

# *The Influence of Digital Affluence Display on Emerging Adults Self-Esteem*

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**Abstract:** This study investigates the relationship between the frequency of engaging with digital affluence display wealth-related content on social media and self-esteem among Chinese young adults aged 18-26. A quantitative analysis of self-reported survey data showed a significant negative correlation between the frequency of viewing wealth-flaunting content and levels of self-esteem, challenging the traditional views of Social Comparison Theory. The results indicate a complex interaction between online displays of wealth and psychological well-being, including influences of stimuli and thresholds, underscoring the need for a more detailed understanding of how young people interpret and respond to social media in today's digital environment.

**Keywords:** Conspicuous online contents, Emerging adults, Social comparison, Social media, Low self-esteem

## **1. Introduction**

In the era of ubiquitous internet access and the proliferation of social media platforms, the showcasing of individual affluence, commonly termed as "wealth flaunting", has emerged as a notable sociological phenomenon. Such displays, highlighting materialistic wealth, opulent lifestyles, and social standing, have invariably captured widespread public scrutiny and discourse. Notably, among the youth demographic — a cohort at a pivotal juncture of self-identity formation and psychological maturation — these digital portrayals might exert significant ramifications on their self-perception and mental well-being. How these individuals construe their relationship with others and appraise their intrinsic worth and societal position can be fundamentally intertwined with their enduring psychological health and subjective well-being.

Drawing from the paradigm of Social Comparison Theory, which postulates the inherent human proclivity to assess oneself via others, individuals are predisposed to engage in social comparisons to

delineate their standing and competence across varied dimensions. Such comparative evaluations might be upward, juxtaposing oneself against those perceived as superior, or downward, against those perceived as inferior.

Integrating the premises of Social Comparison Theory, the primary objective of this research endeavor is to elucidate whether exposure to digital wealth flaunting precipitates heightened sentiments of inferiority or neuroticism among the youth. By delving into this inquiry, it is anticipated that a more nuanced understanding of the psychological implications of online affluence displays on youth can be garnered, offering theoretical foundations for pertinent educational and psychological interventions.

### 1.1. Internet Exposure (Conspicuous online contents)

The rise of social media has brought about a new mode of social interaction, with conspicuous consumption content becoming increasingly popular on these platforms. According to research by Lee Kar Wai and Syuhaliy Osman, conspicuous consumption is on the rise in both developing and developed countries [1]. This type of consumption behavior not only reflects an individual's level of wealth but has also become a way for young people to gauge their own and others' social status. While these displays of wealth and luxury lifestyles on social media are often enviable, they can also have a distorting effect on young people's self-identity.

Emerging adulthood is a critical period for the formation of personal identity and self-esteem. Research by Kolanska-Stronka and Gorbaniuk indicates that emerging adults, more than other age groups, pay close attention to their peers and seek social recognition through the acquisition of expensive goods and services [2]. This demonstrates a prevalent social perception among young people that places importance on self-esteem, with a tendency to shape their self-esteem through the approval of others. Brands have become a tool for emerging adults to express their identity, helping them to establish their self-concept within social groups [2]. Thus, conspicuous consumption content on social media is not just a display of material wealth but also a means for emerging adults to form self-identity and boost self-esteem. However, in an environment where online flaunting of wealth is common, the boundary recognition between normative expectations and goals begins to blur for the youth, potentially distorting their perceptions of self-worth and success.

During the period of self-identity formation in emerging adults, they are easily influenced by the display of digital wealth, which can have adverse effects on their self-perception. Lehdonvirta's research shows that people are increasingly inclined to publicly display their material possessions and lifestyle online, further intensifying the trend of conspicuous consumption [1]. These behaviors receive widespread dissemination and recognition on social media, providing a new symbol of social identity. However, young people, as the main users of social media, are particularly sensitive to such displays. According to Wai and Osman, "Self-esteem can influence people's behaviors and encourage the appearance of certain behaviors"[1]. Due to the ubiquity and convenience of the internet, youth can easily display luxury goods on social media to enhance their self-esteem, which is positively reinforced by their vanity. In other words, during this critical period of self-identity formation, young people are susceptible to the influence of these digital displays of wealth, which may lead them to have unrealistic expectations of success and adversely affect their self-esteem and behavior. Additionally, the roots of conspicuous consumption trace back to Veblen's "Theory of the Leisure Class" proposed in 1899, which incorporated social status into traditional economic theory [1]. In the context of social media, conspicuous consumption becomes a means of exhibiting personal social status. Individuals may use luxury consumption to enhance their image on social media and potentially boost their self-esteem [3]. In this digital age, the behavior of conspicuous consumption has become more convenient and widespread, allowing people to easily showcase their wealth and

lifestyle to a global audience. According to Wai and Osman, luxury goods not only express personal identity and social status but also enhance self-esteem [1].

