completely different from other social networking platforms. For example, if you are on Weibo, all you see are hostile comments. You can rarely find an environment like ‘985 Feiwu Plan’ group on the Internet—everyone is friendly and polite.” (Henry, 23-year-old, male, teacher)

What they said shows that the emotional resources are abundant and group members are willing to make emotional investment in this online group. The emotional capital is converted to social capital when individuals expanding the influence of affective ties of family or private sphere to a broad public sphere just as the members did in this online community. At the same time, the subcultural capital focusing on negative emotions that group members gain can from the engagement of Sang culture can also be understood as a form of emotional capital which is transformed into social capital. Raymond Williams (1975)’s concept “structure of feeling” states the emotions are culturally constituted and culturally shared, based on it, I argue that an influential collective emotion demonstrated by a group of people, such as the “Sang” emotions shared by the members of “985 Feiwu Plan”, is a reflection of the specific social and cultural context of the epoch. In turn, the collective emotions and feelings emerging that are different from the dominant discourse in the society can be considered as a specific cultural phenomenon, that is, emotions can also generate culture in some cases. That is why I suggest that subcultural capital of Sang culture can be seen as a form of emotional resources acquired by expressing collective negative emotions in public sphere to resist the official discourse such as “positive energy” in China. Therefore, members of the group gain the alternative sources of social capital by two ways: on the one hand, they acquire the emotional capital from the interpersonal interaction with others; on the other hand, they accumulate the subcultural capital from expressing the unique styles of Sang subculture to resist the official discourse.

5. Conclusion

The thesis has explored the three research questions based on the key concepts elaborated in literature review section. The analysis section has explained the inheritance and development of Sang subculture in this online group, the two seemingly conflicting collective identities “985” and “Feiwu” constructed by the group members, and how the alternative sources of social capital are generated through the conversions of various forms of capital in this group. In this chapter, the three research questions will be answered concisely.

In what ways do members of “985 Feiwu Plan” group perform as part of the Sang subculture?

To answer this question, this thesis has explored the inheritance and development of Sang subculture in this “985 Feiwu Plan” group. First, it is important to know why the Sang culture can be considered as a subculture in Chinese context. Different from those subcultures such as club culture or punk culture that are based on an activity or a fashion, the Sang culture is emotion-oriented, that is, to show a collective disappointed or disillusioned feelings and emotions towards personal life or the broader society. Why does the negative emotion-oriented expression become a subculture in China? Because the powerful and dominant official discourse such as “positive energy” and “main melody” in China has limited the the space for people to speak out different voices. As Conceison (1994, p.191) notes, as a metaphor, “main melody” implies that Chinese society includes a discordant mixture of voices, but “the loudest and clearest of these should be the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) and socialism, just as a piece of music has many components but the most prevalent should be the main melody”. Similarly, the “positive energy” refers to positive or optimistic attitudes or emotions “that are aligned with the ideological or value systems of the party-state, or any discourses that promote such an alignment” (Yang and Tang, 2018). The two typical political ideology and nationalism propaganda in China demonstrate explicitly only the government and the party have the right to define the correct collective narrative, which obstructs the diversity of other voices such as the expression of “Sang” emotions. In this sense, in a place where the powerful mainstream narrative and official discourse emphasize optimistic, uplifting emotions, the utterance of pessimistic emotions such as Sang culture is often considered as inappropriate.

Then, this study has explored the similarities of Sang culture that are performed by the members of “985 Feiwu Plan”, which consists of three aspects—powerlessness, self-irony, and weak resistance. At the national and social level, their sense of powerlessness stems from two

aspects— on the one hand, they must face the reality that the increasingly intense competitions in many fields in China; on the other hand, they cannot freely express their feelings of helplessness and disillusion due to the official discourse monopolized by “positive energy” and “main melody”. At the personal level, their sense of powerlessness comes from the state of “learned helplessness” (Maier and Seligman, 1976), which occurs after one has experienced a depressing situation repeatedly and the person may believe it is impossible to control or change the situation so the person may give up the chance to try. The powerlessness of “Sang” reflects young people lose the confidence in self and the hope for the future at the personal level.

The self-irony and weak resistance of Sang subculture is tightly connected. According to Brooks (1951), when using irony, a statement may mean quite the opposite of what it purports to say. For the group member, self-irony is a way to express a denial of self-denial. By making absolute and dramatic attributions about failure in the daily life such as “I am a total Feiwu (loser), I cannot do anything well”—the deconstructive effect of an apparently irrational discourse through the self-irony, the group members shift the focus from the internal to the external attribution such as class stratification and generational differences to justify their failures. Through dramatic self-mocking, the self-irony of Sang culture also creates a certain type of humour which can be considered as a hidden and weak resistance to the powerful mainstream and official discourse such as “positive energy”. As Newirth (2006) suggests, jokes and humour allow us to enter a view of the unconscious as a transformational system that addresses issues of powerlessness, meaninglessness. In this sense, the humour of Sang culture provides a safe space for its members to speak out those sensitive thoughts and emotions to resist the mainstream discourse which are filled with optimistic emotions.

Finally, this study suggests that the variations of Sang culture expressed by the members in the group are mainly the differences between the two labels “Feiwu” and “Sang”. They use the term “Feiwu” who have achieved some achievements, only temporarily in a mire, to distinguish themselves with those “real Sang” people who are a total failure to achieve nothing. The factor of high education level has deeply influenced on how the group members think of themselves and other “real Sang” people. For these group members, the fact that they got good grades in the competitive Gaokao and entered prestigious universities in China has proved their capability, which is different from those “real Sang” people who are unable to make any achievements. In addition, some group members adopt Sang subculture as a weapon to defend themselves from the judgement from others—they think, if they mock themselves, then others may lower the expectations towards them, which provides them more freedom and space to

accept their failure and handle it. This reflects the psychological term “defensive pessimism” (Norem and Cantor, 1986) that means individuals may sometimes use low expectations to cope with their anxiety so that it does not become debilitating (ibid.). In short, the variations reflect two aspects: their outstanding educational background of prestigious university and their use of the Sang culture as “defensive pessimism” to vent emotions and seek empathy. On the one hand, a high level of education is an important criterion that distinguishes them from other audiences of Sang culture. On the other hand, the members of the group think that they remain positive in terms of their substantive attitudes. They express their negative feelings through “defensive pessimism” and self-deprecate as “Feiwu”, but their aim is to learn from their failures and to encourage and share their experiences with each other to help themselves out of the predicament.

