

## Resistance in Disorder: A Behavioral Diffusion Perspective on Crawling Movements Among University Student Populations (Postprint)

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### Abstract

The collective crawling movement among college student groups is essentially a process of internet memes transitioning from online generation to offline diffusion. This study approaches the phenomenon from this perspective, employing a ternary causal model as its analytical framework to examine the role of individual psychological mechanisms underlying this phenomenon. This analysis aims to further explore new forms and directions for the future development of youth subculture, while simultaneously providing a novel perspective for research on body communication and behavior communication. The study argues that the crawling movement of college student groups serves as an external metaphor, using “disorder” to combat a “meaningless” state of existence, and represents a form of bodily expression and actualization of self-meaning undertaken by college student groups in response to their own spiritual predicament.

### Full Text

#### Resisting in Disorder: A Study on the Crawling Movement Among College Students from the Perspective of Behavioral Communication

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**Abstract:** The collective crawling movement among college students essentially represents the offline diffusion of an online meme. This study examines this process through the lens of Bandura’s triadic causal model to analyze the role of individual psychological mechanisms underlying the phenomenon, thereby exploring new forms and directions for the future development of youth subcultures while providing a novel perspective for research on body communication and behavioral communication. The study argues that the crawling movement among

college students metaphorically employs “disorder” to resist a “meaningless” state of existence, serving as a bodily expression and realization of self-meaning constructed by college students in response to their spiritual predicament.

**Keywords:** communication behavior; bodily carnival; affordance; youth sub-culture

In November 2022, videos themed around “crawling” spread widely across major social media platforms. These videos depicted groups of dozens of college students crawling together on university athletic fields. According to official statements, these activities were spontaneously organized by students themselves. From a communication studies perspective, the popularity of this crawling movement among college students is essentially the result of offline diffusion of an online meme, with this collective carnival reflecting a behavioral significance: contemporary youth’s resistance against meaningless order and their search for pathways to self-meaning within uncertain environments.

## 1. Theoretical Construction of Behavioral Communication

### 1.1 Bandura’s Triadic Causal Model and Its Connection to Affordance

In the mid-1980s, Bandura’s social cognitive theory of human functioning took shape. Building upon social learning theory, this framework places greater emphasis on the role of individual beliefs in shaping one’s own behavior and thoughts, offering valuable insights for communication processes centered on human agency. Bandura outlined a human self-system possessing five fundamental capabilities: symbolic representation, forethought, vicarious learning, self-regulation, and self-reflection. According to this view, humans are self-organizing, proactive, self-reflective, and self-regulating agents—not merely reactive organisms shaped solely by external environments or driven by underlying internal forces. Human functioning emerges from the dynamic interplay of three reciprocally interacting factors: personal agency, behavior, and environment [1]. In this triadic causal model, people are not only influenced by their environment but also actively change it.

The concept of “affordance,” introduced by James J. Gibson in 1979, reflects the theoretical perspective of ecological psychology, emphasizing the relationship between environment and organism. European media scholars Taina Bucher and Anne Helmond have identified five ways to describe affordances: as relational properties between animals or people and their environment, perceived affordances, technological affordances, social affordances, and communicative affordances [2].

### 1.2 Research Framework for the Crawling Movement as Communication Behavior

The crawling movement, as a behavioral characteristic, connects the crawling subject with the media environment. Within this tripartite relationship, the

crawling subject, crawling behavior, and media environment interact dynamically: in the interaction between subject and behavior, individual psychological motivations influence the initiation of crawling behavior, while feedback from the media environment regarding this behavior subsequently affects the individual's thoughts, attitudes, and emotions. In the interaction between crawling behavior and media environment, environmental feedback determines the subject's willingness and intensity to continue the crawling movement, yet this crawling behavior, through online dissemination, also becomes embedded within the media environment, influencing the environment itself. In the interaction between subject and media environment, the subject's self-cognition and personality shaping are products of environmental influence, while simultaneously, the subject can reshape the media environment through personal character, beliefs, and values via online and offline channels.

## 2. Three-Dimensional Interaction Analysis of the “Crawling” Phenomenon

### 2.1 Crawling Behavior Reconstructs Subjective Cognitive Affordance: Bodily Healing and Identity Abandonment

The act of crawling serves as a critical node connecting the individual actor with the media environment, embedding itself within these affordances and reconstructing both the participating college student group and their media environment. Here, affordance can be understood as a relational property—an opportunity for action. Cognitive affordance manifests as assisting subjects in understanding things and their value. Within the crawling movement phenomenon, cognitive affordance provides a unique rationale for why college students engage in this activity: why choose the action of “crawling,” and what drives them at the cognitive level?

From the perspective of health communication, the normal functioning of bodily mechanisms represents a fundamental physiological need for everyone. Combining crawling with rhythmic gymnastic movements offers physical fitness benefits. As some professionals have noted, crawling exercises can strengthen core muscle groups in the lower back and knees, improve lower back pain symptoms, and more. Due to pandemic restrictions, long-unmet health needs inevitably required an outlet, making students' desire for physical exercise even stronger. Within the collective living context of campuses, athletic fields provide suitable venues for crawling activities, which require no auxiliary equipment and can be performed anytime, anywhere, making the barrier to entry low and thus popular. In this sense, the crawling movement phenomenon also reflects the “national fitness” trend that emerged during the pandemic extending into offline campus life. Whether “Liu Genghong girls” or the subsequent resurgence of discussion around “Wu Qin Xi” and “Ba Duan Jin,” the essence lies in audiences' responses based on health needs within risky, unknown environments.

