

Cross-Cultural Discourse Construction of Youth Employment Anxiety in the Digital Context

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Abstract: In the context of deep integration between globalization and digitalization, youth employment anxiety has emerged as a significant interdisciplinary research topic. This study takes China's Xiaohongshu and Spain's Instagram as research objects, employing a methodology that combines corpus linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to systematically examine the construction mechanisms of youth employment anxiety discourse in digital contexts and its underlying cultural logic. The findings reveal that Chinese youth exhibit collective expression and a stability orientation, with their narrative framework shifting from "striving" to "seeking stability." In contrast, Spanish youth demonstrate individualized expression and institutional critique, with their narrative framework transitioning from "striving" to "mobility." These differences reflect the profound influence of cultural capital and social structure on digital discourse practices. This research not only expands the theoretical boundaries of cross-cultural discourse analysis but also provides empirical evidence for vocational education policy-making and the optimization of social support systems.

Keywords: Digital context; Employment anxiety; Social media; Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA); Cross-cultural discourse

DOI: 10.62639/sspjess27.20250210

1. Introduction

Youth employment anxiety, as a global socio-psychological phenomenon, has garnered considerable attention from both academia and policymakers. According to statistics from the International Labour Organization (ILO), the global youth unemployment rate reached 13.6% in 2022, with youth employment issues in countries such as China and Spain being particularly pronounced. Chinese youth face structural pressures, including intensified competition in the job market and job instability, while Spanish youth are chronically affected by high unemployment rates and labor market segmentation.

Digital platforms serve as crucial venues for emotional expression and identity construction, and have become key carriers of youth employment anxiety discourse. Chinese youth express anxiety through collective symbols such as "involution" and "civil service exams," whereas Spanish youth utilize critical metaphors like "trash contract" and "no future" to convey dissatisfaction with the labor market. However, existing research has predominantly focused on psychological and sociological perspectives, lacking systematic exploration of the construction mechanisms of employment anxiety in digital discourse from the standpoints of discourse analysis and cross-cultural comparison.

(Manuscript NO.: JIESS-25-10-113004)

About the Author

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Funding

This article is a preliminary achievement of the research project of the Liaoning Provincial Department of Education: "A Study on the Reception Mechanism of Outstanding Local Traditional Culture from an Intercultural Perspective" (No. LJ122410841006).

This study adopts Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its theoretical framework, integrated with corpus analysis methods, to investigate the construction of youth employment anxiety discourse on social media platforms and its socio-cultural implications. Through the analysis of 4,000 language samples from 2021 to 2023, this research reveals differences in emotional expression, metaphor use, narrative frameworks, and social attribution between Chinese and Spanish youth. It aims to offer new perspectives for understanding youth psychology and social identity in the digital era, while providing theoretical support and practical insights for vocational education, social support systems, and public policy formulation.

2. Theoretical Basis and Literature Review

(1) Critical discourse analysis as the core framework

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) serves as the primary theoretical framework for this study, emphasizing the intrinsic relationship between language, power, and social structure. Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional model—text, discursive practice, and social practice—provides a systematic approach to unpacking how youth employment anxiety is constructed, circulated, and contested in digital contexts. At the text level, analysis focuses on linguistic features such as lexical choice, syntactic structure, and metaphor use, which encode emotions, values. At the discursive practice level, attention is given to the processes of discourse production, distribution, and consumption, including user interactions and algorithmic influences. At the social practice level, discourse is examined in relation to broader social structures, cultural norms, and institutional power, revealing how digital narratives both reflect and reinforce societal inequities.

(2) Integrating psychological and sociological perspectives

While CDA forms the backbone of this research, insights from psychology and sociology are integrated to enrich the understanding of youth employment anxiety. Psychological research highlights individual-level factors such as employment pressure, low self-efficacy, and social expectations as key contributors to anxiety (Chen, 2018). Sociological studies, in contrast, focus on macro-structural forces like labor market imbalances, economic downturns, and educational expansion (ILO, 2019; Wang, 2021). These perspectives complement CDA by elucidating the emotional and structural contexts that shape discourse, yet they often overlook the role of language in mediating these experiences. This study bridges this gap by examining how psychological distress and social inequalities are linguistically constructed and expressed in digital spaces.

(3) Digital discourse and emotional expression

The rise of social media has transformed digital platforms into vital arenas for emotional expression and identity construction. Zappavigna (2012) notes that language on these platforms does more than transmit information—it fosters emotional resonance and social affiliation. In China, Xiaohongshu has emerged as a space where university graduates collectively voice employment anxieties through terms like “involution” and “civil service exam,” reinforcing group solidarity through interactive features (Zhang, 2022). In Spain, Instagram facilitates individualized narratives and institutional critiques, with youth using metaphors such as “trash contract” and “no future” to comment on labor market injustices (Martínez, 2020). These examples underscore the dual function of digital discourse: as both an emotional outlet and a site of cultural meaning-making.

