

Career Expectations and Employment Anxiety in Post-00s University Students: An Empirical Analysis

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Abstract: This study examines the impact of career aspirations on employment anxiety among post-00s Chinese university students using questionnaires and interviews. Results show salary and reputation aspirations positively affect employment anxiety, while match and standardization aspirations do not. Interviews reveal post-00s students prioritize personal interests, remuneration, and career development, with less emphasis on professional matching and employer standardization. This enriches employment anxiety research and offers insights for career guidance, recruitment, and policy.

1. Introduction

The number of Chinese university graduates has been steadily increasing, with the 2024 cohort reaching 11.79 million, an increase of 2.1 million compared to the previous year (Xinhua News Agency, 2023) ^[1]. However, there has been no significant growth in the number of new job opportunities for these graduates, leading to an oversupply of university students in the job market. The majority of contemporary university students are post-00s, recognized as the youngest and most innovative generation (Zhu Zedong, 2023) ^[2]. Characterized by open-mindedness, individuality, and a strong sense of self (Zhang Conghui, 2022) ^[3], the post-00s generation, coupled with the rising number of graduates and stagnant job growth, faces considerable employment pressure, exacerbating the issue of employment anxiety among university students. A survey by the Tsinghua University Institute of Education revealed that approximately 12% of contemporary university students experience moderate to severe psychological distress, with increasing incidents of depression and suicide due to excessive employment pressure. Regarding factors influencing employment anxiety, scholars have analyzed both internal and external factors, including employment policies, government regulation, university education systems, family influences,

personal characteristics, and self-perception (Zhang Bing et al., 2017) ^[4]. Other studies have identified specific variables, such as professional commitment, positing that higher levels of professional commitment correlate with lower levels of employment anxiety (Xing Chengjian et al., 2023) ^[5].

Nevertheless, the crux of the employment issue for post-00s university students in China lies not in their inability to find jobs but rather in their struggle to secure satisfying positions (Li Sijing, 2024) ^[6]. The fundamental challenge faced by university students in finding employment is the imbalance between their career aspirations and reality (Li Lei, Chen Xi, 2024) ^[7]. This mismatch between expectations and available job opportunities leads to employment anxiety. Therefore, it is imperative to conduct in-depth research on the characteristics of post-00s university students, employment anxiety, and career aspirations. Employing both questionnaire surveys and interviews, this study aims to investigate factors influencing employment anxiety among university students, develop a model to explore the underlying causes, identify differences in employment perceptions between contemporary and previous generations of university students, and provide recommendations for universities, enterprises, and individual students based on empirical findings.

2. Literature Review and Research Hypotheses

2.1 Employment Expectations

Expectations refer to the subjective probability individuals assign to achieving a certain goal or satisfying a need (Dou Chi et al., 2024) ^[8]. Expectations provide motivation for individual behavior and performance, driving individuals towards their goals (Mao Jianghua et al., 2014) ^[9]. When people believe the likelihood of achieving a goal is higher, they are more motivated, invest greater effort, and exhibit increased enthusiasm, making the goal easier to achieve (Peng Xiaobing, Cao Ruoming, 2020) ^[10]. Employment expectations represent the initial subjective psychological response of job seekers, linked to the benefits and satisfaction of their needs (Liu Zhikan, Cheng Lina, 2020) ^[11], and constitute one of the crucial factors influencing university student employment. Some scholars understand the content of employment expectations through the conceptual extension of employment expectations. Liu Sha (2019) argues that employment expectations are initial assumptions and plans for future careers formed by individuals based on their values and cognitions, related to job choice expectations ^[12]. Zhang Yanjun (2023) categorizes employment expectations into employment salary, employment unit, employment region, employment destination, entrepreneurial intention, and cognition of employment influencing factors ^[13]. Duan Yinxiang et al. (2021) analyze university students' employment expectations in terms of employment situation cognition, unit nature expectations, employment region expectations, and work intensity expectations ^[14]. This study adopts the Employment Expectation Scale revised by Jiang Yingying from Shenyang Normal University in 2011, examining university students' employment expectations from four dimensions: compensatory, match, reputation, and normalization.

