Causes of and Intervention Strategies for Chinese College Students＇ "Slow Employment": A Study in Grounded Theory

Ying Zhan[1*], Yuting Ren[1]，Junfei Xu[2]

1 Department of Business Administration, Wuhan Business University, Wuhan, 430056, China
2 College of Weaponry Engineering, Naval University of Engineering, Wuhan, 430030, China
Corresponding Author*: Ying Zhan　　E-mail: 20150381@wbu.edu.cn

ABSTRACT

The competition for college graduates entering the job market is becoming sharper and sharper, so "slow employment" has become a hot topic. This study focuses on the causes and coping strategies behind the slow employment of Chinese college students. We recruited 13 undergraduate college counselors in Wuhan, China, as respondents. With the help of a methodology based on grounded theory, we analyzed up to seven respondents to reach saturation and extracted twenty-four concepts, seven subcategories, and two main categories. The results show that slow employment is influenced by multiple factors — personal, family, social, and group factors, with family and group factors indirectly contributing to the tendency to slow employment by shaping individual employment perceptions. Through early intervention, employment assistance, and ideological guidance, we can help college students increase their rates of successfully finding a satisfactory job, thus solving the problem of slow employment.

1. Introduction

In recent years, with the deepening evolution of the global economic landscape and the continued expansion of the education system, the problem of post-graduation employment for college students has gradually become a central issue of global concern. This problem is particularly significant in China. As the number of college graduates continues to grow, the record of "the most difficult employment season in history" is frequently broken. Although the current national policy has alleviated the employment pressure to a certain extent, college graduates are still facing an environment of intense competition for employment. Meanwhile, under the influence of diversified career concepts and an open and tolerant social atmosphere, some graduates choose to take off work to prepare for exams and delay employment, forming the increasingly significant phenomenon of

"slow employment", which has triggered extensive discussion and concern in all walks of life.

Looking at the international academic landscape outside of China, direct research on the topic of slow employment is particularly scarce, with only two studies available. Wang and Li provide insights into how employment values shape college students' willingness to choose slow employment and reveal the moderating roles of employment anxiety and social support in this psychological mechanism; they provide valuable perspectives for understanding college students' employment psychology and behaviors and lead the way for related parties to formulate strategies to reduce the phenomenon of slow employment and promote full employment (Wang & Li, 2022). On the other hand, the study by Wei et al. accurately analyzes and predicts the employment prospects of graduates through cutting-edge data mining and machine learning techniques, which not only enhance the relevance and effectiveness of employment guidance but also provide a technology-driven solution to alleviate the problem of slow employment (Wei et al.,2023).

In the current field of research, there are many shortcomings in the understanding of the phenomenon of slow employment. Firstly, the term "slow employment" itself has a vague meaning and lacks a universally recognized and clear definition, which limits the possibility of in-depth research on this phenomenon. Secondly, existing studies have not yet been able to fully analyze the multiple factors behind the phenomenon of slow employment, including its psychological, sociocultural, and economic aspects. In addition, specific interventions to address the problem of slow employment need to be further explored and improved.

To fill these research gaps, this study adopts qualitative research methods, such as grounded theory and semi-structured interviews, to analyze and redefine the phenomenon of slow employment in depth. This study aims to comprehensively reveal the causes of the tendency of slow employment and, on this basis, propose practical interventions and suggestions. This research process not only deepens our understanding of the phenomenon of slow employment but also brings more scientific and effective employment guidance and support to college students and helps them achieve higher-quality employment.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Studies on the meaning of slow employment

Internationally, there is no precise concept of slow employment, but there are similar concepts, such as the NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), which describes young people who have not been involved in education, employment, or training for a long time (Ripamonti, 2023). A gap year, on the other hand, is a practice that is prevalent internationally where young people choose a period to spend on personal growth and exploration, followed by career planning, after completing their education (Martin, 2010). The Hikikomori phenomenon in Japan is even more extreme; it refers to a group of young people who stay in their homes for long periods and are virtually cut off from socializing (Nonaka, Takeda, & Sakai,2022; Uchida & Norasakkunkit, 2015).

Compared with similar international concepts, the phenomenon of slow employment in China has both commonalities and unique differences in its manifestations. The phenomenon gradually entered the public eye after 2015, and no uniform definition has yet been formed. Scholars have elaborated on it from different perspectives; for example, Song et al. suggest that slow employment is a kind of adjustment period before young people enter the workplace after completing higher

education (Jian, Bo, & Binhui, 2021). Cao and Zhu specifically pointed out that slow employment is the state of college graduates who have not been employed after August 31 of their graduation year and refined it into two types: positive and negative (Shan & Ming, 2023). Positive slow employment is based on career planning, further study or entrepreneurship, and other positive considerations, in addition to actively choosing not to be employed, while negative slow employment is mostly due to ambiguous career planning, huge employment pressure, and a lack of confidence in the job market, resulting in students being in a passive state of waiting or avoiding employment (Shugen, 2017).

Given that university graduation in China is generally concentrated at the end of June each year, the phenomenon of slow employment, as defined in this study, refers to the fact that university graduates, based on a variety of personal considerations (either out of active planning or passive response), have chosen to move their search for a formal and relatively stable career position backward. That is, after June 30 of the year of their graduation, university graduates have not yet formally entered the job market and instead enter unstable working conditions.