(4) Metaphor as a cognitive tool

Metaphor plays a crucial role in constructing youth employment anxiety, serving as a cognitive tool to simplify complex experiences and carry ideas. Chinese youth frequently employ metaphors like “involution” and “track” to convey competitive pressures and collective anxiety (Liu, 2021). Spanish youth, by contrast, use metaphors such as “trash contract” and “no future” to critique institutional failures and express disillusionment (Fernández, 2019).

These metaphorical choices not only reflect individual emotions but also reveal deeper cultural values and societal critiques, making them a critical focal point for CDA-informed analysis.

Despite growing interest in youth employment anxiety, most studies remain confined to psychological or sociological frameworks, neglecting the discursive mechanisms through which anxiety is constructed and negotiated in digital environments. Even fewer adopt a cross-cultural lens to compare how these processes unfold across different societal contexts. This study addresses these gaps by leveraging CDA's multi-layered approach to analyze digital discourse from China and Spain, offering new insights into the interplay of language, culture, and structure in shaping youth employment anxiety. By doing so, it not only advances theoretical understanding but also provides actionable implications for education, policy, and social support.

3. Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) with corpus linguistics to systematically explore the construction mechanisms of youth employment anxiety discourse in digital contexts across Chinese and Western cultures. CDA provides a three-dimensional analytical framework—text, discursive practice, and social practice—enabling the investigation of discourse from linguistic, interactional, and socio-structural perspectives. Corpus linguistics supplements this framework with quantitative techniques such as word frequency analysis, collocation patterns, and metaphor identification, ensuring methodological rigor and reproducibility.

Data were collected from two major social media platforms: Xiaohongshu in China and Instagram in Spain, covering the period from 2021 to 2023. Relevant texts were retrieved through targeted keyword searches, followed by data cleaning and deduplication to exclude non-textual elements. This process resulted in a parallel corpus of 2,000 texts from each platform, forming a reliable foundation for analysis.

In the analytical phase, corpus methods were used to quantitatively identify high-frequency words, emotional expressions, and metaphor usage, uncovering underlying narrative structures and anxiety construction patterns. Subsequently, CDA was applied to interpret these findings across three dimensions:

- (1) Text level: Analysis of lexical choices, syntactic structures, and metaphorical expressions to examine how emotions, values, and social attributions are linguistically encoded.
- (2) Discursive practice level: Examination of content generation, dissemination, and reception processes, including user interactions and platform-mediated communication dynamics.
- (3) Social practice level: Exploration of the interplay between discourse and broader social structures, cultural values, and policy environments, with a focus on cross-cultural differences.

The research process encompassed corpus collection and cleaning, quantitative corpus analysis, qualitative textual interpretation, interaction and dissemination analysis, and socio-cultural interpretation. To ensure reliability and validity, the study utilized cross-validation across multiple data sources, standardized analytical tools, and triangulation of quantitative and qualitative methods. This systematic design enables a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the construction and cross-cultural characteristics of youth employment anxiety discourse in digital environments.

4. Analysis of Youth Social Media Anxiety Discourse

(1) Emotional expression and discourse features

In the digital context, Chinese and Western youth exhibit significant cultural differences in their employment

anxiety discourse on social media. Through corpus statistics, high-frequency words related to employment anxiety in Xiaohongshu include “involution” (412 times), “anxiety” (368 times), “civil service exam” (251 times), “instability” (197 times), and “pressure” (182 times). These high-frequency words indicate that Chinese youth in employment discourse are highly concerned with career competition pressure and job stability. Text analysis shows that approximately 62% of Xiaohongshu posts use group referents such as “we” and “everyone,” transforming individual anxiety into collective expression. For example, a typical post reads: “Our generation of graduates is having such a hard time, living in anxiety every day, really not knowing how to choose.” Multiple responses in the comment section use similar empathetic language, such as “Me too” and “So real,” forming obvious emotional resonance. This collective expression not only reflects personal anxiety but also demonstrates the perception and identification of common difficulties in the social environment.