2.2 Employment Anxiety

Anxiety is an unpleasant emotion arising when individuals foresee adverse consequences from external stimuli or feel threatened, due to unmet needs (Jiang Xiaoyan, 2024) ^[15]. Anxiety can be divided into state anxiety and trait anxiety, with state anxiety being a temporary emotional experience and trait anxiety being a relatively stable anxiety tendency as a personality trait, varying among individuals (Jie Shuiping, 2007) ^[16]. Employment anxiety stems from excessively high career expectations and disappears with the completion of the job-seeking process, with its severity

related to various factors during the employment process, thus primarily constituting state anxiety (Jiang Chunlei, 2009) ^[17]. Moderate employment anxiety can motivate university students to improve themselves, but excessive employment anxiety negatively impacts their employment. Pan Ming et al. (2006) define employment anxiety as the series of negative psychological and emotional experiences individuals face when confronted with graduation and job-seeking issues, anticipating potential failure to achieve predetermined employment goals ^[18]. Some scholars argue that excessively high employment expectations during job-seeking increase university students' employment pressure, leading to a sense of disparity and subsequently triggering employment anxiety when they do not meet employers' demands (Ma Xueyan, 2022) ^[19]. Most scales for measuring employment anxiety are developed by researchers for their specific studies. This study employs the Employment Anxiety Questionnaire developed by Ren Huajuan, consisting of 17 items scored on a Likert five-point scale, with higher scores indicating greater anxiety levels ^[20].

2.3 The Impact of Employment Expectations on Employment Anxiety

It is believed that one of the internal reasons for university students' employment anxiety is excessively high psychological expectations (Su Wenyao, 2023) ^[21]. Many university students hope to engage in high-paying jobs but often face reality's disappointments, discovering that the actual situation does not align with their expectations, leading to a sense of disparity and employment anxiety. Scholars such as Al-Ansi et al. (2021) also used linear regression to analyze the relationship between employment expectations and employment anxiety, concluding that appropriately adjusting employment expectations can alleviate employment anxiety ^[22]. Similarly, Dong Xiaowan (2016) demonstrated a significant positive correlation between employment expectations and employment anxiety through research ^[23]. Based on the above studies, this research examines university students' employment expectations from four dimensions: compensatory, match, reputation, and normalization. Based on these analyses, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: The compensatory aspect of employment expectations has a significant positive impact on employment anxiety.

H2: The match aspect of employment expectations has a significant positive impact on employment anxiety.

H3: The reputation aspect of employment expectations has a significant positive impact on employment anxiety.

H4: The normalization aspect of employment expectations has a significant positive impact on employment anxiety.

2.4 Model Construction

Based on existing literature and the above research hypotheses, this study proposes a research model (see Figure 1).

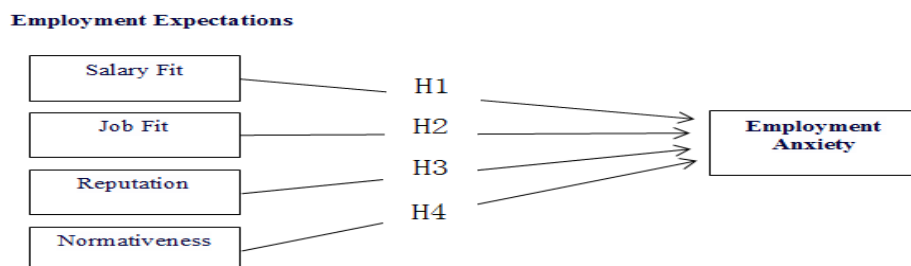


Figure 1: Research Model

3. Questionnaire Design and Sample Characteristics Analysis

This study employs a questionnaire survey method, utilizing the Wenjuanxing platform to conduct online surveys and distribute paper questionnaires for on-site surveys. The questionnaire primarily consists of three parts. The first part involves basic information filling, with all options being single-choice to ensure the uniqueness of participant information. The second and third parts measure employment expectations and employment anxiety, respectively, utilizing a Likert 5-point rating scale for quantification.

This study selects post-2000s college students in Guangdong Province, China, as the survey participants. A total of 350 questionnaires were distributed, with 304 valid questionnaires being recovered, yielding an effective recovery rate of 86.8%. The gender ratio among respondents is 1:1.16. This ratio is generally consistent with the gender ratio of 89:100 for Chinese ordinary undergraduate students as published in the 2022 Education Statistics Data (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2023)^[24]. In terms of grade selection, all four undergraduate grades are represented, with particular emphasis on junior students who are about to face employment but still have time to adjust their employment choices. This study also strives to ensure comprehensive and representative coverage of various academic majors when distributing the questionnaires. Therefore, the survey participants in this study are relatively comprehensive (see Table 1) and possess a certain degree of representativeness.