2.2 Studies on the causes of slow employment

The causes of phenomena such as slow employment are the results of the complex intertwining of multiple dimensions. Hao et al. surveyed college students and graduates in Southwest China and found that competence, job-seeking confidence, and attitudes on the individual level, one-child status, consumption level, and economic dependence on the family level, and the quality of school employment services and the availability of loans on the societal level all significantly increased students' susceptibility to becoming a NEET (Zhao, Li, Yu, & Zhang, 2024). Through the improved decision tree classification method and ant colony algorithm, it was found that ant-colony-based association rule mining had a better reference value, and the analysis revealed four factors affecting college students' willingness to become a NEET, i.e., the individual, family, school, and society (Zhang, 2023).

Personal factors play an important role in the phenomenon of slow employment. This study was conducted with the help of Nvivo12 qualitative analysis software and the use of grounded theory, a methodology that involves constructing and developing theories by systematically summarizing and analyzing empirical data. Based on this methodology, an in-depth analysis of the slow employment of recent graduates was conducted. It was concluded that the high expectations of college graduates for the work environment and salary are important reasons for why some graduates choose slow employment (Yujie, Kunhua, & Guohua, 2023). In addition, research in Singapore also found that NEET tendencies are closely related to individual self-esteem, perceived competence, anxiety and depression, and other psychological states, and these psychological factors further affect young people's decisions related to employment (Liew, K. M., Uchida, Dela Cruz, & Lee, 2021). A proactive personality and career adaptability in college students help them find satisfactory jobs quickly; on the contrary, they may also cause them to fall into a slow employment state (Ling, Teng, Liu, Wu, & Gu, 2022). Extensive participation in extracurricular activities can significantly enhance college students' career competitiveness and employment confidence. This not only demonstrates students' skills but also promotes the accumulation of career knowledge and the diversification of job search strategies, which enhances students' employment self-efficacy and becomes an important aid for success in the job search (Kanar & Bouckenooghe, 2021; Ansala & Uusiautti, 2017).

Family factors should not be ignored. With the increase in middle-class families in China, college graduates do not have to rush to work to support their families, and this improvement in family economic conditions provides a certain economic basis for the phenomenon of slow employment (Liming & Binghui, 2019). At the same time, family background variables such as parents' income, education, and work status significantly impact NEET youths. This indicates the key position of family factors in youths' employment decision making (Rahmani & Groot, 2023). In particular, a general increase in the educational attainment of both parents significantly reduces the risk of their adolescents and young adults becoming NEET individuals. This suggests that a good educational background not only contributes to parents' development but also provides more favorable conditions for their children to grow up through the positive influence of the family environment, thus reducing their risk of being marginalized in society in the future (Yigit, Çakmak, & Çakmak, 2023). In terms of career choices, college students consider the opinions of their parents and relatives, and these suggestions can indirectly shape their employment and entrepreneurial tendencies, as parental support and recognition are crucial to young people's career exploration (Chen, Zhang, Zhao, Deng, & Su, 2021).

At the social level, the imperfections of the labor market and the lagging education system are backgrounds to the phenomenon of slow employment that cannot be ignored. Social factors, such as the quality of employment services provided by schools and the availability of social loans, are directly related to graduates' employment options and speed. At the same time, the degree of competition in the job market and the diversity of employment opportunities profoundly influence the employment status of youths, as verified in studies in Turkey (Sahin *et al.,* 2023; Davis & Kimball, 2015). College students' employment expectations are often affected by multiple factors, such as the general values of society, the employment market conditions, and the orientation of the education system. Society's definition of success is often biased towards high-salary and high-status occupations, and this social atmosphere invariably raises graduates' employment expectations, making them pursue the rapid realization of self-worth and the fulfillment of high-level needs in the process of job searching. At the same time, the imperfections of the job market, such as information asymmetry and uneven opportunities, may also aggravate graduates' employment anxiety, prompting them to take on a wait-and-see attitude and forming the phenomenon of slow employment (Xiaoming & dan, 2019).

Group factors are also of great value in schools, as the main place where college students study and live. This study shows that group factors, especially positive peer employment behaviors, have a significant and robust positive effect on college students' employment intentions. Further analysis reveals that the effective provision and dissemination of employment information by schools significantly enhances this peer effect, thus strengthening the role of group factors in shaping college students' employment intentions (Wu, Zhong, & Zeng, 2023). Students in different majors also need to pay attention to career planning. Zhao pointed out that during the period of vocational art students' schooling, they should plan their careers prospectively, not only focusing on employment positions but also utilizing diversified employment platforms as stages of self-presentation and growth, constantly honing their skills, accumulating experience, and realizing self-improvement. They should reasonably set career goals with the support of schools, society, and other aspects, actively deal with psychological barriers in the employment process, adjust their mindsets, and face employment pressure with a more positive and confident attitude to stand out in the fierce competition and achieve high-quality employment (Zhao, 2023).

2.3 Studies on governance strategies related to slow employment

Due to the prevalence of slow employment among college students, several scholars have conducted in-depth discussions from different perspectives and put forward comprehensive governance strategies. For the group of individuals facing slow employment caused by negative factors, we should help them clarify their career directions and enhance their employment competitiveness through value guidance and vocational ability enhancement, while for the individuals who are actively pursuing slow employment, we should be patient, follow up on their employment progress, and provide necessary support and assistance when appropriate (Sha, 2021). For specific groups, such as "at-risk" adolescent boys who may become NEET individuals, the study by Carmichael-Murphy et al. reminds us that teachers and other meaningful adults play important roles in adolescent development and that they should be encouraged and supported to recognize the importance of personal development and adopt targeted interventions. While youths living in social-democratic welfare states are at a lower risk of becoming NEET individuals, groups of youths with low literacy rates do not fully benefit from the advantages of these states in terms of well-being (Carmichael-Murphy, Demkowicz, & Humphrey, 2022). For this particular group, there is a strong need for more targeted interventions in social policy aimed at actively reaching out and raising public awareness of the negative effects of low literacy. These interventions need to focus not only on the youths themselves but also on directing employers to pay attention to and adapt to the specific needs of this group (van Vugt, Levels, & van der Velden, 2024). More importantly, youths with early mental health and behavioral problems are at a higher risk for school-to-work transition barriers and more serious adverse health outcomes. Early intervention is, therefore, critical to prevent adolescents from becoming NEET individuals in early adulthood, and through timely and effective interventions, we can lay a solid foundation for adolescents' holistic development and social integration (Rodwell et al.,2018; Chandler & Lozada, 2021).