What community identities do the group members construct in the “985 Feiwu Plan” group?

In terms of the communities identities, this thesis has examined it based on the two seemingly labels used by the group members to define themselves—“985” (top university student) and “Feiwu”(loser). The two terms depict the group members’ struggle between the two identities. On the one hand, they distinguish themselves from others through the halo of prestigious universities. On the other hand, they are stuck in the gap between their ideal image of an educational elite and the reality of being a “Feiwu” (loser). The role of education in Chinese context is crucial to the formation of their dilemma.

Confucianism has deeply influenced and shaped Chinese educational system until today, which makes the educated are generally viewed as a successful group with higher social status in Chinese society. Besides, Gaokao is considered as a test that could mythically “determine the course of [one’s] life” for students in China, (Wong, 2012). Therefore, educational success plays a crucial role in the definition of success by the mainstream society, bringing a glory to those students who have a good grade in Gaokao and get the qualification of entering a “985” university. The members in this group still tightly embrace the halo of prestigious universities and they use educational background (“985” or not) as a significant element to distinguish themselves from other people who are not from the top universities as them. By differentiating themselves from others, they construct a certain type of group identity—the subcultural identity of being a “985” student. “Othering” plays a crucial role in this process of subcultural identity information. Under the official discourse such as “positive energy”, these members the group

who express a “Sang” negative attitudes are less powerful, and they are “othered” by the mainstream as inferior and marginalized groups. However, they use the Sang subculture to express their agency and subjectivity by capitalizing the identity of “Feiwu” (Jensen, 2011). They also gain more subcultural capitals from their outstanding educational background as “985” students.

When the member of “985 Feiwu Plan” group overly rely on the superiority and uniqueness that their education background provides them as an identity to distinguish themselves from other “non-985” people, it is more difficult for them to handle the pressure to meet the ideal expectations of being a “985” student and to keep the identity. According to Hall and Gay (1996), identity is in a constant process of becoming rather than being, which implies that identity is a fluid and changeable state of becoming rather than an eternal state of being. Therefore, the reason why the group members feel disillusioned and label themselves as “Feiwu” (loser) is that they are not ready to get rid of the obsession with the label of “985” students and to accept new changes in identities—maybe just an ordinary person rather than an elite in the society.

It is also important to consider the social narrative behind the two identities—to engage in “Involution” (neijuan, 内卷) or to “lying down”(tangping, 躺平) and withdraw from the fierce competition. There is a buzzword to typical collective identity of the “985 Feiwu Plan” group that is generated from the group and then goes viral on Chinese social media— “small-town swot” (xiao zhen zuotijia, 小镇做题家). “Small-town swot” describes good test takers from small towns with weak educational resources who encounter some setbacks after entering university where the scores are no longer the only criteria---most of members in the group identify with the label. The self-mocking term implies the increasingly widening educational inequality in China due to social structural factors such as hukou system. Compared with other “985” students from large cities with high education quality, the “small-town swot” is more likely to become “Feiwu”. This educational inequity at the systemic level makes the group members to question the meaning of working hard for the endless competitions, and they begin to think about possibilities other than the mainstream’s definition of success—from “Involution” to “Lying flat”.

In Chinese context, “involution” is meant to explain the social dynamics of China’s growing middle class who try to keep their social status by working harder and doing all they can to rise above the rest in the competitions, and term is also related to the competitive “996”

working system and education system (Manya, 2021). Involution expresses a collective feeling of burn out under vicious competition (Fan and Yitsing, 2021). Contrary to “Involution”, “lying flat” calls on people to withdraw from the struggle for success, and to reject the promise of consumer fulfilment in a fast-paced society (David, 2021). However, the “lying flat” has received harsh criticism from the state media. These criticisms against “lying flat” is like the objections towards the Sang culture—the powerful official discourse that encourages positive emotions and working hard consider these youth who call on escape from “involution” and “lying flat” as the inferior and outcast with moral turpitude. To engage in “involution” and win the fierce competition reflects the expectations from the mainstream discourse such as “positive energy” and “Chinese dream” where being hard-working is taken for granted. However, for those people who accidentally deviate from “the right track” and start to doubt the meaningless of the never-ending competitions, such as these group members who self-mock as “Feiwu” (loser), there is a dilemma—to work harder to gain a position in the mainstream, or escape from “involution” and to “lie flat” as an outcast? The torn mentality reflects the group members’ oscillation between the two identities— to be a “Feiwu” or to be a “985”?

How do members seek alternative sources of social capital through their expression and interaction in the subcultural online community?

This research question mainly focuses on the interpersonal interaction in this group and what alternative sources of social capital the members gain from the group. The online group provides members a place to communicate with other people who have the similar educational background and emotional experience as a “985 Feiwu”. Members express that to seek a valuable sense of belonging which is hard to find in their daily life is a crucial reason why they choose to join the online group. To analyse the specific sense of belonging in this group, the thesis employs the concept of social capital. Putnam et al. (2004) explore the two forms of social capital: bonding social capital and bridging social capital. In the interest-based online communities the boundary between bonding social capital and bridging capital has become blurred, so members of online groups have both strong ties and weak ties, and both homogenous and heterogeneous backgrounds.

For members of the “985 Feiwu Plan” group, they get together in the online group based on their similarities and gain the rare and valuable sense of belonging. They also get strong emotional support that often provide by family or close friends from other group members, which can be considered as a type of bonding social capital. In addition, identity is fluid, for

the group members, the identity as “985 Feiwu” will change over time. Besides the similarity of being a “985 Feiwu”, the group members have heterogeneous backgrounds such as different career plans. Therefore, the social capital they gain from the interpersonal interaction in this group can also be considered as a bridging social capital that often happens in a diverse community.