Table 1 Basic Information of Survey Respondents

		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Gender	Male	141	46.4	46.4	46.4
	Female	163	53.6	53.6	100.0
Grade	Freshman	62	20.4	20.4	20.4
	Sophomore	42	13.8	13.8	34.2
	Junior	164	53.9	53.9	88.2
	Senior	36	11.8	11.8	100.0
Major Category	Humanities, Social Sciences, Economics, and Management	134	44.1	44.1	44.1
	Science and Engineering	107	35.2	35.2	79.3
	Others	63	20.7	20.7	100.0
Place of Origin	Urban	116	38.2	38.2	38.2
	Rural	188	61.8	61.8	100.0

4. Data Analysis

4.1 Reliability Analysis and Validity Analysis

Reliability refers to the consistency of measurement results, aiming to assess the consistency and reliability of the scale. Cronbach's α coefficient is one of the most commonly used methods for reliability testing. In this study, the Cronbach's Alpha for all variables is greater than 0.7, indicating good internal consistency of the scale (see Table 3).

Validity is used to test the effectiveness of the scale, typically assessed using the

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity. According to the data, the KMO values for all variables are greater than 0.7, and the P-values for Bartlett's Test of Sphericity are all less than 0.05, indicating a good level of significance for the scale. The cumulative variance contribution rate refers to the total influence of all common factors on the dependent variables. In this study, the cumulative variance contribution rates for all variables are greater than 60%, suggesting that the scale data are good and the factor analysis results are relatively reliable. Therefore, the validity of the questionnaire is good, and the measurement results align well with the research content (see Table 2).

Table 2. Reliability and Validity Test

	Variables	Items	Cronbach's Alpha	KMO Value	Bartlett's Test of Sphericity P-value	Cumulative Variance Contribution Rate
Employment Expectations	Salary Fit	4	0.715	0.809	0.000	66.344%
	Job Fit	4	0.828			
	Reputation	5	0.870			
	Normativeness	3	0.730			
Employment Anxiety	Employment Anxiety	16	0.955	0.958	0.000	73.415%

4.2 Correlation Analysis

This study first employs Pearson correlation analysis to verify the relationships among the variables (see Table 3).

Table 3. Correlation Analysis

	Salary Fit	Job Fit	Reputation	Normativeness	Employment Anxiety
Employment Anxiety	0.828*	0.016	0.750**	0.046	1
Note: * indicates $P < 0.05$, ** indicates $P < 0.01$.					

The results indicate a correlation between compensation and employment anxiety, with a significant positive correlation at the 0.05 level, thus confirming Hypothesis 1 (H1). However, there is no significant correlation between fit and employment anxiety at the 0.05 or 0.01 levels, indicating no correlation between the two. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 (H2) is not supported. Meanwhile, there is a significant positive correlation between reputation and employment anxiety at the 0.01 level, confirming Hypothesis 3 (H3). Additionally, there is no correlation between normativity and employment anxiety, thus Hypothesis 4 (H4) is not supported.

4.3 Regression Analysis

Regression analysis can determine the degree of influence between variables and verify the causal relationships among them.

First, a regression analysis is conducted on the relationship between compensation and

employment anxiety. The results are shown in the table below:

Table 4: Regression Analysis of Compensation and Employment Anxiety

Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	Unstandardized Coefficient		Standardized Coefficient	t	Significance
		B	Standard Error	Beta		
Employment Anxiety	(Constant)	2.399	0.320		7.506	0.000
	Reputation	0.162	0.072	0.128	2.247	0.025*
R-squared	0.016					
Adjusted R-squared	0.013					
F	F=5.049,P=0.025*					
Note: * indicates P<0.05, ** indicates P<0.01						

According to the table data, compensation and employment anxiety show significance at the 0.05 level. Therefore, the regression equation can be established as:

$$\text{Employment Anxiety} = 0.162 * \text{Compensation} + 2.399$$

This further verifies Hypothesis 1 (H1): Compensation has a significant positive impact on employment anxiety.