A study by Alfieri et al. reveals the importance of family involvement and targeted interventions in solving the NEET phenomenon due to the family background (Alfieri, Sironi, Marta, Rosina, & Marzana, 2015), which is in line with Jiang Liping's view on the synergistic effect of universities and families, as they jointly build a support network to provide both familial and social protection to solve the problem of slow employment (Liping, 2020). From an international perspective, Saito analyzes the differentiated strategies of universities in various countries in dealing with students' employment, such as Australia's "maximizing potential" model, which emphasizes the transfer of technical knowledge, and Japan's "maximizing results" model, which focuses on the use of academic resources. The differences in the strategies were further emphasized, demonstrating universities' responsibility to flexibly adjust their professional settings to meet market demands. At the same time, all sectors of society should work together to broaden employment channels and pave diversified career paths for college students (Saito & Pham, 2021). As the core coordinator, the government plays a crucial role in promoting college students' employment. Zhang et al. pointed out that, in response to college students' common concerns about salary, city development potential, and finding a professional match, the government should take effective measures, such as adjusting employment concepts, enhancing the attractiveness of non-provincial capital cities, and optimizing professional settings, to further broaden college students' paths to employment (Zhang, Tian, & Sohail, 2022). These initiatives are aimed at guiding college students to establish a correct concept of employment, encouraging them to be courageous in exploration, active employment, and contributing to the sustainable development of society.

With the rapid development of science and technology, advanced technology is changing the

face of career management and ideological and political education. Career and continuous vocational guidance during university years is crucial for students' personal development. To improve students' employability, higher education institutions have adopted a variety of innovative measures, which include not only a large number of practical courses but also the introduction of various systematic assessment and monitoring mechanisms to ensure that student's needs and career paths are accurately identified and met, thus promoting their healthy development (Wang et al.,2022). In a recent study by Shi, deep learning and big data analytics were taken to a new level, showing great potential in constructing a personalized analysis of employment needs and providing accurate career guidance. These advances not only improve employment efficiency but also significantly enhance graduates' employment satisfaction, thus fundamentally changing the traditional employment service model (Shi, 2023). Meanwhile, Shen proposed a prediction model based on big data technology to provide graduates with a clear view of the job market. This innovation not only helps students to quickly understand market trends but also provides them with personalized employment guidance so that they can succeed in the competitive job market and achieve both personal value and career development (Shen, 2023). Through these innovations, we can see that technological advances are providing unprecedented support and career development opportunities for college students.

3. Methods

3.1 Study Design

This study introduces grounded theory as a qualitative research methodology to study the factors of slow employment tendencies among Chinese college students and the means of intervention therein. Qualitative research is characterized by its focus on the research process and specific scenarios, which is in line with the essence of education research, which entails discovering laws and revealing phenomena via the processes of specific educational practices and exploring future development trends. Through the grounded theory approach, Cohen and Johnson reveal that career counselors help students build equitable social capital by sharing their college experiences, building emotional empathy with students, providing personalized career guidance, and actively building a network of campus connections (Cohen & Johnson, 2022). In addition, Thompson et al. provided insights into the far-reaching effects of alternative unemployment experiences on the family and personal psychology of 17 undergraduate students through grounded theory. They found that, while unemployment brought financial stress to families and personal psychological struggles, the participants enhanced their knowledge of the economic and job markets through reflection after experiencing unemployment and had new expectations for their future lives. This study points to the direction for future research exploring the long-term effects of unemployment on individuals and families (Thompson, Nitzarim, Her, & Dahling, 2013). In this study, it is through grounded theory that we analyze the complexity and diversity of the slow employment tendencies of college students in detail, as we intend to propose more precise and effective intervention strategies to promote the successful employment of college students.

In this study, we chose programmed grounded theory as the research path. Programmed grounded theory follows clear steps to systematically collect data, code analyses, and construct theories to ensure that the research process is scientific and standardized. This is because we clarified the slow employment tendencies of college students as a research problem and would like to explore this phenomenon in depth through a systematic approach and standardized steps. The

clear steps and systematic approach of programmed grounded theory can ensure that our research process is more standardized and reliable and allows for easy subsequent analysis and validation. In addition, programmed grounded theory is suitable for researchers who already have a certain understanding of the research problem and can help us better understand and analyze the deep-rooted causes and influencing factors of college students' slow employment tendencies. Therefore, we believe that programmed grounded theory is the most appropriate methodological choice for this study.

3.2 Participants

This study was conducted in Wuhan. Compared with other cities in the country, this city is rich in educational resources and has strong credentials, with a total of 83 general institutions of higher education and a total of 1.23 million college students in 2023, ranking third in the country. In China, counselors are the organizers, implementers, and guides of the daily ideological education and management of college students (Mingyu, 2022; Hemi & Maor, 2023), accompanying college students throughout their college years, and they comprise the most vocal group in the college workforce on issues related to students' slow employment (Cuiping, 2021; Li & Yinghong, 2016). Therefore, recruiting counselors from undergraduate colleges and universities in the city was reasonable in this context.

