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Art Therapy in Slow Variety Shows: A Study on Generation Z Youth

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Abstract. Due to high competition and involution, Generation Z youth (digital natives born between 1997 and 2012) are experiencing psychological burnout in the current social environment. The distress cannot be simply regarded as a personal mood fluctuation. This generation is facing a distinct set of stressors, including an efficiency metrics driven evaluation system, instrumental rationality fostered interpersonal alienation, and a shortage of emotional outlets. In this context, slow variety shows such as *Hello Life* and *Hahaha* have become popular among young Chinese audience, who seek emotional comfort from these emerging slow variety shows. From the perspective of social alienation, this study investigates the root causes of this psychological burnout. Three features are identified to distinguish slow variety shows from conventional TV programs. The effect of each feature on therapeutic functions in distinct dimensions is explored as well. The findings show that slowdown rhythms help alleviate individuals' physical and mental depletion by creating a low-load audiovisual experience. Moreover, an anti-involution discourse system is established to relieve achievement anxiety along with fierce competition. In addition, the de-dramatized narrative is close to daily life, which can provide emotional companionship for the audience. Overall, this study elaborates on the therapeutic logic of slow variety shows in alleviating psychological burnout among Generation Z. It also offers implications for subsequent quantitative investigations and comparative analyses in relevant research.

Keywords: Slow variety shows, Generation Z, Psychological burnout, Art therapy

1. Introduction

In an era of ever-intensifying speed and competition, the logic of modernization has placed accumulating pressure on successive generations. Generation Z youth are now shouldering significantly greater psychological distress than their predecessors [1, 2]. Psychologically, this state can be interpreted via two core concepts: ego depletion and psychological burnout. Both terms depict the gradual depletion of individuals' psychological resources caused by long-term social pressure, constant self-regulation and overthinking. Under an efficiency-driven social logic, the space for individual meaning is eroded constantly, making anxiety, stress, and loneliness pervasive emotions for this generation. This psychological burnout is deeply rooted in the social alienation processes that began with industrialization. Labor is quantified as numerical indicators, and

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individuals are reduced to efficiency instruments [3]; the expansion of instrumental rationality has severed connections between people and between humanity and nature, fostering widespread indifference and inner isolation [4]. Meanwhile, the decline of physical labor in modern life means people no longer exhaust themselves for survival. The surplus mental energy, left with no healthy outlet, easily turns inward and accumulates, further intensifying psychological burnout [5]. Against this backdrop, slow variety shows like *Hello Life, Become a Farmer*, and *Hahaha* have quietly surged in popularity among China's Generation Z [6]. With their calming audiovisual rhythm, non-utilitarian content, and authentic daily narratives, these shows have become important platforms for young people seeking emotional support.

Existing research has explored the narrative features of slow variety shows, the psychological plight of young people, and the companionship function of media as separate topics [1, 2, 6-9]. However, cross-disciplinary studies that integrate all three into a unified framework to systematically investigate their therapeutic mechanisms remain scarce. This observation prompts the central questions of this research: Through what distinct qualities do slow variety shows address the psychological distress of Generation Z? What are the specific mechanisms behind their therapeutic effects? Grounded in the perspectives of social alienation and art therapy, this study first analyzes the root causes of psychological burnout in young people, then delineates the core features distinguishing slow variety shows from conventional ones, and finally reveals their art therapy mechanisms for this demographic. Accordingly, this paper intends to interpret the cultural functions of slow variety shows as well as the emotional demands of contemporary young people.

2. The root causes of Generation Z's psychological burnout

2.1. Value alienation: the dissolution of subjectivity under capital logic

Value alienation manifests on two interconnected levels: quantification by capital and the expansion of instrumental rationality. In traditional societies, labor directly sustained individual subsistence as people grew crops for self-sufficiency and made goods for their own use. Since time was not treated as a quantifiable cost, slow living rhythms were acceptable. The expansion of capitalism, however, altered this logic. It converted entities that were once excluded from commodity exchange into quantifiable objects, among which human beings and time constitute the core examples [3]. People became labor power, and time was converted into money. Once an individual was required to produce measurable results within a fixed timeframe, slowness was no longer permissible. From childhood, Generation Z has been embedded within such evaluative systems centered on scores, rankings and performance metrics. These external quantitative benchmarks reduce human worth to mere numerical indicators. When self-worth is deeply tied to measurable indicators, human intrinsic value is reduced to simple quantitative data, which makes people estranged from their authentic selves. Failure to reach the set numerical standards is likely to trigger self-doubt, and anxiety tends to arise naturally, a psychological outcome identified by the alienation theory of the Frankfurt School [4].