However, the sense of belonging they gain from this online group is also fleeting. First, as the number of group members rises, the percentage of disagreements between members increase, and the communication atmosphere and patterns of interaction within the group also change, leaving some members feeling that the group has become a disappointing place. Second, as group members’ life stages and identities change, they may have different life focuses and the group that is mostly on student’s life may be no longer attractive to them.

To further explore how the alternative sources of social capital are generated in this group, this thesis has examined the conversions of various forms of capitals based on the concept of subcultural capital and emotional capital. Drawing on Bourdieu (1986)’s work on cultural capital, Thornton thinks that subcultural capital can be objectified and embodied in various forms. (Thornton,1997, p.238). The Sang culture, as a subculture, has its own unique stylistic features. It can also be seen as a kind of weak resistance of Chinese youth—to express a different voice and to show another possibility of life such as escaping from the “involution” to “lying down”. The subcultural distinctions of Sang subculture rely on those negative emotions that are rejected and criticized by the official discourse in China. Through expressing those typical “Sang” emotions and labelling themselves as “Feiwu” (losers), the members of “985 Feiwu Plan” has constructed a certain type of collective subcultural identities and accumulate the subcultural capital based on their collective expression of emotions. Since the subcultural capital of Sang culture is tightly related to emotions, it provides a bridge for the conversions between subcultural capital and emotional capital in this group.

Emotional capital may be understood as the emotional resources—such as support, patience, and commitment—built over time particularly within family sphere (Zembylas, 2007). This thesis has argued that emotional capital can be considered as a narrowed version of social capital and it is restricted to the affective ties of social network within specific sphere such as families. The core of emotional capital are the affective ties and emotional investment between individuals in a community. In the “985 Feiwu Plan” group, members share their experiences of failures and give encouragement and emotional support to each other, which provides abundant emotional resources, sincere atmosphere, and the sense of belonging for group

members. The emotional capital is converted to social capital when individuals expanding the affective ties of private sphere to a broader public sphere just as the members did in this online community.

Based on Raymond Williams (1975)'s concept "structure of feeling" which explains the interrelationship between culture and emotion, this thesis suggests that an influential collective emotion demonstrated by a group of people, such as the "Sang" emotions shared by the group members, reflects the specific social and cultural context of the epoch. In turn, the collective emotions and feelings that are different from the dominant discourse in the society can be considered as a specific cultural phenomenon, that is, emotions can also generate culture in some cases. In this sense, the subcultural capital focusing on negative emotions that group members gain can from the engagement of Sang culture can also be understood as a form of emotional capital which is transformed into social capital. Therefore, this study argues that the alternative sources of social capital are produced through the conversions of different capitals—emotional capital and subcultural capital are transformed into alternative social capital in this group.

In this section, the answers for the three research questions have been discussed above. How are these findings connected? Through the investigation of how members perform the Sang culture in this online group, we know the similarities and variations, which has showed that how the subcultural capital and subcultural identities of an online subculture can be developed in the context of online community. Then, the thesis has explored further about the two most typical subcultural identities--"985" and "Feiwu" -- of this group under the two conflicting social narratives "Involution" and "Lying flat" in contemporary China, providing a deep understanding of how the Sang culture appear and why these youths come to the online group. Finally, the thesis has explained what these members gain from the group—an alternative social capital that is derived from the conversions of emotional capital and subcultural capital in this online group.

Limitations

As for the method, this research is mainly based on the 12 interviewees' experiences, compared with the huge number of all the group members, the data is limited. Thus, the findings of this study should be considered with the research questions and the context—voices from the 12 active group members who post articles with typical personal experiences and

thoughts about the identities as “985 Feiwu”. In addition, if the research could include the interview with the moderator of this group to know the reasons for creating the “985 Feiwu”, it would provide more views to understand the appearance and development of this online group.

For the data collection, this research mainly collects the data from the 12 interviews, if some posts from the online group can be included, it would give a more comprehensive perspective of the group. Besides, this thesis mainly focuses on how the group members perceive themselves. It would provide a different voice if the news reports of Chinese mainstream media on this online group “985 Feiwu Plan” could be collected as texts to know how the mainstream represents and interprets this community and the Sang subculture rooted in the group.

For the findings, this thesis has explored this online subculture group mainly based on the concepts of identity and social capital, while this online group is also worth to be analyzed by some other perspectives such as gender. During the data collection process, I find that there are some posts with debates on gender discrimination in employment in this group. Also, the gender of the members of “985 Feiwu” group and the users of Douban platform is predominantly female, for example, 10 out of 12 of the interviewees of this thesis are female. Examining this online group from a gender perspective may provide more insights on the differences between female and male youths participation in Sang subculture, and the possible gender inequality factors behind it in contemporary China.

References

- Altheide, D., and Schneider, C. (2013). *Qualitative media analysis*, Second Edition, London, SAGE.
- Andy, B. and Kahn-Harris, K., 2004. *After Subculture: Critical Studies in Contemporary Youth*.
- Bauman, Z. (1996). From pilgrim to tourist—or a short history of identity. *Questions of cultural identity*, 1, 18-36.
- Bazeley, P. (2013). *Qualitative data analysis: practical strategies*. London, SAGE.
- Baert, P., 2005. *Philosophy of the social sciences: Towards pragmatism*. Polity.
- Bennett, A. (1999). Subcultures or neo-tribes? Rethinking the relationship between youth, style and musical taste. *Sociology*, 33(3), 599-617.
- Bennett, A., 2004. Virtual subculture? Youth, identity and the internet. na.
- Blevins, K. R., & Holt, T. J. (2009). Examining the virtual subculture of johns. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 38(5), 619-648.
- Bourdieu, P. 1986. "The Forms of Capital." Pp. 241–58 in *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education*, edited by J. G. Richardson. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (trans. R. Nice). Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.
- Brooks, C., 1951. Irony as a Principle of Structure. *Literary Opinion in America*, 2, pp.729-741.
- Canales, M. K. (2000). Othering: Toward an understanding of difference. *Advances in Nursing Science*, 22(4), 16-31.
- Charon JM. *Symbolic Interactionism: An Introduction, an Interpretation, an Integration*. 4th ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc; 1992.
- Cohen, Albert K. (1955) *Delinquent Boys: The Culture of the Gang*. New York: The Free Press.
- Conceison, C.A., 1994. The main melody campaign in Chinese spoken drama. *Asian theatre journal*, 11(2), pp.190-212.
- David, B., The 'lying flat' movement standing in the way of China's innovation drive. [online]. Tech Stream. Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/techstream/the-lying-flat-movement-standing-in-the-way-of-chinas-innovation-drive/> [Accessed 8 Jul. 2021].
- Deng, Z., 2011. Confucianism, modernization and Chinese pedagogy: An introduction. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 43(5), pp.561-568.
- Du, J.F. (2017) "Sang" Culture: From Learned Helplessness to "Self-Irony" (丧文化:从习得性无助到“自我反讽”).*Editorial Friend (编辑之友)* · 2017(09):109-112.