Participants were selected based on an intentional sampling technique to select counselors at the school. All participants were recruited regardless of gender, age, and education to achieve diversity in the sample. The inclusion criteria for eligible respondents were (a) ≥5 years of working with students, (b) experience working with students with slow employment tendencies, and (c) the ability to communicate in and understand Chinese.

A total of 13 counselors were identified, all of whom have extensive experience in career guidance. Female counselors were in the majority, with a total of 8 compared to 5 male counselors. This gender ratio reflects the inherent strengths of female counselors in the highly interactive and communicative nature of the counseling role. In terms of academic qualifications, there were 8 individuals with Master's degrees and 5 PhDs, reflecting the high importance that universities place on the professionalism of their counselor teams. This detailed information on gender and academic qualifications was collected at the early stage of the interviews, laying a solid foundation for the smooth implementation of the follow-up work. The confidentiality and anonymity of all the participants were maintained at all times, and the 13 participants were identified with letters A through M. Specific information is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Statistical information of the participants

Number	Age	Gender	Major	Academic Qualifications	Working Years
A	32	Female	Theory of Marxism	Master's degree	7
B	35	Female	Sport Science	Master's degree	10
C	36	Female	Management Science and Engineering	Master's degree	5
D	35	Female	Financial Management	Master's degree	6
E	37	Male	Sport Science	Master's degree	12

F	36	Female	Theory of Marxism	Master's degree	7
G	45	Male	Electronic Commerce	Doctoral degree	17
H	32	Male	Food Science	Master's degree	6
I	34	Female	Financial Management	Master's degree	9
J	33	Male	History	Doctoral degree	5
K	39	Female	Logistics Management	Doctoral degree	8
L	39	Female	Information Science	Doctoral degree	11
M	41	Male	Law	Doctoral degree	10

3.3 Data Collection

Interviews were conducted between March and May 2024, with the purpose of the study and the importance of the respondents' participation being explained at the first meeting; with the informed consent of the respondents, a form was sent to arrange the times and places of the interviews. The interviews were designed using a semi-structured method of outlining, which was designed to guide the interviewees' responses to the research questions and reduce irrelevant interview content. The main elements are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Outline of the interview

Number	Questions
1	Information of the Participants
2	Conceptual Perceptions of Students in Slow Employment
3	Examples of Slow Employment for Students
4	Factors Affecting Students' Career Choices (Expand)
5	Classification of Students in Slow Employment
6	Dimensions and Effects of Interventions
7	Perceptions and Attitudes Towards Interventions

The interviews were mainly face to face and lasted between 0.5 and 1 hours. With the consent of the interviewees, the whole interview was recorded in order to further organize the interview data. The researcher expanded the interview content appropriately according to the interviewer's understanding of the content of the interview, the degree of concern, and the depth of thinking so that the interview was more comprehensive according to the requirements. After the interview, the information from the interview was comprehensively sorted out as the basis for the next step of the coding process. After collecting the required research data through interviews, the researchers sorted and coded the interview data according to the methodological steps and procedures of grounded theory.

3.4 Data Analysis

The entire data analysis process was implemented according to three stages: open coding, spindle coding, and selective coding. In the first stage, the researcher performed word-by-word labeling for the content in the data to ensure that every detail was accurately captured and tagged. Next, similar concepts were clustered to identify the intrinsic connections and commonalities between these concepts through comparison and analysis. Eventually, higher-level categories were refined, which were further abstractions and generalizations of the previous concepts and could reflect the overall structure and characteristics of the research object. The whole coding process is

an iterative, step-by-step deepening process that requires multiple analyses and comparisons to ensure that the conclusions are accurate and comprehensive. This process mainly includes three major parts, namely, labeling, defining concepts, and summarizing categories, and each step is indispensable; together, they constitute a complete system of open coding.

Labeling

The statements in the interview material that were relevant to the subject and had a clear point of view were selected for labeling. The material collected from each interview was carefully analyzed and labeled, expressed as "aaxx", "bbxx", etc. The labeled content was identified as the smallest unit of analysis. The labeled content was defined, for example, "aa01 plan". Based on the above method, this study microanalyzed the content of Counselor A's conversation.

Defining concepts

After defining the labeled content, further concepts were extracted. The process of conceptualization involved repeatedly refining, comparing, and summarizing the content of the interview with Respondent A, which is represented by "axx", e.g., "a01 goal location".

Summarizing Categories

After summarizing the "concepts" using the labeling method, the corresponding concepts were further summarized and refined into categories, and named to form the category content. The interview data of Interviewee A were repeatedly sorted and are expressed by "AAxx+category name", for example, "AA01 personal factor".