On social media platforms, users post images and videos related to a luxurious lifestyle, such as designer clothes, luxury cars, and travel destinations, to build and maintain their social image. The core of this consumption pattern is to elevate one's status by purchasing and displaying goods associated with high social standing. This consumption is non-productive; its main purpose is to showcase one's level of wealth and to differentiate oneself from others. With unique social media interactions like likes, comments, and shares, the displays of conspicuous consumption are amplified, thereby influencing people's perceptions of personal value and success. At the same time, the role of conspicuous consumption in boosting self-esteem is very complex. On one hand, it might make an individual feel more confident, as the positive feedback on social media can be interpreted as a signal of public recognition of the poster's wealth and status. On the other hand, this reliance on external validation for self-esteem can be fragile because it is based on others' feedback on material luxury rather than recognition of intrinsic personal value. While conspicuous consumption can temporarily enhance an individual's sense of social status and self-esteem, this form of identity construction based on youth can be harmful. As Wai and Osman stated, "When a person is experiencing a low level of self-esteem, they tend to engage in activities that can help them raise their self-esteem,"[3]. It exacerbates materialism, potentially leading to dissatisfaction and unease at both individual and societal levels. It reveals that youths, through comparison with others and judging their own self-esteem levels, may change their view of money when they perceive their self-esteem to be low, possibly leading them to mimic the extravagant spending behaviors of other online wealth flaunters or even engage in false displays of affluence.

## 1.2. Emerging adults and social media

The distinct life-course phase of emerging adults from traditional transition occurs during the late teenage years and continues into the twenties situated between teenagers and adulthood. They are a symbol of a human developmental and forming period known as psychological moratorium, which is a critical time to explore worldviews and personal values to influence their transitions into adulthood. During this period, emerging adults embark on the journey of learning to live independently, communicate with others, and excel in academic performance. It is through discovering their life's purpose and meaning that they strive to experience and explore the world. They assess their progress based on the decisions they make regarding their desired living standards. For the majority of emerging adults, their decision-making process is influenced by various factors, including the guidance and support of family members or other caring adults, mentors, social networks, and other support systems [4].

These individuals and networks play a crucial role in shaping their choices and providing them with the necessary guidance and resources to navigate through this transitional phase of life [5]. In the early 21 century, the internet environment plays a crucial role in influencing their development [6]. Emerging adults are using internet more frequently than people in other age groups. One survey conducted by Statistics and Informatics in 2012, demonstrated that the young population aged 19 to 24 years has the highest rate of Internet use, accounting for 67.2% among different population groups [6]. Arnett, et al. announced that emerging adults are living in the digital realm [7]. Indeed, emerging adults often express themselves and engage with others through various social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and Second Life. These platforms provide them with opportunities to connect, share their experiences, and seek information on a wide range of topics, including health [8].

During their formative years, individuals are exposed to diverse perspectives, cultures, and ideas through online interactions platform, which can influence their beliefs, values, and overall worldview.

Social media platforms and online advertisements often showcase idealized and glamorous lifestyles, including luxury possessions, exotic vacations, and extravagant experiences. When young people constantly see these images, it can create a sense of aspiration and desire to attain similar levels of wealth and material possessions [9]. According to Viner, increased usage of social media in online platforms were associated with negative levels of emotion. Zegarra and Cuba showed that there is a relationship between self-esteem and degree of internet use in emerging adults. Bijstra et al. note that low self-esteem is critical in leading to frequent use of internet [10].

