



Developing a Behavioral Science-Based Management Model: Based on Self-Deprecation and “Lying Flat” in Generation Z

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Abstract: With Generation Z eventually becoming the predominant workforce, their corresponding patterns of behavior are starting to have greater effects on standard management paradigms. The self-criticism and “lying flat” ideology that Generation Z employees are expressing function as a challenge to conventional management methods. These behaviors stem from social and psychological factors, influenced by an era marked by widespread uncertainty and economic challenges. However, the theories surrounding these behavioral traits often lack sufficient empirical evidence. This paper, grounded in behavioral science, uses historical data and future trends related to birth rates and student populations in China to explore the psychological mechanisms behind these traits. It aims to construct a Flexible-Differentiated management model that integrates independent, dependent, mediating, and moderating variables to systematically understand the impact of these behaviors on organizational effectiveness. Drawing upon a comprehensive review of the literature and empirical evidence, this paper offers theoretical foundations and practical actions for organizations seeking to leverage the potential of Generation Z employees.

Keywords: Generation Z, self-deprecation of the laying flat management model, independent variable and dependent variables; mediating variables and moderating variables, organizational effectiveness

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Generation Z, born between 1995 and 2010, entering the workforce with its unique set of behavioral characteristics, raises new challenges for traditional management models. Generation Z thinks differently from Gen X, Y, and even from their parents, the baby boomers. These digital natives, who have grown up using the internet and social media, hold unique views on consuming information, engaging socially, and, more importantly, their career outlook[1][2]. In recent years, the continuous decline in birth rates in China will significantly affect Generation Z's development environment and their psychological status with a continuous momentum. The reduction in the number of newborns means that a smaller young labor force could lead to a profound shift in the supply-demand balance in the labor market, potentially altering the employment behavior and psychological state of Generation Z[3].

Table 1. Changes in Birth Rates in China from 2019 to 2023

Indicator	Year 2023	Year 2022	Year 2021	Year 2020	Year 2019
Birth Rate (‰)	6.39	6.77	7.52	8.52	10.41
Death Rate (‰)	7.87	7.37	7.18	7.07	7.09
Natural Growth Rate (‰)	-1.48	-0.60	0.34	1.45	3.32

As shown in Table 1 & Figure 1, China's birth rate has steadily decreased from 10.41‰ in 2019 to 6.39‰ in 2023, while the death rate has gradually increased, resulting in a negative natural growth rate in 2023. These demographic changes significantly impact the workplace behaviors of Generation Z. On one hand, the declining birth rate reduces competition among peers in the labor market, potentially alleviating employment pressures; on the other hand, the economic and social uncertainties arising from population decline may exacerbate the anxiety of Generation Z, leading to an intensification of “lying flat” behavior [4].

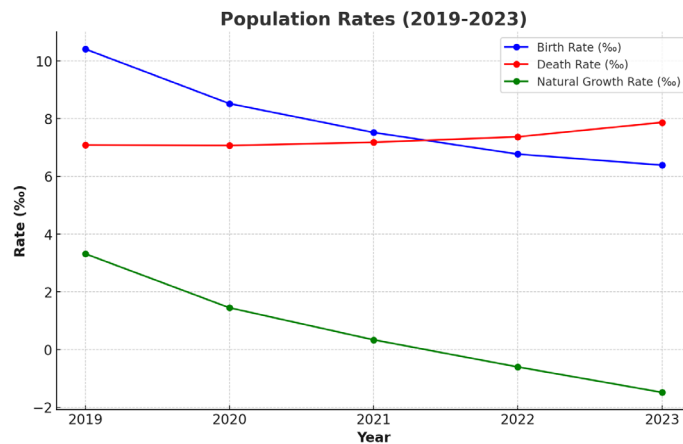


Figure 1. China's Population Rate from 2019-2023

1.2 Research Questions and Objectives

This study looks forward to analyzing behavioral traits of employees in Generation Z, mainly the causes leading to self-deprecation and lying flat phenomena, by integrating the latest demographics and education data from China. This study is based on the science of behavior and will construct a new model of management, including independent variables, dependent variables, mediating variables, and moderating variables. Particularly, this paper will address the following key questions:

Causes and Impacts of Self-Deprecation: Why do Generation Z employees tend to underestimate their abilities? How does this self-deprecation behavior affect their workplace performance? The following paper will study the impact of expansion in higher education in China on the behavior of Generation Z employees [5].