According to the content collated and sorted out by Interviewee A as the initial sample, the same method was used to further carry out the analysis of the other respondents, and the results mined from Interviewee A were further enriched, improved, and optimized through the data sorted out by different respondents until no more new categories appeared and content saturation was achieved. After continuous comparison and analysis, open coding was saturated after completing Interviewee G. A total of 24 concepts and seven subcategories were obtained, and the seven subcategories were categorized into two main categories, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Encoding results

Main Category	Subcategory	Concept
contributing factors	personal factors	goal location
		professional ability
		employment intention
		career awareness
		employment expectation
		pressure resistance
		practical experience
	family factors	family environment
		family values
		family resources
	group factors	major
		community influence

	social factors	employment of others
		epidemic situation
		social environment
		economic situation
		fierce competition in industry
	employment assistance	career planning
		school–enterprise cooperation
		student portraits
intervention methods		home–school linkage
	thought leadership	student thought leadership
		parental thought leadership
	intervention phase	early intervention

3.5 Credibility Checks

In order to assess the credibility of the data, after confirming that the seventh respondent's coding had reached saturation, the researcher coded and analyzed the text of the interviews of two more respondents, which showed that saturation was indeed reached and that no new codes were generated.

4. Results

Among the factors of slow employment tendencies in the main categories extracted in this study, personal, family, social, and group factors play important roles. Specifically, family and group factors act as indirect drivers influencing personal factors and thus slow employment tendency. In contrast, personal factors and social factors play a direct role in slow employment tendency. Among the intervention methods and approaches, employment assistance, ideological guidance, and the intervention stage are all important links. The researchers produced a model of the factors and intervention methods of slow employment tendencies (Figure 1). Each subcategory is described below.
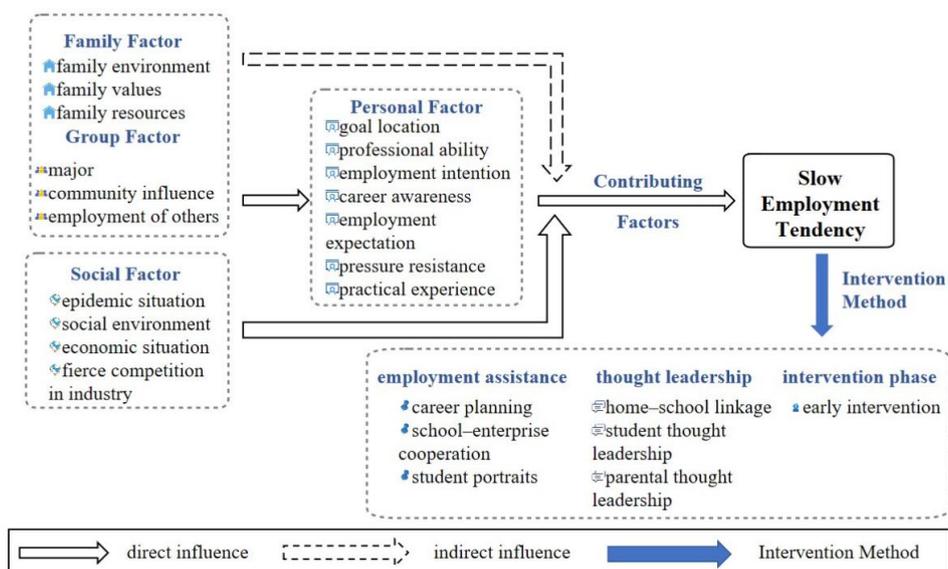

Figure 1: Model of the factors and intervention methods for generating slow employment tendencies

4.1 Personal Factors

Personal factors, such as internal driving forces, profoundly shape students' employment concepts and decision-making processes. Each student's goal location, professional ability, employment intention, career awareness, employment expectation, pressure resistance, and practical experience are all comprehensive reflections of their unique personality and experience, which, together, play a role in the formation of their concept of employment and decision making. These personal factors interact with each other and, together, guide students toward different career paths.

Goal Location

An unclear goal location makes it difficult for college students to quickly find a suitable direction for themselves, wandering between choices such as employment and further study. Clear goals can enable them to find their own directions in life and keep striving for them.

"I think if students have clear employment objectives, develop their abilities in all aspects, and possess excellent qualities, they'll be able to secure employment quickly."(Interviewee A)

"I taught a very goal-oriented student. He told me, when he was a junior in college, that he didn't want to go to graduate school, he wanted to work. So he gained experience through part-time jobs while he was in school." (Interviewee C)

Professional Ability

The level of professional ability is one of the factors affecting the slow employment of college students that cannot be ignored, and if the professional ability of college students fails to meet the expectations of enterprises, they will face difficulties in finding jobs.

"Students with poor personal and professional skills have a fear of employment, cannot find a job and often close themselves off." (Interviewee D)

"Students who are capable and think they can do the job right away will be employed faster. If they don't feel confident in their academic foundation, or they're not clear about the direction of employment, they may not be in a rush to find a job." (Interviewee G)

Employment Intention

Employment intention is an important factor driving employment. If students lack a sense of urgency to find employment, it is difficult for them to take the initiative to seize employment opportunities.

"I don't think the students are gearing up properly. During the first semester of their senior year, they don't have the sense that they'll soon be looking for a job, and they don't feel the urgency of finding employment." (Interviewee B)

"If we recommend jobs, we may have some positive influence on students who are motivated to find employment, but the effect on those who lack a strong will to do so is very limited." (Interviewee F)

Career Awareness

In terms of career choices, students should take into account their personal interests and abilities and market demands to avoid having blind perceptions of certain careers.

"Students can also access a wide range of information from the Internet. For example, they watch movies and TV shows about certain professions, which leads them to have expectations about the professional characters and think they have a high chance of securing such a job." (Interviewee A)

"Students who study in school often lack contact with social work and have limited knowledge of various professions. Even professions that seem familiar, like teachers or civil servants, are often only understood superficially and not in depth." (Interviewee D)

Employment Expectations

Students should also adjust their employment expectations and face the job market with a pragmatic attitude to avoid failing to achieve anything.