Kim et. al. [11] pointed out that the new generation of young people is easily misled by the prevailing consumerism and superficial prosperity in society. They blindly worship fashion and exhibit new consumption phenomena, such as excessive consumption, luxury consumption, and indulgent consumption. The purpose of consumption has shifted from meeting basic needs to conveying certain personal messages to society and the audience. The study also found that young American women are particularly inclined to invest in luxurious purchases to display costly-signalling consumptive status. According to Giovannini et al. [12], the display of conspicuous consumption is also evident among college students, who pursue designer brands and fashion. Some do it to showcase their unique taste, while others flaunt their wealth, insisting on buying only expensive, branded, and trendy items. They use consumer symbols to boast about their identity, status, and economic power, aiming to evoke envy, respect, and jealousy from others, and to gain admiration and satisfy their own vanity and sense of honour.

### 1.3. Social comparison and self-esteem

The social comparison theory suggests that individuals evaluate themselves by comparing their own attributes, abilities, and achievements with those of other people [13]. According to Festinger, self-evaluations are easily influenced by the choice of comparison targets. This is known as downward social comparison when people tend to compare themselves to those who perform slightly worse in a certain aspect. When people compare themselves to those who perform worse, they feel more valuable and the self-esteem increases. However, people compare themselves to those who are more capable or popular, known as upward social comparison. The result of such comparisons is usually a blow to the self-esteem [14].

The impact of social comparison on individual well-being is crucial for comprehending human behavior within any social context [15]. During emerging adulthood, individuals undergo a process of value formation, influenced by their experiences and interactions with the world around them. This period is characterized by self-discovery, questioning of traditional norms, and the development of personal beliefs. The educational and social environments provide opportunities for emerging adults to explore different perspectives, challenge existing beliefs, and shape their own values. However, the influence of media, including social media, can also impact their value formation process [16]. The rise of social media platforms has revolutionized the way emerging adults interact and perceive themselves and others. Online platforms often showcase curated versions of individuals' lives, emphasizing material possessions, luxurious lifestyles, and achievements [17]. Most people cannot easily ignore the statistical results reported by the media or societal role models. When ones are forced to compare themselves to these external standards, their self-evaluation decreases, and their self-esteem diminishes. The culture of flaunting wealth and success can trigger social comparison among emerging adults, leading to feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. The constant exposure to others' seemingly perfect lives can create unrealistic expectations and contribute to a sense of inferiority. The perception of yourself becomes more negative when you see your friends showing off on social media. From another contrary view, whenever upward social comparison occurs, some feel a strong desire to do something to narrow the gap between themselves and the comparison target, in order to restore their self-esteem to its previous level.

Additionally, the prevalence of online platforms and the culture of flaunting success can lead to social comparison and fluctuations in self-esteem among emerging adults. It is crucial to promote a supportive environment that encourages individuality, self-acceptance, and critical thinking to help emerging adults navigate these challenges and develop a strong sense of self [16].

#### 1.4. Literature review

Shaw et al. conducted a study to test the hypothesis that Internet usage can have a beneficial effect on users, which found that internet use significantly increased self-esteem [18]. Mehdizadeh study investigate the most widespread social platform, a new method of self-presentation by collecting personality self-reports from 100 users [19], where most individuals of global internet users participate in sharing information, tastes, feelings, and experiences according to García-Domingo et. al. [20]. Cha et. al. present evidence that on social networking platforms, social comparison activities are developing into three different patterns, like lateral comparison, downward comparison, and upward comparison [21]. What's more, social media users tend to engage in upward social comparisons with individuals who excel in various aspects, rather than seeking happiness from those who are less fortunate in life [22].

Conversely, in a world profoundly impacted by the ubiquity of social media, it is imperative to scrutinize the impact of exposure to social media-based social comparison on user's negative emotions on social media platforms. In the study conducted by Anixiadis et al. in 2019, researchers observed that when thin-idealized images of users' bodies were posted on social media platforms, there were noticeable effects on individuals' state mood and body dissatisfaction. As a result of upward body comparison thoughts and a desire to the body depicted, individuals may experience negative mood changes [23]. Rüther et al. examined the effects of positivity-biased images of female social media influencers on the state self-esteem of female participants. The results of regression analyses revealed that when exposed to these images, participants engaged in upward social comparisons, which subsequently predicted lower levels of state self-esteem [24].

