

A Society Caught in a Vicious Cycle and People Unable to Love

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ABSTRACT

The dominance of meritocracy-driven, in-volutional competition is reshaping young people's emotional practices, giving rise to the phenomenon of "inability to love". This study employs a three-dimensional isomorphous analysis framework of "occupational burnout–emotional exhaustion" to reveal three manifestations of this inability among youth: emotional depletion and inability to invest, dehumanisation and the instrumentalisation of romance, alongside low personal accomplishment and crises of self-identity. This paper contends that through mechanisms such as time compression, meritocracy supremacy, and inflated instrumental rationality, the competition of the 'involution' constrains young people's emotional investment in marriage and romance, reflecting the paradoxes of modernity within the process of individualisation.

KEYWORDS

Youth Romance and Marriage; Burnout; Involution; Meritocracy.

1. INTRODUCTION

Modern competitive pressures profoundly shape the existential conditions and psychological states of the younger generation through intransigent competition. This intensifies resource scarcity and individual competition, compelling young people to escalate personal development investments to stand out in highly homogenised contests. Prolonged high-pressure competition breeds burnout, while the social temporal discipline dictated by competitive logic renders labour time elastic, evolving into round-the-clock self-exploitation. Burnout thus spreads from work and study into private life and emotional spheres[1].

In recent years, the crisis of youth marriage and romance has remained a topic of intense public debate. The existential pressures stemming from the normalisation of internalisation have reshaped young people's emotional practices, compelling them to choose singledom either actively or passively. The value discipline of meritocracy has embedded efficiency-first principles into the social fabric, producing a multitude of exhausted subjects. This state of exhaustion is ontological, obstructing the formation of intimate relationships. These young people, profoundly alienated by the mechanisms of internalisation, endure the collision of traditional and modern concepts while facing the erosion of their capacity to build intimate relationships through systemic violence[2].

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

2.1. Shifts in Contemporary Youth Attitudes Towards Marriage and Romance

Globally, youth marriage and dating patterns are undergoing profound shifts, with rising proportions of single individuals and a transition from "universal early marriage" to "universal late marriage." As a late-transition society, China now has 240 million singles, reflecting a deep transformation in marital patterns. Contemporary youth attitudes towards marriage and dating exhibit an intertwining of modern and traditional elements. Mate selection criteria emphasise personal emotional and value compatibility, while the dating process prioritises the fulfilment of individual emotional needs and self-actualisation. Nevertheless, core elements of traditional marriage and relationship views continue to exert influence, blending with modern societal values to form a composite conceptual framework[3]. Confronted with market competition pressures and everyday life risks, the instrumental role of romance and marriage has become more pronounced. Partner selection and family relationships exhibit utilitarian orientations, with economic conditions emerging as one of the most valued factors in contemporary youth's mate selection[4].

2.2. Multidimensional Explanations for the Mechanisms Underlying the Phenomenon of Singledom

Academic research on the mechanisms underpinning singledom presents a multi-dimensional explanatory framework. At the macro level, from an individualisation theory perspective, the values of young people during periods of social transition shift from collectivism towards individualism. Consumerism fosters new practices of intimate relationships, lending cultural legitimacy to singlehood. From the perspective of the marriage market and resources, gender structural imbalances and nationwide migration trigger marriage squeeze effects. The proliferation of new media alters young people's socialising patterns; the lack of deep real-world interactions leads to the prevalence of the notion of "being single, living alone, and unwilling to date".

At the micro-individual level, attention focuses on the tension between personal pursuits and intensifying life pressures. Young people prioritise personal achievement and self-actualisation, tending to postpone romantic relationships and marriage to pursue education and career development; mounting life pressures create conflicts between career competition and investment in relationships, leading to delayed or rejected marriage[5].

2.3. Limitations of Existing Research and Contributions of This Study

Existing research predominantly focuses on traditional analytical perspectives such as individual choice, marital resources, and institutional change, generally overlooking the structural constraints imposed by China's "involutionary" process. While some studies mention time conflicts between work and romantic relationships, they fail to deeply analyse how an involutionary society systematically reconstructs young people's life trajectories. This paper adopts a critical realism methodology, using the characteristics and essence of intransigence as its entry point. It dissects how the competitive dynamics of intransigence reshape affective production relations and explores how meritocratic values discipline the ideologies of production and intimate relationships, offering new perspectives for understanding and addressing contemporary youth affective issues.