"When students first start their careers, all jobs typically begin at the grass-roots level, which some of them may find somewhat unacceptable." (Interviewee B)

"Students whose grades are not very good do not have high expectations of themselves, so they are willing to get down to the business of employment, and therefore they will have more choices. On the contrary, students with okay grades, who have high expectations of themselves and make repeated choices in the process of choosing a career, are more likely to become slow to find employment." (Interviewee E)

Pressure Resistance

After experiencing setbacks, students should maintain a positive mindset, be resilient, learn from their failures, and continue to improve themselves; they should not fall flat on their faces and give up on themselves.

"I have a student whose grades were actually very good during his school years, but he was repeatedly frustrated in his job search, and he did not hear back from any of the positions he applied for, and he did not expect such an outcome, so he kind of gave up."(Interviewee E)

"Students who are more introverted are afraid of being frustrated and are more likely to be frustrated. This is because active children have many opportunities to experiment during their college years, thus increasing their stress tolerance; while inactive children have few opportunities to experiment, have weak stress tolerance, and eventually form a vicious circle." (Interviewee F)

Practical Experience

College students need to recognize the importance of practical experience and should take the initiative to seek internships and part-time job opportunities during their college years to accumulate practical experience and enhance their competitiveness in employment.

"I have a student who has been working part-time for a major company on weekends and was able to transition seamlessly into a full-time position there upon graduation." (Interviewee B)

"Students who are proactive in job searching and practicing, plus those who have experience working as student leaders, are employed more quickly." (Interviewee D)

4.2 Family Factors

As an important part of students' growing environment, families play an indispensable role in shaping students' career values and decision-making processes. Family environments and concepts shape students' career interests, values, and future expectations; family resources directly influence students' career aspirations and guide them to make appropriate career choices.

Family Environment

The family environment, as the starting point for individual growth, is an important context for students' career preparation and employment decisions.

"The accumulation of family wealth allows these children to slowly find jobs that interest them more." (Interviewee B)

"Parents of students are now a little more educated, so parents expect a little more from their children's education." (Interviewee D)

Family Values

Family values have a potential and far-reaching impact on students' employment values, shaping their individualized views and expectations of employment.

"Nowadays, parents also have the same view that if their children graduate and don't find a job for a while, they can take their time to look for one, not that they have to find a job after graduation." (Interviewee B)

"Parents' values have a great influence on their children. At present, there are many students who choose to take the civil service examination for establishment, largely due to family requirements." (Interviewee G)

Family Resources

Family resources serve as an important source of support for student employment and may include financial assistance, social networks, and work experience, providing students with relevant employment information and practical support.

"I have a student whose family is in business. He used his resources to start his own business when he was enrolled in school, and now he has started several companies." (Interviewee B)

"When the student's parents or relatives operate a family business, the student often joins them directly in management roles." (Interviewee D)

4.3 Group Factors

Majors, community influence, and others' employment situations may also have an impact on students' employment values and decision making. Different majors may have different

employment prospects and market demands, community influence may lead students to adopt a herd mentality or imitation behavior, and others' employment situations may serve as a reference point to influence students' employment decisions.

Major

The major is the starting point of a student's career, and its strength is directly related to the student's job prospects and self-confidence.

"The choice of major also significantly influences student employment prospects, with students specializing in strong, in-demand fields more likely to secure jobs." (Interviewee A)

"There are certain less popular majors where students will be employed as soon as possible, and not many people want to go to graduate school or do research. Highly applied majors, where the specialty is very relevant and then basically meets the demand, in which case the student may be employed as soon as possible." (Interviewee G)

Community Influence

As an important environment for students' daily life and study, the atmosphere and interaction pattern of the community also invariably shape students' concepts of employment.

"There is also a high influence factor between students and they influence each other."(Interviewee A).

"Some students don't know much about the form of employment, and they may spread this more negative view in conversation with other students." (Interviewee E)

Employment of Others

Observing others' employment situations is an important way for students to learn about the job market and often becomes an important reference for students in making employment decisions.

"The employment situation and attitude of their seniors have a great influence on them. For example, I have a lot of students who sell houses, and they would introduce each other, and the underclassmen might think that the industry is more popular and lucrative, so they all go there for employment. This is because a very reliable source they get is the employment situation of their seniors." (Interviewee A)

"If there is a senior who chose slow employment and then through hard work he succeeded. This kind of psychological suggestion is very useful." (Interviewee G)

4.4 Social Factors

Today, the tendency toward slow employment is becoming more and more significant, which is not only the result of personal choice but also a reflection of social change. The pandemic broke the balance of the job market; changes in the social environment have prompted a change in the concept of employment; fluctuations in the economic situation have also affected the stability of employment; competition in industry has become more and more intense, requiring college students to have a higher level of competence. The combined effects of these factors have prompted college

students to plan their employment more rationally, thus promoting the development of the phenomenon of slow employment.

Pandemic Situation

The pandemic had a significant impact on the global economy, with companies frequently laying off employees, which certainly increased the instability of the job market. Against this backdrop, students are beginning to rethink their employment strategies, seeking job opportunities that are more stable and less risky.

"Most students have been affected by the stabilizing winds of the epidemic, with a particularly high number of students taking their second graduate exams." (Interviewee A)

"Especially after the epidemic in the past two years, it is only after unemployment or unsatisfactory employment due to the epidemic or personal mismanagement and other circumstances that students have set their sights on more stable positions or some state-owned enterprises." (Interviewee D)

Social Environment

Changes in the social environment have a direct impact on the ease or difficulty of employment for students, and society's current open and tolerant culture provides students with more choices.