Increasing of social media usage is closely linked to an individual's mental well-being, especially increasing negative mood. Boers et. al. uses an annual study to test significant relationships between screen time, self-esteem, and social media throughout 4 years. The results indicate that more screen time is linked to upward social comparison, and the interaction between between-person and within-person associations regarding social media and self-esteem supports the concept of reinforcing spirals [25]. Yang et. al. provides the underlying mechanisms for the relationship between social media use and social anxiety through the questionnaire with 470 undergraduates as participants. The results showed that social media use intensity has positive relation with social anxiety. In Study 1, social media use leads to upward social comparison, which in turn contributes to social anxiety, and Social media use leads to upward social comparison, which affects self-esteem, ultimately contributing to social anxiety. In Study 2, a total of 180 participants were divided into two groups: the experimental group and the control group. The experimental group was exposed to content commonly accessed by undergraduates on social media, while the control group was exposed to landscape documentaries. The researchers measured the participants' levels of upward social comparison, self-esteem, and social anxiety. The results indicated that participants in the experimental group reported higher levels of social anxiety compared to those in the control group. This finding demonstrates a causal relationship between social media exposure and social anxiety [26].

In conclusion, these studies offer valuable insights into how emerging adults manage their self-esteem in relation to social media usage and online portrayals of wealth. However, their primary focus lies in examining the impact of self-perception and mental well-being on the use of social media platforms. That is that individuals with higher or lower self-esteem tend to exhibit a stronger association between social media usage and upward social comparison.



## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

Participants were randomly selected from the public, and 95.2% of them are college students. 447 participants completed the survey. This research provided three age ranges, namely less than 18 years old, 18-26 years old, and older than 26 years old. Since this study is conducted on emerging adults, the research chose to use the 314 participants (118 male, 196 female) aged 18-26 years.

### 2.2. Measures

The Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale is a widely used instrument for evaluating individual self-esteem. It is an 8-items scale that measures both positive and negative feelings about oneself. All items are answered using a 5-point Likert scale format ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. For the four positive questions, give “Strongly Disagree” 1 point, “Disagree” 2 points, “Neither agree or disagree” 3 points, “Agree” 4 points, and “Strongly Agree” 5 points. For the four negative questions, the scores were reversed. Sum all scores up for 8 items. Higher score means higher self-esteem. The research also measured the mean and standard deviation for the self-esteem score.

The frequency of flaunting wealth content is measured by a multiple-choice question with four options, which are almost not, rarely, sometimes, and often. These four options match the scale from 1 to 4 (almost not is 1, often is 4) for future analyze.

Basic information such as age, gender and job are also measured in the questionnaire.

### 2.3. Procedure

Participants were assured of complete confidentiality at the outset of this questionnaire and no personal information would be recorded or disclosed. The study was presented as an online questionnaire via WeChat. First, participants provided sociodemographic data and basic questions about the frequency of network use and social comparison. Next, they completed the measures of Rosenberg self-esteem scale.

### 2.4. Analyses

The research used Pearson Correlation to analyze two variables, the frequency of viewing content showing off wealth on internet and the self-esteem score.

$$r = \frac{\sum(x_i - \bar{x})(y_i - \bar{y})}{\sqrt{\sum(x_i - \bar{x})^2 \sum(y_i - \bar{y})^2}} \quad (1)$$

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Correlation

The research investigated the correlation between frequency of viewing content showing off wealth on internet and the self-esteem score and found a weak negative linear relationship exists between the two variables ( $r = -.03$ ). The value of  $-0.03$  is very close to 0, which suggests that there is almost no linear correlation between the two variables. In practical terms, changes in one variable do not reliably predict changes in the other.