- Erikson, E.H., 1959. *Psychological issues: Identity and the life cycle*. International Universities Press.
- Fan, Wang., Yitsing, Wang., The buzzwords reflecting the frustration of China's young generation. [online] BBC news. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-57328508> [Accessed 14 Jun. 2021].
- Festinger, L., 1954. A theory of social comparison processes. *Human relations*, 7 (1), 117-140.
- Freud, S. (1960). *Jokes and their relation to the unconscious*. WW Norton & Company.
- Furstenberg, F. F., & Hughes, M. E. (1995). Social capital and successful development among at-risk youth. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 57, 580–592.
- Geertz, C. 1963. *Agricultural involution: The process of ecological change in Indonesia*. Berkeley, CA: Published for the Association of Asian Studies by University of California Press.
- Haenfler, R. (2013). *Subcultures: the basics*. Routledge.
- Hall, E. T. (1976). *Beyond culture*, New York:Anchor Press–Doubleday.
- Hall, S. (1989). Cultural identity and cinematic representation. *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, (36), 68-81.
- Hall, S. and Paul Du Gay (1996). *Questions of cultural identity*. London ; Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Harding, J., & Pribram, E. D. (2002). The power of feeling: Locating emotions in culture. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 5(4), 407-426.
- Hayhoe, R., 2017. The evolution of modern Chinese educational institutions. In *Contemporary Chinese education* (pp. 26-234). Routledge.
- Hornsey, M. J. (2008). Social identity theory and self-categorization theory: A historical review. *Social and personality psychology compass*, 2(1), 204-222.
- Jensen, S. Q. (2011). Othering, identity formation and agency. *Qualitative studies*, 2(2), 63-78.
- Kim, D., Pan, Y. and Park, H.S., 1998. High-versus low-Context culture: A comparison of Chinese, Korean, and American cultures. *Psychology & Marketing*, 15(6), pp.507-521.
- Kruse, H. (1993). Subcultural identity in alternative music culture. *Popular music*, 12(1), 33-41.
- Kuckartz, U., 2014. *Qualitative text analysis: A guide to methods, practice and using software*. Sage.
- Lehdonvirta, V., & Räsänen, P. (2011). How do young people identify with online and offline peer groups? A comparison between UK, Spain and Japan. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 14(1), 91-108.

- Lister, R. (2004). *Poverty*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Liu, L. and Xie, A., 2017. Muddling through school life: an ethnographic study of the subculture of 'deviant' students in China. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 26(2), pp.151-170.
- Lu, M. and Fan, H., 2018. I Sang, Therefore I am! Uses and Gratifications of Self-Mocking Memes and the Effects on Psychological Well-Being. *International Journal of Cyber Behavior, Psychology and Learning (IJCIBPL)*, 8(2), pp.35-50.
- Maffesoli, M., 1996. *The time of the tribes: the decline of individualism in mass society* (trans.D. Smith). London: Sage.
- Maier, S.F. and Seligman, M.E., 1976. Learned helplessness: theory and evidence. *Journal of experimental psychology: general*, 105(1), p.3.
- Manya, K., Concept of 'Involution' (Nèijuǎn) on Chinese Social Media. [online] What's On WEIBO. Available at: <https://www.whatsonweibo.com/the-concept-of-involution-neijuan-on-chinese-social-media/> [Accessed 22 Apr. 2021].
- McArthur, J. A. (2009). Digital subculture: A geek meaning of style. *Journal of communication inquiry*, 33(1), 58-70.
- Mehra, B., 2004. The internet for empowerment of minority and marginalized users. *New media and society*, 6 (6), 781-802.
- Miño-Puigcercós, R., Rivera-Vargas, P. and Romaní, C.C., 2019. Virtual communities as safe spaces created by young feminists: identity, mobility and sense of belonging. In *Identities, youth and belonging* (pp. 123-140). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.
- Muggleton, D., 2000. *Inside subculture: the postmodern meaning of style*. Oxford: Berg.
- Näsi, M., Räsänen, P., & Lehtonvirta, V. (2011). Identification with online and offline communities: Understanding ICT disparities in Finland. *Technology in Society*, 33(1-2), 4-11.
- Newirth, J., 2006. Jokes and their relation to the unconscious: Humor as a fundamental emotional experience. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 16(5), pp.557-571.
- Norem, J. K., & Chang, E. C. (2002). The positive psychology of negative thinking. *Journal of clinical psychology*, 58(9), 993-1001.
- Norem, J.K. and Cantor, N., 1986. Defensive pessimism: Harnessing anxiety as motivation. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 51(6), p.1208.
- Nowotny, H. (1981). *Austria: Women in public life. Access to power: cross-national studies of women and elites*, 147-156.