"Students are of the view that taking examinations for the establishment and the civil service are more legitimate reasons for deferring employment. The entire social environment is also much more accommodating than before." (Interviewee A)

"The general social environment makes students feel that they can take up employment later and that they do not have to be in such a hurry, and the overall social climate is now more accommodating." (Interviewee B)

Economic Situation

As the popularization of higher education accelerates, the size of the college student population continues to expand, and the complex and volatile global economic situation has made it more difficult for students to find employment.

"Nowadays, there are an overwhelming number of university graduates graduating each year, while the availability of jobs is declining. Furthermore, the economic situation has been bleak in the past few years. The entire employment landscape and ecology have undergone significant changes, which, in my opinion, marks an important turning point." (Interviewee C)

"Slow employment may be due to an unfavorable economic situation or employment environment." (Interviewee E)

Fierce Competition in the Industry

Fierce competition in the industry has led to increased employment pressure on college students, and this real-life dilemma has prompted many graduates to take a more cautious approach on the road to employment.

"This is because nowadays, many jobs do not necessarily require high academic qualifications, yet there are numerous job-seekers, resulting in intense competition across various trades and industries." (Interviewee C)

"People are more inclined to go for stable positions like careers, but it also makes these positions more competitive." (Interviewee D)

4.5 Employment Assistance

Schools play an indispensable role as the backbone of students' career development. In the face of the challenges posed by the job market, schools need to make full use of their career guidance resources to illuminate the way forward for students. Through measures such as career planning, school-enterprise cooperation, and student portraits, schools can effectively guide college students to plan their employment more rationally, thus moving the slow employment phenomenon in a positive direction.

Career Planning

Universities attach great importance to education on career planning. By taking specialized career planning courses, students can master the basics of career planning and gradually clarify their career goals and locations.

"Career planning is a guidance program that is conducted when students first enter university." (Interviewee E)

"The career guidance curriculum in schools should undergo reform and be made more specific, as much of the content taught is over a decade old. Furthermore, the career planning courses offered should be more specialized in order to offer more professional advice to students." (Interviewee G)

School–Enterprise Cooperation

As a link between students and enterprises, schools need to actively seek new avenues of school–enterprise cooperation so that students can better understand market demand and industry trends.

"We have created a form for the College's unemployed students, filling in their name, student number, contact details and reason for not being employed. This information is subsequently relayed back to the college so that internship advisors can reach out to these students and connect them with relevant companies." (Interviewee A)

"School interventions include on-campus job fairs, as well as the implementation of order classes and school-enterprise cooperation for some minor majors, where a class of students is oriented and transported, which is also a more active form of employment." (Interviewee G)

Student Portraits

Some interviewees suggested that schools could collect and analyze information on students' attitudes towards employment, career planning, and psychological states through daily observation and questionnaires to draw an "employment portrait" of each student.

"We would like to gain an understanding of the characteristics of students who choose slower career paths, and then learn about the impact of various factors on students' career choices. With this information, we hope to conduct a student portrait of each student during their freshman and sophomore years, allowing us to gain insights into their career choice preferences." (Interviewee E)

4.6 Thought Leadership

The role of thought leadership in career guidance should not be underestimated. Home-school linkage can provide in-depth insights into the needs of students and allow the customization of precise employment guidance strategies. The school's ideological guidance for students can help them establish the correct value of employment. Parents have an important influence on their children's growth and can provide strong psychological support and practical help during critical moments.

Home–School Linkage

Home–school cooperation mechanisms not only facilitate communication and enable parents to keep abreast of the school's career guidance policies and resources but also allow the school to gain a more in-depth understanding of the students' home environments and individual needs. Through close collaboration between the two sides, students are provided with more accurate and effective career planning guidance.

"All parties are interconnected in the process of planning students' careers, with guidance and support coming from both schools and parents." (Interviewee A)

Student Thought Leadership

In-depth and detailed communication among counselors, teachers, and students can help them better understand students' employment needs and inner fluctuations so that they can provide more comprehensive and targeted advice and assistance.

"Classroom teachers and counselors often talk to students and try to find out the reasons behind their choice of slow employment." (Interviewee E)

"Professional teachers should also strengthen their communication with students, especially in the area of career guidance." (Interviewee F)

Parental Thought Leadership

Parental thought leadership has a potential and far-reaching impact on students' employment values, shaping their individualized views and expectations of employment.

"Parental intervention is also important as parental attitudes and economic conditions have a great impact on students' employment." (Interviewee E)

Parents should utilize their experience and wisdom to provide guidance to students. Parents should also pay close attention to students' mental health to ensure that they remain positive and determined in the face of employment challenges.

4.7 Family Intervention Phase

Choosing the right timing for an intervention is extremely crucial in alleviating the problem of slow employment among students. Early intervention helps students to develop a clear understanding of the market demand and the employment situation while they are still in university so that they can cultivate correct employment concepts and proactively plan their career paths.

Early Intervention

Preventive measures taken before students enter the community and face employment challenges can increase their readiness and motivation to enter the workforce. Conversely, the effects of interventions may be significantly diminished if they are delayed until just before graduation.