Behavioral Motivations of "Lying Flat": Why do Generation Z employees choose "lying flat" as a coping strategy in the face of stress? Why do they fail to completely give up, even if they harbor this kind of attitude? This study will consider the impact of demographic changes—like that of dropping birth rates and natural growth rates in China—on this phenomenon [6].

Behavioral Science-Based Management Strategies: How do scientific management methods with independent variables, dependent variables, mediating variables, and moderating variables help find and effectively address these behavioral characteristics of Generation Z employees to enhance organizational effectiveness [7]?

1.3 Significance of the Study

This research will not only provide theoretical evidence to understand the behavioral characteristics of Generation Z employees but also offer practical guidance for managers by integrating demographic and educational data with regard to China. Building a management model that relies on behavioral science helps organizations adapt to these needs and psychological traits among their Generation Z employees in an advanced way, further increasing their job satisfaction and organizational effectiveness [8]. This is important for enhancing organizational competitiveness and opens up new horizons for future research into human resource management [9].

2. Literature Review

2.1 Self-deprecation Behavior Analysis

Self-deprecation is the act of psychological disposition in which an individual undervalues their worth in appraising personal capabilities. This behavior is dominant among Generation Z. Research has shown that self-deprecation is closely related to social comparison, influence from social media, and evaluation mechanisms within the education system [1].

For example, Twenge found that Generation Z, due to being more regular users of social media, continuously compares themselves and often gives negative self-evaluations, explaining this phenomenon of heavy social media users who tend to make social comparisons a lot [1].

Research also indicated that self-deprecation behavior is significantly associated with negative influences on career development and work performance. Orth and Robins (2014) found out that self-deprecation not only affects the level of self-esteem but also reduces self-confidence and increases anxiety in the workplace [10]. This mental position usually results in employees avoiding challenging tasks, hence minimizing their work performance and career attainments [11]. For instance, over the last few years, the expansion of higher education in China has greatly increased enrollment in institutions of higher education,

as indicated in Table 2. While such an expansion increases overall levels of education, it could also give rise to more intense social comparisons and hence accentuate tendencies toward self-depreciation among Generation Z-ers [3].

Table 2. Headcount Changes of Students in Different Education Levels in China from Year 2019 to 2023 (Unit: 10,000)

Main Detailed Category	Year 2023	Year 2022	Year 2021	Year 2020	Year 2019
Graduate Students (ten thousand)	388.294	365.3613	333.2373	313.9598	286.3712
Undergraduate Students (ten thousand)	3775.0146	3659.4175	3496.1307	3285.2948	3031.5262
Total Regular High School Students (ten thousand)	2803.6268	2713.8747	2605.0291	2494.4529	2414.305
Secondary Vocational Education Students (ten thousand)	1298.4621	1339.2903	1311.8146	1663.3685	1576.4713
Regular Primary School Students (ten thousand)	10836.0253	10732.0594	10779.9349	10725.3532	10561.2358
Special Education Students (ten thousand)	91.1981	91.8502	91.9767	88.08	79.4612
Preschool Education Students (ten thousand)	4092.9784	4627.5486	4805.2063	4818.2634	4713.881

As Table 2 & Figure 2 shows, China has had a stable growth in the number of graduate and undergraduate students, reflecting a fast expansion at the tertiary level. On the one hand, this will increase the overall educational level and may also cause more intensive competition, especially in the job market where the graduates face higher expectations from society and a more competitive environment, possibly leading to the enhancement of self-depreciation tendency [3].