2.4. Theoretical Foundations

Professional burnout theory provides an appropriate analytical tool for examining the phenomenon of "emotional burnout" among young people in the context of marriage and romance within the mechanisms of the rat race. Maslach et al.'s three-dimensional model of work-related burnout (emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and reduced self-efficacy) possesses strong universality

and scientific rigour. It allows for the observation of the specific manifestations of young people's "inability to love" under the pressure of the rat race from three dimensions: the individual, interpersonal relationships, and self-evaluation. Resource conservation theory explains burnout occurrence through the lens of needs and resources. When individuals invest substantial resources yet fail to achieve expected returns, resulting in resource depletion, negative consequences such as burnout emerge. The intensified competition within an internalised environment exacerbates this sense of burnout. Irrational competition within resource-constrained scenarios leads to sustained resource depletion and diminished prospects for effective returns.

3. THE TRIPLE MANIFESTATIONS OF INVOLUTIONARY COMPETITION AND YOUTH'S INABILITY TO LOVE

3.1. Individual Stress Dimension: Emotional Exhaustion and Inability to Invest

Emotional exhaustion, a core dimension of occupational burnout, manifests as depleted emotional reserves and diminished motivation stemming from prolonged stress. As intransigence becomes a fundamental condition of modern existence, this emotional depletion permeates intimate relationships, causing contemporary youth to exhibit physiological fatigue and psychological avoidance in romantic commitments. The high-intensity pace of life leaves young people with neither the energy nor patience to cultivate deep relationships amidst the pressures of survival. Anxiety makes them more selective in choosing partners, sometimes even sacrificing love for essential resources. Prolonged labour depletes both physical and mental energy, while private emotions are continuously conscripted as productive resources. Modern workers are compelled to make greater emotional investments, and this widespread emotional drain undermines the foundations of intimate relationships. Chronic emotional depletion fosters defensive attitudes toward intimacy, fuelling fears of renewed exhaustion. Love has been downgraded from a necessity to a dispensable commodity. Young people, unable to enter romantic commitments, adopt avoidance strategies, seeking substitute means to fulfil emotional needs.

3.2. Interpersonal Dimension: The Shift Towards Depersonalisation and Instrumentalisation

When emotional exhaustion reaches a certain threshold, individuals activate "depersonalisation" stress defence mechanisms and self-protection strategies. This manifests as emotional detachment and indifference towards interpersonal relationships, reducing interaction partners to devoid-of-feeling "objects" or symbols. Mechanical interaction patterns are employed to avoid emotional investment. In this process, individuals progressively lose the capacity for profound emotional experience, reducing romantic relationships to calculable, quantifiable behaviours. Fear of objectification drives them to actively distance themselves from emotional bonds. Within the panopticon constructed by meritocracy, societal evaluation systems reduce human labour to quantifiable indicators of competitiveness, restructuring interpersonal relationships into competitive modes of existence. When meritocratic logic permeates intimate spheres, young people begin substituting heartfelt connection with quantitative standards; the "matching criteria" prevalent in arranged dating markets fundamentally commodify emotion.

3.3. Self-Evaluation Dimension: Low Self-Efficacy and Identity Crisis

Negative self-evaluation constitutes the third core manifestation of burnout syndrome, stemming from diminished agency and a lack of meaning. As the effort-to-reward ratio declines, the costs of marriage and romance rise, and quantitative criteria for condition-based matching proliferate in the dating market, young people hold increasingly low opinions of their own romantic capital. The experience of autonomy is severely diminished by modern society's accelerated pace, trapping young people in perpetual competition. Their freely disposable time for emotional interaction is drastically

compressed, making it difficult to establish stable self-perception or form deep emotional connections with others. This fosters a sense of alienation and estrangement from both self and world. The expansion of instrumental rationality has transformed romance and marriage into performance-driven capital competition, causing emotional practices to deviate from their essential nature. Utilitarian mate selection criteria compel young people to continually adjust their self-perception, forcibly linking intrinsic value with external evaluation. Individuals disadvantaged in quantitative assessments gradually internalise the belief that they are "unworthy of love," plunging into a crisis of existential nihilism.

4. ANALYSIS OF THE CAUSES OF INVOLUTION-INDUCED LOVE FATIGUE

4.1. Behavioural Traits and Experiential Patterns: High Intensity and Homogenisation

The most pronounced characteristics of contemporary societal entropisation are high intensity and homogenisation, which jointly reconfigure the existential conditions of the youth demographic. Systematic deprivation of social time erodes agency, reducing multifaceted human activity to unidimensional labour. Standardised competitive tracks devour young people's life time and emotional resources. Devoting vast amounts of time and energy to standardised pursuits like academic advancement and career progression, work and study schedules squeeze out leisure, leaving youth lacking agency in emotional exchange and recreational time. They find no space to attend to their relationship with the world. Competition monopolises young people's attention, disrupting the formation of emotional willpower and the capacity for focused emotional engagement. The workplace's 996 work schedule and overtime culture severely compress time for dating and socialising, forcing individuals to manage emotional needs during fragmented work intervals. Involution compresses human existence into a singular "labour-recovery" cycle. Within this fragmented leisure, people increasingly opt for instant gratification as a means of "recharging," undermining the sustained interaction essential for deepening relationships. Meritocracy reduces human value to quantifiable performance metrics, while homogenised competition stifles individual development, eroding the creative foundations of love.