The expansion of instrumental rationality has further intensified this dissolution of subjectivity. Since the Industrial Revolution, technological advances have not only increased productivity but also reshaped interpersonal relationships as well as the connections between humans and nature [4]. Films by Michelangelo Antonioni, including *Red Desert* and *L'Eclisse* precisely capture this predicament of modernity. People fall into verbal silence even when occupying the same space, and humans grow alienated from nature amid industrialization [10]. This situation has gradually become a normal state of modern society. On the interpersonal level, contemporary young people have

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frequent online digital connections, but they generally lack in-depth communication. In terms of human-nature relations, modern working environments are isolated from natural settings, which continuously weakens the bond between humans and nature and leads to their gradual separation. These rifts between individuals and between humans and nature are precisely the divides that slow variety shows seek to bridge.

2.2. Psychological alienation: suppressed vitality and internal depletion

A core shift in modern society lies in the sharp decline of physical labor brought about by technological development. People rely on vehicles for daily commuting, order food through online applications, and spend most of their working hours in sedentary states. As a result, they no longer need to expend significant physical energy to sustain their existence. Herbert Spencer's "surplus energy theory" had long pointed out that after meeting survival needs, organisms must release excess energy through non-utilitarian activities like play [5]. This is exactly the prevailing condition today. According to Attention Restoration Theory , the recovery of directed attention requires exposure to restorative environments such as natural scenes [11]. The prolonged lack of physical labor among modern individuals implies their insufficient contact with such restorative environments, which prevents fatigued attention from recovering, and forces the excess energy that should have been discharged outward to turn inward instead, resulting in excessive rumination and psychological alienation [11]. This phenomenon has gradually intensified across successive generations, and internal depletion becomes more prominent among Generation Z [2]. It is precisely this suppressed vitality and mental depletion that generate Generation Z's demand for the concept of useless utility constructed by slow variety shows.

3. The distinctive features of slow variety shows

3.1. A decelerated rhythm

Exemplified by programs like *Hello Life, Become a Farmer,* and *Hahaha*, slow variety shows are becoming increasingly popular among Generation Z in China. Conventional variety shows rely on tightly-paced competitive segments and scripted dramatic conflicts to captivate viewers with high-intensity sensory stimulation. In contrast, slow variety shows consciously avoid this formula, offering audiences an alternative media experience characterized by a soothing audiovisual tempo, non-utilitarian content, and authentic daily narrative discourse.

Long exposed to intense stimuli stemming from excessive internal workplace competition, surging information flow and high-conflict film and television productions, contemporary Generation Z exists in an isomorphic state of constant tension that persistently drains their cognitive resources. Distinct from the fast-paced editing logic of traditional variety shows, slow variety shows exhibit an obvious tendency of "deceleration". In terms of narrative structure, they abandon compact session arrangements and adopt a soothing prose-style aesthetic throughout the whole programme [6]. in terms of audio-visual language, these works incorporate plentiful aesthetic blank shots ranging from natural landscapes to indoor still-life scenes. Warm color grading shapes a tranquil atmosphere, and the editing tempo is moderately prolonged to reserve visual negative space [7]. These empty shots transcend mere transitional functions. According to the Attention Restoration Theory, such natural or low-complexity scenes possess soft fascination that effortlessly captures viewers' attention by stimulating involuntary attention and grants valuable rest to directed attention, which has been persistently strained by information overload [11].

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3.2. De-commercialized content

While conventional variety shows use competition as their primary driving force, slow variety shows largely dispense with this utilitarian content framework. Such productions generally omit confrontational segments in their layout [7]. In *Hello Life*, for instance, the program does not follow a tight script; the cast freely decides the direction of each episode, and the content revolves around everyday activities such as cooking, games, and mountain climbing, focusing on the experience itself rather than competition [6]. The show *Hahaha* follows the same logic. Although it incorporates game segments, the outcomes do not lead to rankings or eliminations; participants typically complete tasks together and share rewards. Competition is thus diluted into a form of collective entertainment rather than a mechanism for judging winners and losers. By stripping away ranking, elimination, and comparisons, these shows grant Gen Z, who are constantly subjected to quantitative evaluation, a temporary reprieve from competitive anxiety, offering an emotional space for relaxation free from judgment.

3.3. A de-dramatized narrative

Conventional variety shows typically follow fixed scripts and rely on suspense and conflict to attract viewers' attention. Slow variety shows take the opposite path, widely employing documentary-style techniques to portray the cast's ordinary daily lives [7]. Scenes of shared meals, old friends chatting, and working in the fields require no dramatic treatment to form the entire narrative. "Homely sense" is precisely "the unique advantage of slow variety shows" [6]. These productions refrain from relying on sensational and contrived plot, nor do they stimulate viewers through artificial dramatic tension. Instead, they trust that ordinary life itself is worth watching. When the camera stops chasing theatrics, the viewing experience itself shifts from one of "being stimulated" to one of "being accompanied."