- O'Malley, R. L., Holt, K., & Holt, T. J. (2020). An exploration of the involuntary celibate (Incel) subculture online. *Journal of interpersonal violence*, 0886260520959625.
- Onyx, J. and Leonard, R., 2010. The conversion of social capital into community development: an intervention in Australia's outback. *International journal of urban and regional research*, 34(2), pp.381-397.
- Peidong, Y. and Lijun, T., 2018. "Positive Energy": Hegemonic Intervention and Online Media Discourse in China's Xi Jinping Era. *China: An International Journal*, 16(1), pp.1-22.
- Pret, T., Shaw, E. and Drakopoulou Dodd, S., 2016. Painting the full picture: The conversion of economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital. *International Small Business Journal*, 34(8), pp.1004-1027.
- Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of american community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Putnam, R.D., Feldstein, L. and Cohen, D.J., 2004. *Better together: Restoring the American community*. Simon and Schuster.
- Redhead, S., 1990. *The end-of-the-century party: youth and pop towards 2000*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Ren, L., Zhang, H., Zhao, J.S. and Zhao, R., 2016. Delinquent subculture and juvenile offenders' attitudes toward the police in China. *Police quarterly*, 19(1), pp.87-110.
- Ren, Y., Harper, F. M., Drenner, S., Terveen, L., Kiesler, S., Riedl, J., & Kraut, R. E. (2012). Building member attachment in online communities: Applying theories of group identity and interpersonal bonds. *Mis Quarterly*, 841-864.
- Ren, Y., Kraut, R., & Kiesler, S. (2007). Applying common identity and bond theory to design of online communities. *Organization studies*, 28(3), 377-408.
- Rheingold, H., 1993. *The virtual community: homesteading on the electronic frontier*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Sargeant, J., 2012. *Qualitative research part II: Participants, analysis, and quality assurance*.
- Szablewicz, M. (2014). The 'losers' of China's internet: Memes as 'structures of feeling' for disillusioned young netizens. *China Information*, 28(2), 259-275.
- Szablewicz, M., 2014. The 'losers' of China's Internet: Memes as 'structures of feeling' for disillusioned young netizens. *China Information*, 28(2), pp.259-275.
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In Hatch, MJ & Schultz, M(Eds.), 2004, *Organizational Identity: A Reader* (pp. 56-66).. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

- Tan, K.C. and Cheng, S., 2020. Sang subculture in post-reform China. *Global Media and China*, 5(1), pp.86-99.
- Thornton, S. (1995). *Club cultures*. Cambridge: Polity Press
- Thornton, S., 1997. The social logic of subcultural capital [1995]. na.
- Turner, J. C. (1975). Social comparison and social identity: Some prospects for intergroup behaviour. *European journal of social psychology*, 5(1), 1-34.
- Wan, Y., 2006. Expansion of Chinese higher education since 1998: Its causes and outcomes. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 7(1), pp.19-32.
- Weeks, J. (1990). The Value of Difference. In J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (pp. 88-100). London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Wei, R., 2006. Lifestyles and new media: adoption and use of wireless communication technologies in China. *New media & society*, 8 (6), 991-1008.
- Wheaton, B. (2000). "Just do it": Consumption, commitment, and identity in the windsurfing subculture. *Sociology of sport journal*, 17(3), 254-274.
- Wheaton, B., & Beal, B. (2003). Keeping It Real' Subcultural Media and the Discourses of Authenticity in Alternative Sport. *International review for the sociology of sport*, 38(2), 155-176.
- Williams, D. (2006). On and off the net: Scales for social capital in an online era. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 11(2), 593–628.
- Williams, J. P. (2003). The straightedge subculture on the Internet: A case study of style-display online. *Media International Australia*, 107(1), 61-74.
- Williams, J. P. (2007) 'Youth Subcultural Studies: Sociological Traditions and Core Concepts', *Sociology Compass* 1 (2): 572–93.
- Williams, R. (1975) *The Long Revolution*. Westport, CT: Greenwood.
- Williams, R. (1979) *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review*. London: NLB.
- Willis, S. and Tranter, B., 2006. Beyond the 'digital divide'. Internet diffusion and inequality in Australia. *Journal of sociology*, 42 (1), 43-59.
- Wong, E. (2012, June 30). Test that can determine the course of life in china gets a closer examination. *The New York Times*, A4. <http://www.nytimes.com/>
- Wu, Q., Xie, B., Chou, C. P., Palmer, P. H., Gallaher, P. E., & Johnson, C. A. (2010). Understanding the effect of social capital on the depression of urban Chinese adolescents: An integrative framework. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 45(1), 1-16.

- Xiao, J., 2017. The biographical approach in (post-) subcultural studies: Exploring punk in China. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 20(6), pp.707-723.
- Xiao,Z.J., Chang,J.F., Sun J.(2017). From “loser” to “Paralysed Geyou”: A Study on the “Sang Culture” of Online Youth in the Perspective of Social Psychology(“废柴”到“葛优躺”: 社会心理学视野下的网络青年“丧文化”研究). *Journal of Youth Studies (青少年学刊)* , (03):3-7+31.
- Yu, S., Chen, B., Levesque-Bristol, C., & Vansteenkiste, M. (2018). Chinese education examined via the lens of self-determination. *Educational Psychology Review*, 30(1), 177–214.
- YÜKSEK, D. A. (2018). Evaluating the Importance of Social Capital for the Conversion of the Forms of Capital: A Critical Approach to the Bourdieusian Model. *Gaziantep University Journal of Social Sciences*, 17(3), 1090-1106.
- Zembylas, M., 2007. Emotional capital and education: Theoretical insights from Bourdieu. *British journal of educational studies*, 55(4), pp.443-463.
- Zhang, J., Hamilton, W., Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil, C., Jurafsky, D., & Leskovec, J. (2017, May). Community identity and user engagement in a multi-community landscape. In *Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media (Vol. 11, No. 1)*.
- Zhao, Y. and Lin, Z., 2020. ‘Jianghu flow’: examining cultural resonance in The Rap of China. *Continuum*, 34(4), pp.601-614.
- Zou, S., 2020. Beneath the bitter laughter: Online parodies, structures of feeling and cultural citizenship in China. *Global Media and Communication*,p.1742766519900303.

Appendices

Appendix 1: The demographics of the interviewees

Name	Age	Gender	Occupation	City
Lu	23	Female	Student	Guangzhou
Seven	23	Female	Student	Qujing
Ting	27	Female	Content Marketer	Guilin
Ming	22	Female	Student	Jingmen
Seren	21	Female	Student	Chongqing
Sage	23	Female	Student	Baoji
Tai	21	Female	Student	Guilin
Nan	24	Female	Student	Baoji
San	24	Female	Student	Harbin
Onion	27	Female	Editor	Tianjin
Henry	23	Male	Teacher	Qingcheng
Valen	25	Male	Hotel Operator	Lianyungang

The website of the “985 Feiwu Plan” group:

<https://www.douban.com/group/692739/>

Appendix 2: Interview guide

Topic 1: Expression and interaction in this group

1. When, How and Why did you join the group?
2. Since joining, how often have you visited this group?
 - Which type of post do you watch most often?
 - Do you interact with other people (likes, comments)?
3. How many posts have you posted in total?
 - How does it feel to post for the first time, to get comment for the first time?
4. What do you think of the interpersonal communication and interaction models in the group?
 - Is the atmosphere different from other social platforms (such as WeChat and Weibo)?
5. Do you have concerns when posting in the group?
 - For example, worried about the topic causing controversy?