Similarly, regression analysis is used to analyze the relationship between reputation and employment anxiety. The results are shown in the table below:

Table 5: Regression Analysis of Reputation and Employment Anxiety

Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	Unstandardized Coefficient		Standardized Coefficient	t	Significance
		B	Standard Error	Beta		
Employment Anxiety	(Constant)	2.635	.185		14.223	.000
	Reputation	0.159	.060	.150	2.644	.009**
R-squared	0.023					
Adjusted R-squared	0.019					
F	F=6.993,P=0.009**					
Note: * indicates P<0.05, ** indicates P<0.01						

Based on the results in the above table, it is evident that employment anxiety and reputation have a significant correlation at the 0.01 level. Thus, the regression equation can be formulated as:

$$\text{Employment Anxiety} = 0.159 * \text{Reputation} + 2.635$$

Therefore, Hypothesis 3 (H3) is confirmed: Reputation has a significant positive impact on employment anxiety.

4.4 Conclusion of Hypothesis Testing

This study conducted a survey and used SPSS 26 statistical analysis software to test the hypotheses, leading to the following conclusions:

H1: The compensation aspect of employment expectations has a significant positive impact on

employment anxiety. This hypothesis is supported.

H2: The fit aspect of employment expectations has a significant positive impact on employment anxiety. This hypothesis is not supported.

H3: The reputation aspect of employment expectations has a significant positive impact on employment anxiety. This hypothesis is supported.

H4: The normativity aspect of employment expectations has a significant positive impact on employment anxiety. This hypothesis is not supported.

5. Interviews and Discussion

Through the questionnaire survey, we found that the compensation and reputation aspects of job expectations have a significant impact on employment anxiety among post-00s college students, while the fit of the job and the normativity of the employer do not have a significant impact. This finding is inconsistent with many previous studies. Therefore, this study employs the interview method to attempt to explain this survey result.

This study interviewed 10 post-00s graduates and 8 post-00s junior college students, focusing on the issues of job fit and employer normativity.

5.1 Regarding job fit, post-00s college students no longer overemphasize the alignment between jobs and their majors

When making employment choices, whether a job aligns with their college major is not a crucial criterion for them. They pay more attention to whether the job aligns with their personal interests and hobbies and whether it offers more superior compensation and benefits. This conclusion from the interviews further proves the significant positive impact of compensation on employment anxiety, as stated in Hypothesis 1 of the questionnaire survey.

The main reasons for this phenomenon are twofold. On the one hand, post-00s college students have strong personalities and hope to plan their careers based on their personal interests, unwilling to be restricted by their current majors. On the other hand, some interviewees stated that they did not choose their college majors based on interest and are unwilling to continue compromising themselves when selecting jobs. Additionally, some interviewees mentioned that their college majors were not helpful for employment, so they did not care much about whether the job matched their majors. This reflects a structural mismatch between college majors and employer demands, which is also a direct cause of employment anxiety among college students. It can be seen that the employment outlook of post-00s college students is more open and diversified.

5.2 Regarding normativity, post-00s college students do not excessively pursue traditional jobs with strong normativity, such as "civil servants" or "public institution employees"

Through interviews, we learned that when choosing employers, post-00s college students show a preference for small businesses and private enterprises, rather than traditionally popular state-owned enterprises, civil servant positions, or other jobs within the system. They tend to accumulate experience and improve their abilities in small enterprises first, to avoid the frustration of being rejected in interviews with large enterprises due to lack of experience and ability. After enhancing their abilities, they then consider joining larger, more normalized enterprises. "Avoiding frustration" was a frequently mentioned phrase by interviewees during the interviews.

Through the interviews, we also found that many post-00s college students choose to take exams for civil service positions or other government-funded jobs for the following reasons. Firstly, they follow their parents' arrangements, but they themselves do not like working as civil servants.

Secondly, they consider social reputation. It is generally believed in society that civil servants and government-funded jobs are more respectable, so their career choices need to conform to social expectations. This conclusion from the interviews also confirms Hypothesis 3 of the questionnaire survey, which states that reputation has a significant positive impact on employment anxiety. Thirdly, escape mentality. Some college students are afraid of facing job searching and the fear of failure, so they escape by taking exams for civil service positions or other government-funded jobs. These exams often cannot be passed with just one attempt, allowing them to temporarily avoid job searching with the excuse of "preparing for exams." Fourthly, it cannot be denied that there are indeed some students who genuinely want to work as civil servants, but in our interviews, we found that such students do not make up a large proportion. Many research conclusions suggest that college students tend to seek stability in their job searches and prefer civil service positions or other government-funded jobs (Zeng Shuai, 2022)^[25]. This interview result differs significantly from previous research.