Furthermore, the “instinct” in crawling exercises has long existed in human

genes. Imitative animal training ranges from ancient Eastern “Wu Qin Xi” to modern Western “Animal Flow.” The Eastern Han Dynasty’s “Wu Qin Xi” already compiled movements based on the tiger, deer, bear, monkey, and crane for physical fitness [3], while the recently popular “Animal Flow” is also based on ground-based animal biomimetic movement patterns. This training method, rather than being “atavistic,” represents a return to bodily instinct and nature. The preference for “crawling” movements among youth actually reflects the pursuit of physical fitness fundamentals and the need to enhance bodily perception and control.

The prevalence of crawling movement among college students also has specific psychological drivers for this demographic. A research team from Southern Medical University found through questionnaires in 2020 that the incidence of depressive emotions under COVID-19 reached 21.16%, with mild, moderate, moderately severe, and severe depression accounting for 16.98%, 3.17%, and 1.01% respectively [4]. From the “Tsinghua Involution King” phenomenon in late 2020 to “Lying Flat is Justice” in 2021, these successive annual buzzwords reveal the predicament of contemporary youth mentality. The current environment’s sense of disorder and immense uncertainty about the future, combined with a lack of meaning, invisibly intensifies young people’s existential crisis. In this context, the “crawling” movement, with its powerful “abnormal” coloration, immediately sparked strong identification upon trial. Crawling on all fours like an infant, this proactive “rejuvenation” is regarded by student groups as a mature stress-reduction method, a positive act of self-care and psychological construction—manifesting the defensive function of human “regression.” Regression refers to a psychological protective mechanism where, when in anxious or stressful states, individuals experience helplessness and frustration toward the external world and choose to retreat to childhood patterns, abandoning adult principles to avoid reality and escape anxiety [5]. As participants state: “Once you start crawling, you forget your secular identities as college students or office workers.” Using bodily movements to 暗示 (imply) abandoning civilized social identities and names allows all floating feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, and unease to temporarily land during brief carnival moments.

At this level, crawling movement, like previous internet meme phenomena such as “crazy literature” and “walking cardboard pet dogs,” becomes a behavioral tool for youth groups to vent anxiety through instinct-liberating, self-releasing enjoyment.

## 2.2 Media Environment Provides Technical Affordance: Online Interaction and Offline Participation

From the perspective of the media environment, it provides technical affordance for crawling movement and participants. Technical affordance can be understood as “the complementarity between the acting organism and the environment acted upon.” Across different media environments, technology offers affordance directly or indirectly—internet, social platforms, filming equipment,

and other technical support extend the crawling spectacle from offline physical scenes to cyberspace, enabling synchronized mirror performances across both scenarios. Simultaneously, once online college student groups transform their psychological motivation to forward and share into substantive crawling participation, they further expand the participating subjects and domains, achieving effective complementarity between acting individuals and their acting environment.

### **2.3 Crawling Subjects Create Social Affordance: Bodily Co-Presence and Virtual Co-Presence**

The social attributes and stress-relief value derived from crawling exercises also help behavior subjects release pressure. Randall Collins posits that interaction rituals are processes with causal relationships and feedback loops, where participants share common focus and can perceive each other's bodily micro-rhythms and emotions [6]. Campus crawling movement requires participants to physically engage on-site to obtain richer experiences—what Collins emphasizes as “bodily co-presence.” Simultaneously, participants who forward and comment on related information can enter the interaction ritual space through “virtual co-presence” in the cloud, forming emotional connections with offline performers and fellow enthusiasts. Offline participants conduct immediate emotional responses through the “language” of crawling, while online participants can interact through “like, comment, share” functions on video broadcast platforms, achieving real-time interaction through virtual identities. Although virtual co-presence participants experience far less intense emotional atmosphere than those physically present, both achieve “co-presence” in ritual interaction.

Thus, supported by the media environment, offline crawling movement coexists with online crawling spectacles, forming different ritual situations across different spaces. Participants can conduct ritual interaction within shared situations, transforming individual emotions into collective carnival and generating interaction outcomes where crawling movement becomes social currency, achieving group cultural value sharing.

## **3. Conclusion: Combating “Meaninglessness” with “Meaninglessness”**

In the post-pandemic era, epidemic prevention and control have become normalized, with changes in living environments and travel patterns significantly impacting college students' learning and lifestyles. According to data from Professor Lu Lin of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, by the end of 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic had caused 70 million additional depression patients and 90 million additional anxiety patients globally, profoundly affecting human mental health—an impact that will persist for at least 20 years. When student groups face modern spiritual crises, initiating “crawling movement” serves as an active, positive means of self-healing. Behind seemingly “absurd” behavior

lies their use of special methods and symbols to express emotions and seek resonance. Similarly, today's "crawling movement" may have historical precedents. Works such as Picasso's *Guernica* and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* emerged in the forms of surrealist, prophetic fantasy amidst economic crises and war smoke. Facing the war of COVID-19, much like waiting for Godot, college students' crawling movement represents youth's active exploration of meaning in "meaningless" life through humanity's most primitive form.

*Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.*

*Source: ChinaXiv — Machine translation. Verify with original.*