Topic 2: Sang subculture and identity

1. What do you think is the definition of “feiwu(loser)”?
 - What is the opposite of feiwu?
 - Do you identify yourself as a feiwu?
2. Do you think claiming to be a feiwu(loser) is influenced by the Sang culture?
 - What do you think of the Sang culture?
3. Do you think this group is a “Sang” group?
 - Do you think you are “Sang” person?
4. What do you think of the group identities, that is, what kind of group is this?
5. What do you think of your identity in this group?

Topic 3: Subculture-Mainstream

1. Do you think this group is a subculture group?
2. What do you think of the mainstream values in China?
 - Are the values of the group consistent with the mainstream values?
3. Have you read the media reports on the “985feiwu plan group”?
 - If you have read it, what do you think of their comments on this group?

Finally, do you have anything else to share?

Appendix 3: A full transcript of one-to-one semi-structured interview

Interviewee: Sage, 23-year-old, male, student, Baoji

Interviewer: Hui

H: How did you find out about this group?

S: I joined the group around May 2020. One or two months before the time I posted, this “985 feiwu” Douban group was particularly popular. At that time, there were many friends who were forwarding posts from the group to post on WeChat Moments, and one of the articles from “985 Feiwu” group was very typical, expressing the problems for top university students from a small town may meet.

H: Why do you want to join this group?

S: I felt like I was a loser at that time. I didn't have any notable achievements during my university years and didn't know what to do next, I was in a state of great trepidation and I found many people in “985 Feiwu” group in a similar situation. I was thinking of commenting and posting, which according to group rules requires membership, so I joined. I think that commenting and posting is a bit more interactive than just browsing posts.

H: What is the reason you filled in when you applied to join the group?

S: I don't remember, I probably described myself as a loser in details.

H: How often have you visited the group since you joined in May last year?

S: At first, I browsed the group a lot, but then I didn't visit much. After I posted my own article to record my daily life in the group, I would only come into the group when I needed to update my articles, but I would only update my own posts and not browse other content.

H: What kind of posts did you read more in the group?

S: I read more about other group members' shared experiences of their hard time, to find empathy. I also read some articles with helpful and solid information to see the methods and experiences shared by others.

H: Did you interact with others in the group?

S: I interacted with some of the people who posted, especially those who are not in a good state, for example, some said they lay motionlessly in bed all day, or some failed their exams badly, and I tried to comfort them by commenting. They would thank me, but I didn't have a follow-

up deeper interaction with anyone. Just commenting in response under the post articles. In one case, I felt embarrassed when I posted and was recognized by my classmate who messaged me on WeChat asking if it was me who posted the article. This group didn't seep into my life that much at a later stage.

H: Why did you choose this online group to post about your life?

S: At first it was because I saw the content of the “985 Feiwu” group and felt it resonated with me. Then I was thinking that I wanted to do something with continuity and to see if there was a way to record my gradual changes in daily life. However, a lot of people in the group now tend to express too much negative emotions and thoughts, so I didn't read it as much later on, otherwise I would easily get caught up in the negativity. If I read it when I'm in a bad mood, I might empathize, but I don't read it when I'm in a good state. I think most of the people in the group just indulged in their negative emotions and don't want to do anything about it. I posted because I have the desire to do something about it (to deal with the problem).

H: Has joining the group helped you to some extent?

S: Yes, by recording my life in this post in the group, I did kind of stick around and do something, and it was an outlet to vent my emotions. Overall, there are very few real-life friends who know about my Douban account. I don't want real-life friends to see my post in the “985 feiwu” group because I feel like a lot of very personal emotions are mentioned in the post. I'm relatively honest and relaxed when I'm recording in this post, and I feels like I do not want this part of myself to be seen.

H: From May 2020 onwards, by what month did you basically stop reading posts this group?

S: I didn't read many posts after the summer holidays in July and August 2020. I was busier, I went out to travel more frequently over the summer, and I felt like I was opening up to new worlds and I wasn't particularly empathetic to that low state with the group anymore.

H: Have you received personal message from other group members or have more in-depth interactions with others after you have posted?

S: I've only posted this one post in the group. Someone in the group messaged me privately to ask help for interviewing me for doing research on the “985 five” group. There were no people who said they wanted to communicate with me on personal topics.

H: What do you think of the interpersonal atmosphere within the group?

S: I think it's quite good that people in the group comfort and encourage each other. But the general atmosphere is still quite “Sang” (down). I think many members of the group have not opened their eyes, and I used to be the same way –I thought I would be successful if I went to such a top university in China, and I was very proud of my high education and thought highly of myself. I later found out this is not the case. I recently saw a discussion on Weibo about whether the “985 Feiwu” group should exclude people from “211” (“211 Project ” universities in China), which I think reflects the closed and exclusive nature of the group. Are not people stuck with this group because they are too obsessed with the label of high education, like how you must be successful because you went to “985 Project” universities and people with poor education must be bad, Is it really the case? Actually, no. The world is constantly changing, and people will fall short if they don't adapt to, and I can understand that feeling. But I feel that if I dwell on this feeling, I can't get out of it. So sometimes I avoid visiting the group a little bit to avoid being immersed in this kind of atmosphere.

H: Do you think there is a difference between the interpersonal atmosphere of the group and other platforms such as WeChat and Weibo?

S: I think I receive more responses when I post in the group, as people have similar experiences and usually have more empathy. But I've been solo (talking to myself and not interacting) for quite a while and I just see that someone has bookmarked my posts. Compared to other social media platforms such as Weibo, within the “985 Feiwu” group you can quickly find people who have similar thoughts and feelings with you. If you're on Weibo, it's more likely to be solo, unless you've become very famous.