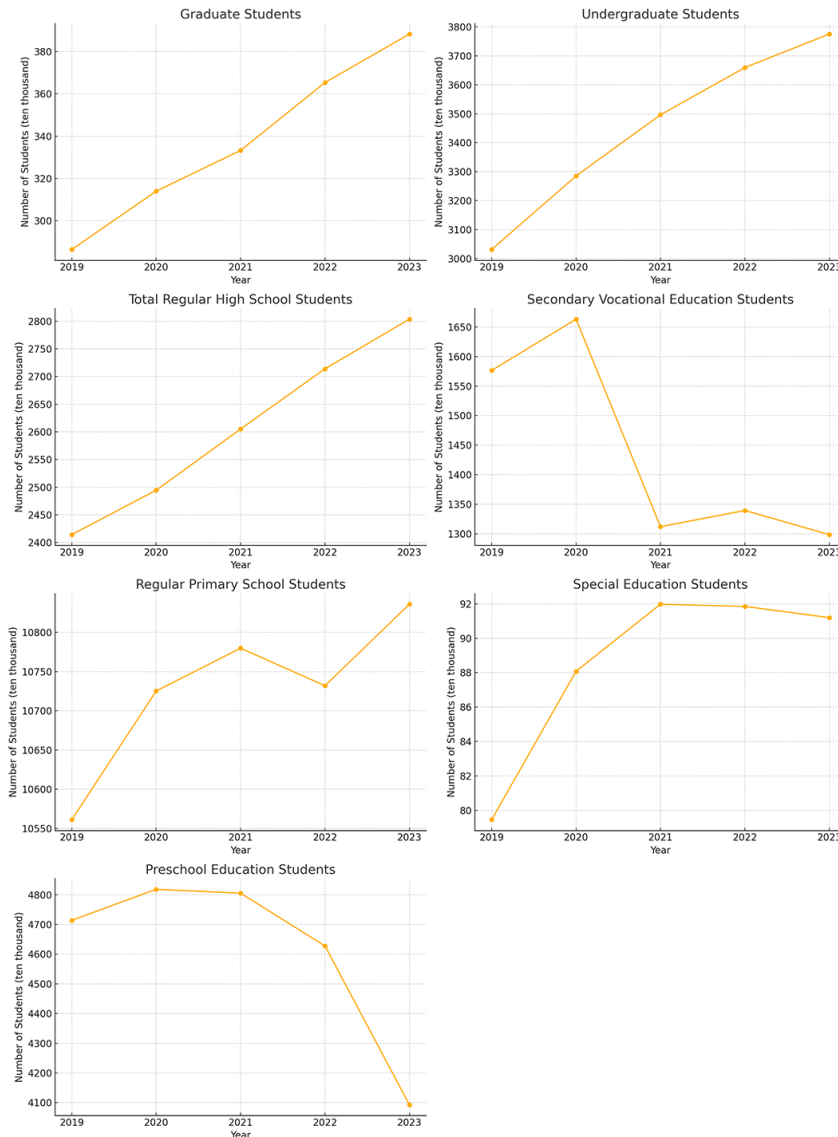


Figure 2. Number of students in different stages of education

This behavior of self-deprecation has a strong base theoretically in the field of psychology. For example, Vogel et al. [5] said that people with continual social comparison tend to exaggerate the strengths in other persons while downplaying their ability, which culminates in self-deprecation. Such psychological tendency is especially common for Generation Z, whose members have grown up in the most developed era of social media and are easily influenced by others' displays of success and idealized lives [1]. Moreover, although the expansion of higher education raises knowledge levels in society, it may also increase social comparisons and then bring more self-deprecation behaviors [3].

2.2 Behavioral Motivations Behind “Lying Flat”

“Lying flat” is a new social phenomenon by Generation Z in China, showing their passive response to high pressure and competition in society. The concept of giving up the exhausting pursuit of high achievement and leading a low-effort and low-expectation lifestyle characterizes “lying flat” [6]. However, for basic living requirements and social anticipation, Generation Z employees often cannot completely give up their effort and are caught in the process of “striving versus giving up” oscillation [12].

This phenomenon is driven by various social and psychological factors. For instance, expensive housing, pressured work, and an unpredictable future make Generation Z feel powerless at changing it by themselves through laboring [9]. By contrast, a continuously declining birth rate over the last several decades in China indicates little demand for young labor, which is likely to make Generation Z feel more perplexed and powerless and eventually opt for “lying flat” as a way of self-salvation [4]. Meanwhile, under economic pressure and social responsibilities, they usually cannot abandon completely; the mode of operation is oscillating between trying and giving up [6].

Chen goes further to reveal that “lying flat” is just a type of passive resistance strategy by youths in China who have already expressed their disillusionment with society and uncertainty about the future [6]. Wang and Liang continue by pointing out that the main push factor that has driven many youths into “lying flat” is high housing prices, fierce workplace competition, with consequent low motivation and low engagement at work [9]. In the past few years, the decline in birth rates has generated a reduction in the demand for young labor and increased anxiety and feelings of helplessness among Generation Z [4].

2.3 Application of Behavioral Science Theory in Management

Behavioral science provides an important theoretical framework for understanding and managing Generation Z employees. It emphasizes that the complexity and diversity in individual behavior are a product of intrinsic motivation, the external environment, and the social culture [7]. The theories of behavioral science are usually used for designing and implementing incentive mechanisms, performance management systems, and psychological interventions in most cases related to management [8].

For instance, Deci and Ryan underscore the need to satisfy the basic psychological needs of the employees in their Self-Determination Theory [7][8]. According to this theory, the levels of intrinsic motivation and job satisfaction will be much higher if the needs of the employees for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met. This is particularly important in addressing the self-deprecation and “lying flat” behavior of Generation Z employees [8].