4. The art therapy mechanism of slow variety shows for Generation Z

4.1. Audiovisual therapy: a low-stimulation aesthetic for restoring mental fatigue

The "art therapy" examined in this study is conceptualized from a broad aesthetic perspective. It refers to the positive moderating effect of aesthetic experience on psychology, and differs from clinical art therapy, a standardized intervention with diagnostic and therapeutic capacities in clinical psychology. The "decelerated," "de-commercialized," and "de-dramatized" qualities of slow variety shows address Generation Z's psychological distress in a layered and progressive manner, moving from sensory relaxation and restoration to cognitive value reconstruction, and finally to emotional companionship and fulfillment.

The way artistic activities affect humans does not start with rational analysis but with the senses first. Artworks act directly on the body and mind through visual frames, sound, rhythm and other elements. Slow-variety productions follow a similar therapeutic logic. Generation Z, living under long-term high pressure and information overload, experiences excessive sensory depletion. The audio-visual language used by the slow variety show provides a reverse adjustment effect for the audience. These programs contain gentle images, long empty shots and continuous rhythms, similar to the effect of massage to relieve muscle tension. Through gentle and continuous sensory stimulation, they create a breathing space for the audience [7]. This can help the audience relax and recover the physical and mental state of excessive fatigue.

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4.2. Narrative therapy: an anti-involution storyline to ease achievement anxiety

If audiovisual therapy addresses sensory depletion, narrative therapy directly targets the achievement anxiety bred by value quantification. The narratives of slow variety shows do not manufacture suspense or play up conflict. Instead, they focus on unproductive moments, such as waiting for a pot of soup to simmer, watching a patch of land being tilled. The narrative shifts its focus from outcomes to processes, from the pursuit of winning or losing to the emphasis on personal perceptions, enabling audiences to break free from the conventional utilitarian evaluation system and embrace the idea that the meaning of life lies in each of its moments.

Such narratives rejecting cutthroat competition furnish Gen Z with an alternative benchmark for life, opening up an imagination of an alternative way of living. Within these narratives, slowness is permissible, and aimless behaviors carry intrinsic value. By consuming slow variety shows, young audiences slow their mental tempo and anchor their happiness in immediate sensory experience, easing their anxiety stemming from the sense of lost control over time [9]. During viewing, audiences can temporarily achieve cognitive detachment from the anxiety-provoking dominant narrative, gain emotional relief in turn, and immerse themselves in an inclusive and pluralistic value system constructed by the program. Such cognitive liberation at the narrative level can effectively alleviate the psychological burnout induced by achievement anxiety.

4.3. Emotional therapy: aesthetic compensation and mediated companionship

The deepest treatment often exists at the emotional level. The slow variety show has built such an aesthetic world, which complements reality, so that the repressed needs of Generation Z can be satisfied through aesthetic participation. Research shows that viewers can establish " parasocial relationships" through roles in TV programs [12], and this emotional bond can provide a sense of belonging and effectively buffer loneliness. In addition, the lonelier an individual is, the more they want to be accompanied by TV [8]. The fact that young people in contemporary China are addicted to social media shows that Generation Z is trapped in loneliness, which is due to the alienation of algorithm-driven digital platforms that alienate the traditional communication model. Young people in China strive to form deep emotional bonds through online interaction, but the scope of communication is constantly narrowing when facing real life [13]. The community atmosphere created in slow variety shows is a projection of young people's ideal life. Among them, the warm relationship narrative reduces their loneliness in real life [9], which is like " psychological recharge". While it cannot fundamentally alter reality, it can effectively fill a spiritual void. When cast members on the screen sit and chat, or labor together, what the audience feels from the other side of the screen is the comfort of an old friend's presence.

5. Conclusion

This study began with the social roots of Generation Z's psychological burnout and analyzed the distinctive features of slow variety shows and their art therapy mechanisms. The findings suggest that the psychological distress of this generation is the product of quantitative capital logic, expanding instrumental rationality, and an accumulation of surplus energy. Through their decelerated, de-commercialized, and de-dramatized qualities, slow variety shows address this distress in a progressive, three-tiered manner: low-stimulation audiovisuals, an anti-involution narrative, and mediated companionship. Admittedly, the above therapeutic function only offers emotional consolation rather than fundamental resolution of real dilemmas. This study's analysis

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rests on textual interpretation and theoretical reasoning, and its proposed mechanisms lack empirical verification. In addition, slow-variety programs have diverse thematic categories. Rural, travel and lifestyle-themed shows produce distinct therapeutic effects. This paper does not differentiate these categories, so the applicable scope of its conclusions needs further clarification. Follow-up research should verify the audiovisual, narrative and emotional therapeutic mechanisms proposed in this study through questionnaires or experimental research. It can further investigate the sustainability of the relaxing effects generated by slow-paced variety shows, explore whether audiences engage in offline community activities associated with such programs, and verify whether such participation exerts positive impacts on their psychological well-being.

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