H: Would you expect more group members to interact with and private message you?

S: I would look forward to interacting with more people who have the same experiences and dilemmas. For example, I enjoy your interview with me today, it was a pleasant feeling to be heard and seen, and quite an interesting experience.

H: Were you worried about posting in the group before?

S: I was a bit worried at first. For one thing, I was worried that my record in my post would not match the very down and "Sang" atmosphere of the “985 Feiwu” group, or that I would be considered as showing off my superiority than others, but I wasn't. Because I am often in a very

difficult, unmotivated, and painful state. But I don't just want to be totally miserable, I still want there to be something positive. I was worried that people would say that you came here to show off in the group, but that's not true. In fact, I am quite a loser, really. Secondly, I don't want to be identified by my personal information, or people ask me if I'm from the same school as them, like that friend of mine.

H: What's your definition of a Feiwu (loser)?

S: I think the definition of Feiwu(loser) is not having achieved success defined by the mainstream: being qualified to a “985 Project” university, making achievements that you can write on your CV, having a bright and promising future, having a job with good payment, being academically successful, or studying abroad. Overall, loser means doesn't have the kind of achievements that are very visible and worth mentioning. To be honest, I study journalism and communication in my university, and it is kind of easy to pass the exam and to graduate, compared with some of the people in the “985 Feiwu” group failing a lot of subjects and worrying about not graduating. But I also don't know what to do next in life, being in a permanent state of confusion. At this stage it seems that I have not achieved the popularly defined success, I am confused, I have no direction and am in a state of powerlessness. I seem to have done something in university but without visible results and I feel incompetent, for example, when attending the autumn job fair, I was worried that I would not get any offer and would be unemployed. In terms of the academic success, I am also struggling to write my thesis. Overall, I have been chronically in a state of incompetence and with little positive feedback.

H: What do you think is the opposite of Feiwu (loser)?

S: I haven't thought about it much. Through talking with my friends, I've found that they have clearer goals and know what they want to do, like someone who does a lot of internships, someone who is academically outstanding. I've always felt that I don't have any noteworthy achievements on my CV, no prize of competition or no college club experience, not much offline internship experience either.

H: Would you define yourself as a Feiwu(loser)?

S: Yeah. At this stage, I'm quite a loser. I've been offered a job in Changsha, earning 6,000 Yuan a month, and I don't know what I'm going to do in the future. I've done a few things during university and I haven't achieved much, so I'm still not quite sure about the future, and that's really where I am now. However, I don't think I will always carry the label of "985 Feiwu"

on my back. Because whether it is "985" or "loser", these labels are just a phase, and then something new will come into your life. I sometimes think that if you let go of the "985" label, you might not feel like such a loser either.

H: Why do you feel more comfortable if letting go of the "985" label?

S: Before I went to university, I thought I was different from everyone else because I had the aura of being a "985" student. In fact, we are all ordinary people. If you can see the strength in ordinary people's lives and draw some strength from them to live hard, it doesn't really matter whether you are a "985" student or not. I've been enjoying reading stories of ordinary people's struggles recently. I think some of the posts in the group also show how it is possible to let go of the glamour of a prestigious university and return to ordinary life, which has broaden my horizons.

H: What do you think of Sang culture?

S: I think "Sang" is a common emotion in life, a kind of self-mocking and self-irony. In the context of "Sang", people can find a connection with each other, maybe you are in "Sang" mood and I am too, then we can find a common sense of belonging in the Sang culture. In addition, "Sang" is also a small and powerless struggle for ordinary people in a society that is now full of pressure and increasingly rigid rules. I may not be able to do what people say about "positive energy", hard work, but I am "Sang", so I am different from you. It is like a weak sense of resistance, which is also a general social psychology.

H: You would not directly define "Sang" as a very negative thing?

S: Yes. But maybe if you're "Sang" all the time, you'll be in a bad mood. It's good to use the Sang culture as an outlet, including finding empathy, but too much "Sang" can be very painful and I don't want to make myself only miserable. I don't need to be particularly positive or active, I just don't want to be totally miserable about it.

H: Do you think the "985 Feiwu" group is a very "Sang" group?

S: I get a bit "Sang" after reading those posts in the group. I do not know how to give a very clear description.

H: What in the group would make you feel very "Sang"? Could you give some examples?

S: Some of the group members have very bad personal experiences, such as someone who failed a course so they couldn't graduate, someone who stayed at home and couldn't find a job. Others mentioned the difficulties they encountered in job hunting, not knowing how to find a job. In general, I feel very sad when I read such posts about the reality of society, how serious the “involution (内卷)” is, and how fierce the competition is.

H: Do you feel “Sang” at this stage?

S: Yes. I want to stay in Guangzhou in the future, but I don't know if I can find a job in Guangzhou. I don't know how to start with my thesis, I just want to get through it perfunctorily. I haven't written my thesis yet, but it's not easy to talk with my supervisor about it. I chose to study the programme Journalism and Communication after my university entrance exam because I wanted to go to my current University, and I had just enough points for this major. When I first entered the university, I had four major courses that were in bad quality a week, and I didn't know what I was going to study, and I was confused and under a lot of pressure. I joined the university club on investigative journalism, but I didn't make any progress. Some of my friends around me in that club have written great news reports and some of my friends have become great investigative journalists, which makes me feel a lot of pressure.

H: What do you think about the identity of the "985 Feiwu" group? What kind of people are in it?

S: Students from "985 Project" universities have pride and expectation in this identity with high education. But the gap between reality and expectations can make them feel powerless. The myth of "if you get into a 985 university in China, you'll have a bright future" that we were told in primary and secondary school has been shattered. Those “985” students may not be happy at university, and they may not know what to do. Living in the ivory tower, they may be afraid to enter society. They don't understand society and are too weak to face it.

H: Do you think the members in the “985 Feiwu” group generally show some of the characteristics you describe?

S: I can't quite generalize. The descriptions I mentioned above is partly talking about myself.

H: Which category of people do you think you belong to in this group?

S: I'm weak too. My old value system is slowly disintegrating, and new things have not been established yet, I am in a state of flux.

H: How do you see the mainstream values in China?