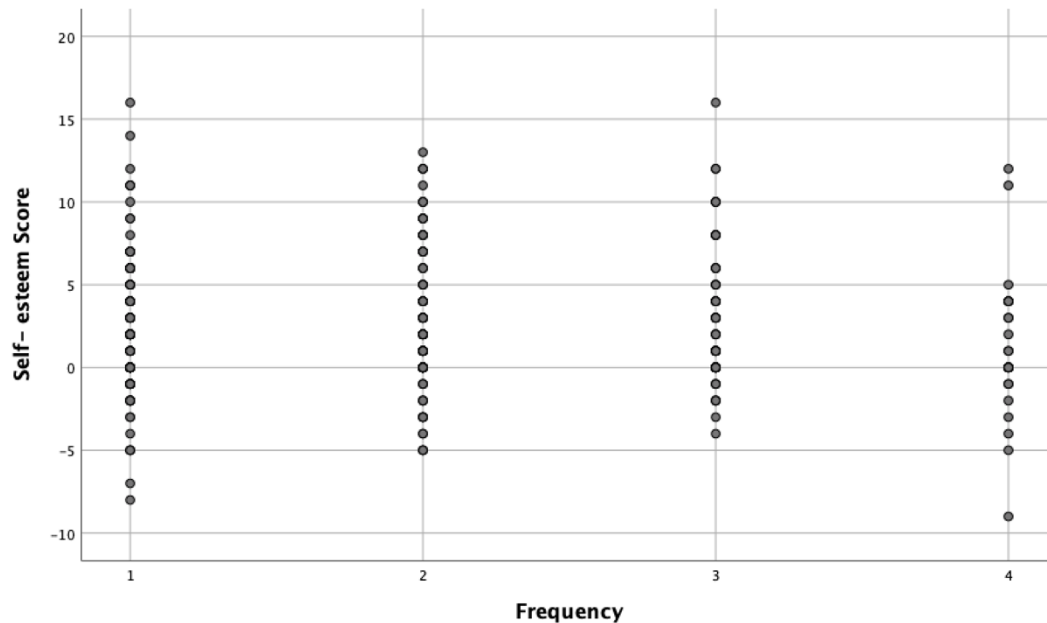


Figure 1: Interaction between Frequency of wealthy content viewed and self-esteem score.

Table 1: Pearson Correlation between Frequency of wealthy content viewed and self-esteem score.

Correlations			
		Self-esteem Score	Frequency
Self-esteem Score	Pearson Correlation	1	-.030
	Sig.(2-tailed)		.596
	N	314	314
Frequency	Pearson Correlation	-.030	1
	Sig.(2-tailed)	.596	
	N	314	314

### 3.2. Mean and Standard Deviation

The research analyze the mean and standard deviation for the self-esteem score and got a mean of 2.37 and a standard deviation of 4.102. The standard deviation of 4.102 is relatively high compared to the mean of 2.37, suggesting that there is considerable spread or variability around the average self-esteem score 2.37 which is not significantly high or low.

## 4. Discussion

The study tried to find a connection between how young adults come across displays of wealth on the internet and their self-esteem. Surprisingly contrary to what was expected based on Social Comparison Theory there was a weak correlation ( $r = -0.03$ ) found between the frequency of encountering flaunted wealth online and self-esteem. This result shows that the impact of flaunting wealth content is not as straightforward as previously believed on young individuals' self-esteem.

There might be complex reasons since the research received this slightly negative correlation. For instance, it is possible that some other factors affect the correlation, such as an individuals' resilience or their ability to critically assess online content. These factors might cause further thinking for emerging adults against the effects of comparing themselves to others who display wealth on the

internet. Furthermore, the weak correlation may reflect how younger generations interpret the displays of wealth on social media. This generation might be skeptical regarding the authenticity of the online wealth content. Also, when evaluating themselves, they may prioritize different aspects such as skills and personal achievements rather than material possessions.

People might question the previous idea of how wealth content impacts self-esteem since the study got this result. Moreover, the result shows that the research may need to do further studies on the impact of social media. If the connection is not as strong as previously believed, people might need to consider focusing on something else, such as emphasize the development of critical-thinking skills in individuals, especially in emerging adults.

It would be beneficial to explore factors that could influence the connection between flaunting social media wealth and self-esteem. This could involve research tracking changes over time or qualitative studies providing deeper insights, into individual experiences. Through investigations, the research may uncover how young adults handle and respond to online displays of wealth as well as how these behaviors affect their self-esteem. While this study indicates that there may be an influence of showcasing wealth online on the self-esteem of young adults it opens avenues for further exploration of the complex factors at play. Moreover, it urges us to reconsider interventions that aim to support the healthy development of self-perception among young people in the digital age. Of solely focusing on shielding young adults from the impact of social media emphasizing the cultivation of media literacy skills and nurturing a strong sense of self identity could prove more advantageous. By embracing these approaches young individuals can adeptly navigate the challenges presented by media and maintain a positive self-image in a society where the boundaries, between reality and online presence are increasingly blurred.