This study, through interviews, delved into the impact of job fit and employer normativity on employment anxiety among post-00s college students. The results revealed that post-00s college students pay more attention to personal interests and compensation in their employment choices, rather than major alignment, reflecting their open and diversified employment outlook and awareness of the structural mismatch between majors and the job market. At the same time, when choosing employers, they prefer small businesses and private enterprises to accumulate experience and enhance their abilities first, rather than traditional, highly normative organizations, demonstrating their pragmatic strategies and the psychology of avoiding frustration. Furthermore, although some post-00s choose to take exams for civil service positions or other government-funded jobs, their motivations are diverse, including following their parents' wishes, pursuing social reputation, escaping employment pressure, etc. Few of them genuinely love working as civil servants. These findings explain why job fit and employer normativity have no significant impact on employment anxiety among post-00s college students in the questionnaire survey and differ significantly from previous research conclusions.

6. Conclusion and Suggestions

This study systematically explored the impact of post-00s college students' employment expectations on their employment anxiety through literature analysis, questionnaire surveys, and in-depth interviews. The questionnaire survey revealed unique characteristics in the employment choices of post-00s college students. They attach great importance to job benefits and reputation, and high expectations in these two aspects significantly increase their employment anxiety. In contrast, job matching and the standardization of employers have no significant impact on their employment anxiety. This conclusion is significantly different from previous studies. Further interviews revealed that post-00s college students place more emphasis on personal interests, remuneration packages, and career development when choosing a job, and hold a more open attitude towards the matching degree between their majors and job positions, reflecting their diverse and flexible employment concepts. They tend to accumulate experience and enhance their abilities in small enterprises and private enterprises, adopting a pragmatic strategy to avoid the feeling of frustration. Meanwhile, although some post-00s choose to take exams for civil servant positions or state-owned enterprise jobs, their motivations are diverse. Not many of them genuinely love these jobs; most do so out of obedience to their parents' wishes, pursuit of social reputation, or avoidance of employment pressure. In summary, post-00s college students exhibit a trend of placing more emphasis on personal interests, remuneration, and career development in their employment choices, while relatively downplaying the importance of major matching and the standardization of

employers. This finding not only enriches existing research on employment anxiety but also provides useful references for college career guidance, employer recruitment strategies, and policy formulation.

At the university level, one of the reasons for the employment anxiety among post-00s college students is their belief that their academic knowledge does not support finding a good job. Therefore, universities should strengthen the design of professional courses and offer courses that better meet the needs of the job market. Another reason for their employment anxiety is that they are not studying a major they like. Thus, it is recommended that universities enhance the management and institutional design for major changes after enrollment, and pay attention to the design of double majors, general education courses, and public elective courses to meet students' demands for learning different subjects. Additionally, universities can help students understand their interests and values by offering systematic career planning courses, guiding them to form reasonable career expectations. At the same time, universities can invite external experts and outstanding alumni to share the latest trends in the job market, corporate hiring needs, and job-seeking experiences. Universities should also carry out mental health education activities, provide psychological counseling and guidance services to address employment anxiety, helping students understand the causes of anxiety and coping methods, and improving their psychological resilience.

At the enterprise level, salary and job reputation are important factors affecting college students' employment anxiety. When recruiting, enterprises should set reasonable salary and benefit levels based on market conditions and their actual situation, avoiding false propaganda that creates excessively high salary expectations among college students. Enterprises should also cultivate a good corporate image to attract graduates through their positive social reputation. They can also try to recruit based more on actual abilities rather than strictly adhering to majors, which will provide more choices for graduates and help enterprises find talents that better match the job positions.

At the individual student level, students should establish a clear self-awareness by analyzing their interests, skills, strengths, and weaknesses, understanding their positioning in the job market, and setting reasonable employment goals based on their actual abilities. For their shortcomings, they should continuously learn new knowledge and skills to improve their overall quality and competitiveness, reducing obstacles in the employment process. Moreover, during the job-seeking process, students should establish correct employment concepts and not excessively pursue corporate benefits and reputation. At the same time, they should maintain a positive and optimistic mindset, learn to face difficulties and setbacks optimistically, and seek advice and professional guidance from friends, family, or relevant university institutions when encountering difficulties.

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