4.2. High Investment, Low Return: Performance Competition and Self-Doubt

Contemporary youth find themselves in a paradoxical predicament of internalised competition. To prevail in homogenised contests for finite resources, individuals must invest ever-increasing amounts of time and energy. Yet this self-exploitative effort fails to deliver anticipated self-actualisation, instead plunging them into profound self-doubt and negation. Society's singular evaluation system intensifies performance-driven competition among youth, compelling them to engage in endless internal strife on the 'achievement-oriented' track. Self-identity constitutes the reflective understanding and cognition of the self based on personal experiences; modern social fluidity demands individuals continually reconstruct this identity. The diminishing marginal returns inherent in this internalised competition amplify performance pressures, translating into anxiety about one's capabilities. The gap between the 'real self' and the 'ideal self' fosters persistent unease, trapping young people in a cycle of self-doubt. Self-identity may crystallise into a "loser" image, and this crisis of value recognition erodes the self-affirmation needed for intimate relationships, creating psychological barriers that make 'daring to love' difficult. Prolonged high-pressure work coupled with low efficacy often breeds psychological disorders such as depression and anxiety, while also fostering interpersonal alienation and emotional detachment.

4.3. Ideology and Value Orientations: Meritocracy and Instrumental Rationality

In the age of invariance, meritocratic values precipitate the alienation of the self. Under the prevailing neoliberal paradigm, individuals undergo covert and inescapable self-destructive alienation through excessive self-discipline and self-deprecation under competitive pressures. Meritocracy reshapes contemporary subjectivity by constructing a special ethics of responsibility. While driving the alienation of the worker's "self," it transforms social competition into an infinitely self-replicating, exclusionary practice, giving rise to increasingly "narcissistic" subjects. Instrumental rationality and efficiency supremacy prevail, while value-based rationality gradually recedes, forming a "rational cage." Merit becomes the sole measure of value, systematically excluding non-quantifiable dimensions such as human emotions and creativity. Inner needs are neglected, binding self-identity to external achievements. The instrumental rational mindset directly conflicts with the emotional capacities—such as empathy and tolerance—essential for intimate relationships. Young people, fearing romantic involvement may hinder career advancement or impose financial burdens, actively avoid such bonds.

5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The present fast-paced, high-pressure competitive environment breeds exhausted lives incapable of love. The heightened risks and instability of modern society amplify existential anxieties. While meritocracy promises equal opportunity and freedom of choice, it simultaneously strips individuals of autonomy through disciplinary mechanisms, compelling adherence to singular standards of success and eroding possibilities for diverse life narratives. Individual worth is reduced to competitive metrics, fostering perpetual comparative anxiety. Self-exploitation and mental attrition deplete the psychological energy required to sustain profound emotional connections. Instrumental rationality has ballooned into the sole yardstick, with heartfelt attraction yielding to compatibility checks. Romantic commitment has become a venture capital investment, while marriage and courtship are viewed as class-climbing stepping stones and risk-aversion tools, dissolving intimacy's intrinsic meaning. This utilitarian shift collides violently with humanity's innate yearning for genuine affection, forging a collective syndrome of "love incapacity".

The phenomenon of "emotional fatigue" among young people is fundamentally a product of the mutual construction between societal structural contradictions and individual psychological mechanisms, reflecting the paradoxes of modernity within the process of individualisation. The so-called "binary opposition between survival and love" is a false proposition; the deeper root lies in how competitive models of social development squeeze the space for meaning within the lifeworld. This is not merely a dilemma of personal choice, but a modernity-related proposition demanding reflection by society as a whole. When developmental logic excessively constricts the space for living, the urgent question becomes how to restore warmth and meaning to the emotional world while balancing personal development with emotional life. Subsequent research could focus on exploring the tension between China's unique "establishing a family and career" ethical paradigm and modernity's transformation, the reconstructive effects of digital technology on emotional interaction, and the reshaping of boundaries between the public sphere and private life. Such investigations would provide a more explanatory theoretical framework for understanding the contemporary youth's existential circumstances.

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