"We expect to be able to accurately identify students who may have a tendency towards slow employment through questionnaires and scales during their sophomore and junior years and provide them with personalized and specific interventions immediately." (Interviewee D)

"Interventions should be focused primarily on students while they are in school, especially early in their studies, as the effectiveness of interventions tends to diminish as students begin internships or approach graduation." (Interviewee B)

5. Discussion

Currently, with the uncertainty of the job market brought about by accelerated global economic integration and the growing proportion of unemployed and uneducated young people, it has become imperative to address the issue of youth unemployment and social disengagement (Maguire, 2015; Alfani, Clementi, Fabiani, Molini, & Valentini, 2023). In reviewing the relevant literature, the researcher noticed a phenomenon: there is no clear and unified definition of slow employment in the academic world, but it has found many resonances globally, such as NEETs, Gap Years and the Hikikomori phenomenon, which all show the complexity of youth's career choices to different degrees.

Unlike previous studies, this study specifically chose counselors as interview subjects, not just focusing on the students themselves. Through the perspective of counselors, we are able to more systematically and comprehensively examine the root causes of students' slow employment, the interventions adopted by schools, and the actual effectiveness of these measures, thus enhancing the logic and clarity of the analysis. Meanwhile, through the analysis of grounded theory, the phenomenon of slow employment is not caused by a single factor but is the result of multiple intertwined factors, such as one's personal factors, family background, social environment, and group influences; this is consistent with the findings of previous studies conducted by Zhu and Yang et al. (Xiangchen, 2024; Hongjuan, Wenying, Jiangtao, & Ming, 2023). Among the personal factors, career perception and employment intention directly affect students' employment behaviors. For example, high expectations for employment quality may prompt students to choose slow employment, while a lack of career planning and a sense of urgency regarding employment may cause students to miss employment opportunities. Therefore, college students should take the initiative to improve their self-knowledge and career planning abilities to increase their employment success and career satisfaction (Ning, 2019). Family factors play a crucial role in

students' employment decisions. The family environment and family resources provide students with the basic conditions for employment, while parents' values may influence students' career choices and timing of employment. This echoes previous research by To et al. emphasizing the potential impact of parenting style on a child's NEET status (To, Victor, Daniel, Lau, & Su, 2021). In addition, the intensity of competition in the field of specialization, interactions within the community, and the employment status of those around them all become important external forces that shape students' employment perceptions and decisions.Social factors, including the economic situation, job market conditions, and social environment, provide a macro-background for college students' employment. Public health emergencies, such as epidemics, further exacerbate the instability of the job market, affect students' employment confidence and choices (Zheng, Wu, Zhao, & Chen, 2022), and expose students to employment pressures from themselves, their schools, and their families (Yang et al.,2022; Peng, Lv, Low, & Bono, 2024).

Employment assistance and thought leadership are important means of alleviating the phenomenon of slow employment. Through career planning courses and school-enterprise cooperation, schools can provide students with employment guidance and practice opportunities; through student portraits, they are able to understand students' employment tendencies in advance. Families provide emotional support and resources for students' career development through close cooperation with schools. Through in-depth communication, teachers and parents are able to gain insights into students' inner needs and confusions and help them establish correct career concepts and employment attitudes, thus providing more precise guidance and support. All sectors of society should also create favorable conditions for students' employment, promote matching between labor demand and supply, and create a fair employment ecosystem (Erdoğan & Paabort, 2024; Yiliang, 2023). Su et al. also illustrate that social workers are able to facilitate recluses/semi-recluses to leave their comfort zones, re-establish connections with the community, and increase self-efficacy by providing interest- and work-based activities (Su, Li, & Wong, 2023).

However, the timing of intervention is critical. Early intervention has the potential to promote students' development of correct employment concepts and acquisition of necessary skills, while late intervention may be less effective.

6. Limitations and Future Directions

This study has some limitations in its analysis of the causes of and intervention strategies for the phenomenon of slow employment among college students. This study was mainly based on interviews with counselors and professional teachers of undergraduate students in a university in Wuhan, so it may not fully reflect the actual situations of all students. The data were collected over a limited period and cannot reflect long-term trends or annual changes. As this study adopted a qualitative approach, the results may be subjective and difficult to widely generalize. In addition, the interventions proposed in this study also lack long-term data monitoring, and their effectiveness and sustainability need to be further verified in future studies.

Given the limitations of the current study, future research can be expanded in the following directions: the scope of this study can be expanded to include students from different regions and types of colleges and universities to improve the representativeness and overall applicability of the findings. Longitudinal research can be conducted to track the employment statuses of college students from enrollment to post-graduation to identify the long-term trends and influencing factors

of the slow employment phenomenon. Quantitative and qualitative research methods can be combined to enhance the objectivity and accuracy of the research findings. Finally, the effectiveness of the existing employability policies can be evaluated, and recommendations for optimization can be made to better meet students' employment needs.

7. Conclusions

Under the perspective of grounded theory, this study focuses on and deeply analyzes the increasingly prominent slow employment phenomenon of Chinese college students and its causes, and proposes corresponding intervention strategies. Through in-depth interviews with multiple counselors, We find that the phenomenon of slow employment among college students is a complex problem intertwined with multiple factors. This phenomenon is not only closely related to individual career planning and mentality, but is also influenced by the social environment, including fierce competition in the job market and scarce employment opportunities. Furthermore, the employment choices of peers and family values are also subtly shaping students' employment concepts. Therefore, addressing this phenomenon necessitates the collaborative efforts of the government, universities, enterprises, and individual students. The intervention strategies proposed in this study not only have theoretical significance, but also provide valuable references for practice. Future research can further explore the combination effects of different intervention strategies and their applicability in different regions and groups, to provide a more comprehensive and in-depth solution to the problem of slow employment of college students.

8. Data availability

The datasets generated and analysed during the current study are not publicly available due to limitations of university policy and anonymity of the questionnaire we conducted, but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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