Moreover, the Nudge Theory by Thaler and Sunstein represents real managerial tools applicable to controlling employees of Generation Z [13]. Reasonable choice architectures made with fine interventions might help a manager lead their employees along the way of desirable behavior without making them resist. It is also very effective with employees who have “lying flat” tendencies, as it may change their behavior surreptitiously without directly piling pressure on them [13].

Pink identified that intrinsic motivation is a vital factor for high-performance work. For Generation Z workers, more specifically, they are not as reactive to traditional extrinsic motivators such as monetary rewards. Instead, their intrinsic motivation should be triggered by fulfilling their need for autonomy and achievement [14]. The Job Demands-Resources Model (JD-R Model) by Bakker and Demerouti puts forward similar arguments and states that resources in the work environment, such as empowering leadership and a positive culture within the team, are key drivers of employee motivation and performance [15].

3. Construction of a Behavioral Science-Based Management Model

3.1 Identifying and Understanding Employee Behavioral Characteristics

Management strategies that work well are usually guided by a clear understanding of characteristics in employee behavior. For Generation Z employees, there is a need to establish and determine self-deprecation and the tendency for “lying flat.” To systematically analyze and address such behaviors, the constructed management model will comprise independent

variables, dependent variables, mediating variables, and moderating variables.

Social Comparison Orientation: This is an orientation that makes Generation Z employees constantly compare themselves with others. The tendency is especially high using social media platforms, as made evident in studies [1] [5].

Work Pressure: The high-pressure work environment, especially related to high housing prices and uncertain career prospects, may drive Generation Z employees to adopt “lying flat” behavior [6][9].

Demographic Shifts: Decreasing birth rates and the consequential inability to supply the labor market with individuals at its required level may affect Generation Z employees’ employment expectations and, consequently, their behavioral choices [3][4].

Besides these independent variables, the general demographic context that affects these variables, particularly in the educational setup of the Generation Z demographic in China, is also quite essential. The workforce, especially in terms of numbers, is significantly influenced by the various student categories and educational years.)

Let “ $S_{c,y}$ ” represent the number of students in category “ c ” during year “ y ”.

The total number of student for year “ y ”, denoted as “ T_y ”, is calculated as:

$$T_y = \sum_{c=1}^n S_{c,y} \quad (1)$$

This formula sums up the number of students in all categories for a year, giving the total number of students in one formulation and therefore presenting a general view of the entire educational situation. These may include graduate students, undergraduate students, regular high school students, secondary vocational students, primary school students, special education students, and preschool students, as indicated in Table 2.

The growth in higher education, as observed from these figures, reflects the general changes happening in society, which lead to increased competition and, through it, to self-deprecation and “lying flat” behavior among Generation Z workers[3].

3.2 Relationships Between Variables

3.2.1 Relationship Between the Independent and Mediating Variables

Social Comparison Orientation → Self-Deprecation: The intense social comparison that social media imposes leads to self-deprecation in Gen Z employees, destroying their self-esteem and causing more negative outcomes for them in the workplace [1][5].

Work Pressure → Lying Flat Behavior: High work pressure and uncertain career prospects will make some employees of Generation Z choose to “lie flat,” with low engagement and reduced effort [6][9]

3.2.2 Relationship Between Mediating and Dependent Variables

Self-Deprecation → Organizational Effectiveness: Self-deprecation reduces work motivation and task performance, lowering organizational effectiveness [10][11].

Lying Flat Behavior → Organizational Effectiveness: “Lying flat” behavior dramatically lowers work engagement, resulting in poor job performance and low organizational effectiveness [6][9].

3.2.3 Moderating Effects of Organizational Culture and Managerial Interventions

Moderating Role of Organizational Culture: A supportive organizational culture could reduce the damaging impacts of self-deprecation and “lying flat” behavior on work performance. If employees realize their inputs are valuable, such negative behaviors will be less likely to occur, thereby fostering better work outcomes [4] [7].

Moderating Role of Managerial Interventions: With proper managerial interventions, such as flexible goal setting and psychological support, managers can sufficiently mitigate the negative effect of “lying flat” behavior and enable work performance to improve with better organizational effectiveness [7][8].

3.3 Applying the Model

The model can be utilized for improving organizational effectiveness in dealing with Generation Z employees. In an organization where most of the employees are from Generation Z, such as a technology-based one, the model will be used to identify the source of social comparison and work pressure. Through devising interventions in terms of psychological support, setting achievable goals, and developing a supportive organizational culture, it would greatly reduce self-deprecation and “lying flat” behaviors, improving organizational effectiveness within the company.