## 5. Limitation and Future Directions

This paper has numerous limits, providing opportunities for further investigations. First, the generalizability of the survey's results is limited by the sample. The research focuses on Chinese emerging adults between the ages of 18-26. This limitation on population and age might lead to bias in the findings. Self-esteem can fluctuate across the lifespan and ethnic groups [27], so results of Chinese emerging adults might not apply to older or younger individuals with cultural differences. Aligning with the difference in social media platforms, the result might not apply to people living in Western countries, which would harm the generalizability of the study. So, future researchers should research other countries and generations to examine the generalizability of the result.

Second, using a survey to assess the participants' self-esteem can introduce response bias. Participants may exaggerate or hide their true self-esteem due to various factors. For example, people with low self-esteem may report a higher score, or people with high self-esteem may report a lower value to present themselves in a generally favorable range. Furthermore, different people may have different portrayals and perceptions of self-esteem. A person with individual variations in their concept of self-esteem may not provide data that aligns with the research's intended measurement. These subjectivities can affect the validity of findings. Future researchers can include a more diverse measure of self-esteem and compare the results to reduce the impact of response bias.

Third, the third variable problem could confound the results because the research focuses solely on the correlation between social media usage frequency and self-esteem. For instance, personality traits like neuroticism and openness can influence social media users' responses to internet content. People with the same frequency of exposure but different personalities could result in different levels of self-esteem. Failing to control for these variables might lead to erroneous conclusions about the impact of social media. Due to these factors, the result may need to include essential factors that could alter the result. Future researchers can control confounders like personality traits and genders to provide a more accurate depiction.



Finally, the study only captures data at a single point due to the time limitation. So, it only provides a snapshot of the relationship between social media usage and self-esteem. However, people's perception of upward social comparison and self-esteem is flexible. So, people's recent experience would change both measures and affect the results. For instance, if a person has just browsed content related to showing off wealth, he may give a higher rating in the survey about the frequency and lower self-esteem. As a result, it would report a false correlation between self-esteem and upward social comparison, which would further affect the results of the study. To eliminate such factors, future researchers could adopt a longitudinal design that tracks the same individuals over time. This approach can explore the changes in social media usage and the fluctuation of self-esteem within individuals and provide a more solid result.

## 6. Conclusion

The research explored the relationship between exposure to wealth-flaunting content on social media and self-esteem among Chinese youth aged 18-26. The findings suggest a weak negative correlation between the frequency of viewing wealth-displaying content on social media and the level of self-esteem among Chinese youth. This challenges the traditional view under Social Comparison Theory that increased exposure to such content significantly impacts self-esteem negatively. While the results indicate that the impact of online wealth flaunting on self-esteem is not as pronounced as previously thought, it does not negate the potential psychological implications. Factors such as individual resilience, critical media literacy, and prioritizing personal achievements over material wealth may mediate this relationship. It is important to acknowledge that this generation might view and interpret social media content differently, potentially being more skeptical of the authenticity of online wealth displays. The limitations of the research, including its reliance on a specific demographic group and self-reported measures, highlight the necessity for further research. Future studies should aim to expand the demographic scope, incorporate longitudinal designs, and control for additional variables such as personality traits and stimuli, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of these dynamics. In conclusion, the study contributes to the ongoing discourse on the impact of social media on emerging adults' psychology. It underscores the necessity for educational interventions focusing on the development of values and perspectives on money among emerging adults, with an emphasis on developing critical thinking and media literacy skills. These skills are crucial in helping emerging adults navigate the complex social media environment, discern misinformation, and maintain a healthy self-perception in an increasingly digital world.

## Authors' Contributions

DZ, YQ, YW and KL: conceptualization, visualization and project administration. DZ: investigation, writing-original draft preparation, review, editing and supervision. YQ: writing-introduction, Internet Exposure (Conspicuous online contents) and conclusion. YW: methodology and writing-discussion. KL: writing-limitation and further directions. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Dingding Zhou, Yuelin Qiu, and Yahe Wu contributed equally to this work and should be considered co-first authors.

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