S: Stability, no mistakes, always on the right track. There are some things I cannot explicitly say for the reason you know. In general, it's about stability in personal development. What I understand by "on the right track" is: having a life that is accepted by the majority, doing what one should do at a certain age, getting good grades in school, getting a good job after graduation, getting married and having children, and then having their children repeat the path. For the small family, this is a kind of stability. For the nation too. However, the freedom, the diversity of choice for the individual, is suppressed under the stability.

H: Do you think the values in the “985 Feiwu” group are in line with the mainstream?

S: I think a lot of people in the group are in a state of struggle and dilemma. Firstly, the mainstream values are suppressing the free choices of the individual, and if you have some sense of self-consciousness, it's not very comfortable to stay in the mainstream-values-dominated environment like this. Secondly, the Feiwu (losers) in the group are no longer in line with the mainstream values in some ways—they are no longer as successful in some ways, for example, in getting good grades or finding a job. But on the other hand, when it comes to what they want to do in the future, most members in the group still feel that it is quite good to civil service exam and work for the government or state-owned enterprises that are stable and considered a very good way out. I saw the employment figures, the percentage of students from Peking University going to work in the public institutions (administrative organs of the government) has doubled.

H: What would you yourself say about mainstream values and being “on the right track”?

S: I don't really like it; I find it very boring. In fact, people don't have to live under certain rules, such as “tiger moms”and “overworked kids” and so on, it's quite ridiculous, people don't live like human beings. I wouldn't consider going into the public institutions system (“体制内”), it conflicts with my personal values.

H: Have you read any media articles about the “985 Feiwu” group? Or some critical voices?

S: I can't recall any explicit criticism.

H: For example, some criticism of this "985 Feiwu" Group: students from prestigious universities have poor ability to suffer setbacks and do not come out of the halo of their education.

S: I recall a previous discussion on Weibo about the “985 Feiwu” group where group members talk about kicking members from “211 Project” universities out of the group. This reflects the exclusivity of the group members. However, from a holistic point of view, since the “985 Feiwu” group can form a sizeable group, it cannot be blamed on individual. We are in an age of social change—for example, 996 working culture (work from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., six days a week), rising housing prices, credentialism and educational inflation, the mismatch between university education and market demand for labors, and the possible collapse of the ivory tower. But, just decades ago, if you got into university in China, you had good prospects. Society is changing, but universities, education and people's values are not changing fast enough. Like before I went to university, I thought it was undoubtedly important to get into a good school.

It is in this broader social background that people feel like "losers". It's because of these realities that such a group like “985 Feiwu” and the phenomenon has emerged. It doesn't make sense if you just blame individuals for having a low endurance. Nonetheless, as a member of “985 Feiwu”, I still think there is something we can do to get rid of this label. There is always a way for individuals to do something, instead of saying that "985 Feiwu" is already a given fact and will forever be so. That's why I have posted in the group to document my changes.

H: Will you want to get rid of this label?

S: I don't really want to get rid of the label "Feiwu", I sometimes tease myself about being a loser. It's just a phase, I guess. After graduation, I won't keep mentioning that I come from a "985" university, because even if I'm not a "985" student, I could still be a loser, and a loser could still be doing well. In general, I hope my life will be a bit more vibrant and I can see the bigger world. I hope I won't be confined by a certain identity label, and that I can have a happy life, support myself, and maybe achieve some values in the future.

H: Is there anything you would like to add at the end?

I hope everyone has a good time. Apart from the labels "985" and "Feiwu (loser)", it's a big and wonderful world, so it's good to get out from the box and see.

Appendix 4: Codebook for interview data

Name

- ▶ ● Reason for being 'Sang'
- ▶ ● Opposite of Feiwu
- ▶ ● Mianstream values in China
- ▶ ● Interpersonal interaction in the group
- ▶ ● Definition of Sang
- ▶ ● Definition of Feiwu(loser)
- ▶ ● Community identities

Main codes

Name

- ▼ ● Reason for being 'Sang'
 - Peer influences
 - Income and distribution inequality
 - Generation differences
 - Educational inflation
 - Class solidification
- ▼ ● Opposite of Feiwu
 - Optimistic attitudes
 - Join 'Involution'
 - Great family background
 - Creating Values for the soceity
 - Clear future plan

Subcodes-details 1

- ▼ ● Mianstream values in China
 - Stability
 - Only one definition of success
 - Inescapable 'involution'
 - Collectivism
 - Being postive and striving
 - Anti-Intellectualism
- ▼ ● Interpersonal interaction in the group
 - Sense of belonging
 - Seeking resonance
 - Friendly atmosphere
 - emotional support

Subcodes-details 2

- ▼ ● Definition of Sang
 - Weak resistance
 - Temporary low mood
 - Self-irony
 - Powerlessness
 - Positve 'Sang'
 - Persistent low mood
 - Doing nothing
- ▼ ● Definition of Feiwu(loser)
 - Learned helplessness
 - Defensive pessimism
 - Better than Sang
 - A total failure
 - 'Lying flat'

Subcodes-details 3

- ▼ ● Community identities
 - Torn between 985 and Feiwu
 - Stage of confusion and self-exploration
 - Small town swot
 - People with setbacks
 - People with mental problems
 - Excessive self-expectations
 - Diverse identities

Subcodes-details 4

Appendix 5: Consent form

*This consent form was dictated to participants ahead of all the interviews.

Thank you for accepting my invitation to participate in this interview. I am Hui Chen, I am currently taking Media and Communication Studies program at Lund University in Sweden. Now I am writing my Master's thesis and my topic is on the youth subculture and identities. "Sang" culture and the online group "985 Feiwu" on Douban is the case of my study. I am looking for interviewees who are members of the "985 Feiwu" group. This interview will take half an hour to one hour, before we start the main part of interview, I would like to inform the following information and get your consent:

1. This study will be recorded, and the recordings will be stored until the completion of this study;
2. I guarantee that all the original data is only accessible for the researcher (Hui chen);
3. The content of our conversation will be included in my Master's thesis;
4. All of your personal information will be anonymous;
5. You can choose answer or not answer any questions in this interview.

Now please give me your consent to all the terms of this study. Thanks.