4. Case Study: Managing Generation Z Employees in a Technology Company in Xi'an City, ShaanXi Province, China

4.1 Background

A technology company with its staff largely composed of the Generation Z demographic group recently observed that most of them indulge in these so-called “lying flat” and self-deprecation phenomena, which result in low efficiency and make it hard for staff members to improve their performance. The company decided to adopt a management model based on behavioral science to identify the behavioral characteristics of the employees and consequently offer diversified management strategies for them.

4.2 Application of the Model

4.2.1 Behavioral Identification

The company carried out surveys and psychological appraisals, showing that some employees have great self-deprecation tendencies and less confidence in their own abilities, while others displayed attitudes of “lying flat” and a loss of interest in work. According to these findings, corresponding management strategies for different behavioral characteristics were developed by the company's management.

4.2.2 Flexible Management

The company set smaller, achievable goals for employees with self-deprecation tendencies, aiming to boost their confidence through increased team-building activities and collaborative projects. Simultaneously, the company provided flexible working hours and more personal development opportunities for staff with the “lying flat” tendency, hoping they could once again be motivated to do their work. Over time, this managed flexibility resulted in gradual improvements in employee satisfaction and confidence.

4.2.3 Fostering a Supportive Culture

The company organized many internal sharing sessions for employees to share their difficulties and experiences, thereby creating a more helpful cultural atmosphere within the company. This cultural environment not only relieved employees' anxiety but also allowed them to become more engaged in their work and innovative.

4.2.4 Dynamic Feedback and Adjustment

The company conducted monthly surveys on employee satisfaction and one-on-one communication sessions to update psychological status with employees' work performance. Based on the feedback, the company dynamically adjusted its management strategies, including increasing psychological support resources, optimizing work processes, and offering more targeted training and development opportunities.

4.3 Results

Finally, after a few months, self-assessment and performance improved significantly for all employees. The proper usage of this management model indeed helped this company in every way to sort out issues related to employee management and also provided a guideline for other companies facing similar issues. Employees became more satisfied and better performers at work as the company considered emotional intelligence and leadership, as elaborated by Goleman et al. [16]. All the envisaged organizational effectiveness was achieved by motivating employees through setting an enabling culture with active feedback mechanisms in place.

5. Conclusion and Future Directions

5.1 Study Contributions

This paper thoroughly analyzes the behavioral characteristics of Generation Z employees and proposes a differentiated and flexible model of management to effectively handle tendencies of self-deprecation and “lying flat.”

The research is grounded both in behavioral science for theoretical support in understanding the psychological motivations of Generation Z employees and in demographic and educational data for practical guidance for managers in China. By constructing a behavioral science-based management model, organizations can adapt to the needs and psychological characteristics of Generation Z staff more effectively, elevating job satisfaction and organizational effectiveness.

5.2 Practical Implications

Unlocking the potential of Generation Z employees in becoming an effective workforce under contemporary organizational management is vital for increasing organizational effectiveness and competitiveness. The management model developed in this study provides a practical and effective approach by identifying employee behavioral characteristics,

flexibly deploying management strategies, fostering a supportive culture, and establishing dynamic feedback mechanisms. This approach creates a positive, satisfying job environment for Generation Z employees while improving their work performance, thereby adding more value to organizations.

5.3 Future Research Directions

Although the management model proposed in this paper has a certain degree of theoretical and practical success, there is still much room for further exploration. Future research could emphasize the following directions:

Applicability of the Model in Different Cultural Contexts: The focus of the present study is on Generation Z employees in China. Future research could assess the applicability of this management model in varying cultural contexts by analyzing the role and impact of other culture-related factors on employee behavior and management strategies.

Technology and Management Integration: With the fast evolution of artificial intelligence and big data technology, future research could explore how these technologies can be incorporated into employee behavior identification and used to optimize the management model by making management more precise and efficient.

Future Study on Long-Term Impacts of the Model: Future studies may also investigate long-term impacts, such as career development in employees and organizational effectiveness. This would provide more detailed and profound guidance to organizational managers.

By understanding the distinctive psychological and behavioral characteristics of Generation Z and applying them to management, organizations will further unlock the potential of this generation, achieving a win-win situation for both the organization and its employees.

Informed Consent Statement: "Not applicable."

Data Availability Statement: Data can be found in: <https://data.stats.gov.cn/index.htm>

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