In contrast, Instagram corpus shows that Spanish youth are more inclined toward individualized narratives, with high-frequency words including “anxiety” (226 times), “stressed” (198 times), “trash contract” (172 times), “temporary work” (145 times), and “no future” (138 times). Approximately 78% of the texts use first-person narrative, such as: “I am 25 years old, with two master’s degrees, and still on temporary contracts. It’s frustrating.” This expression highlights personal subjective experience, directly links to institutional issues, and demonstrates youth’s sensitivity to and critical awareness of social structures. Through comparison, it can be found that Chinese youth emphasize collectivity and resonance in emotional expression, while Spanish youth lean toward individualized expression and institutional critique. This difference is closely related to cultural values: China’s collectivist culture reinforces group identity and the need for stability, while Spain’s individualistic culture emphasizes independence and critical spirit. This difference is reflected in the choice of emotional vocabulary and syntactic structures, demonstrating the cultural embeddedness of youth employment discourse in the digital context.

(2) Metaphor use and narrative frameworks

Metaphors play a key cognitive and emotional encoding role in youth employment discourse. Corpus analysis shows that Chinese youth often use metaphors such as “involution,” “track,” “job-hopping,” and “lying flat” to describe competition pressure and career anxiety. For example, a Xiaohongshu post reads: “I feel like I’ve run on the wrong track, anxiously chasing others every day.” Such metaphors concretize employment competition pressure in a vivid way, allowing readers to feel the anxiety and powerlessness. In terms of narrative framework, Chinese youth show a shifting trend from “striving hard” to “seeking stability,” with approximately 36% of Xiaohongshu texts mentioning “civil service exam” or “public institution exam,” indicating a tendency among youth to seek stable positions to alleviate anxiety in digital discourse.

Spanish youth in Instagram corpus often use metaphors like “trash contract,” “no future,” and “youth unemployment,” directly pointing to institutional problems in the labor market. For example, one post reads: “I have been working on trash contracts since I graduated from university, and I see no future here.” Metaphors not only convey emotions but also reflect critical awareness of institutions. In narrative frameworks, Spanish youth focus more on “mobility” and “migration” as coping strategies. Analysis shows that approximately 18% of Instagram corpus involves cross-border employment or immigration intentions, such as: “I will go to Germany, there are no opportunities here.” This reflects the initiative of youth to seek solutions through action or discourse when facing structural dilemmas. The differences in metaphor use and narrative frameworks between Chinese and Western youth not only reflect differences in cultural values but are also closely related to social structures and policy environments. Chinese youth tend to seek psychological and occupational security through internal systems, while Spanish youth seek breakthroughs through cross-border mobility and institutional critique.

(3) Platform discourse practices and interaction mechanisms

At the discursive practice level, platform mechanisms have a significant impact on the production, dissemination, and reception of discourse. User-generated content (UGC) dominates on Xiaohongshu, forming an interactive

network through posts and comments. Data shows that among 2,000 Xiaohongshu posts, approximately 57% received over 50 comments, with comments mostly being experience sharing or emotional resonance, such as “I’m also preparing for the civil service exam” and “It’s really heart-wrenching.” Like and save mechanisms further enhance the visibility and spread of anxiety discourse, forming a community culture of “anxiety resonance.” Platform recommendation algorithms tend to push highly interactive posts, causing employment anxiety discourse to spread rapidly within the community, enhancing collective expression and psychological resonance.

Interaction mechanisms on Instagram present different characteristics. The average number of comments per post is 34, with likes concentrated between 100–500. Although interaction volume is relatively low, youth are more inclined to use hashtags for discourse dissemination, such as “#trash contract,” “#no future,” “#youth employment,” forming a cross-user critical discourse network. Additionally, visual content combined with text makes institutional critique discourse more intuitive and vivid. By analyzing platform interaction patterns, it can be seen that digital platforms are not just tools for information transmission but also participate in shaping discursive practices, influencing the dissemination and social resonance of anxiety discourse.

(4) Values and attribution at the social practice level

At the social practice level, Chinese and Western youth employment discourse reflects the shaping effects of different cultural values and social systems on anxiety expression. Chinese youth’s values show collectivist tendencies, with anxiety attribution mostly pointing to macro-social structures and policy environments. Corpus data shows that approximately 42% of Xiaohongshu texts mention social factors such as “layoffs in big companies,” “reduction in positions,” and “policy changes.” Anxiety discourse often uses “we” instead of “I,” showing that youth alleviate uncertainty through collective identity and seek psychological support. At the same time, Chinese youth emphasize “striving” and “accumulating experience” in their discourse, showing high sensitivity to future planning and social expectations.

Spanish youth’s values, in contrast, reflect individualism and critical spirit, with anxiety attribution focused on structural problems in the labor market and institutional injustice. Approximately 38% of Instagram corpus mentions tags such as “temporary contract” and “youth unemployment,” directly pointing to labor market instability and policy deficiencies. Youth express social dissatisfaction through critical narratives and explore cross-border employment or migration as coping strategies. This discursive practice not only reflects individual cognition of social systems but also demonstrates youth’s proactive coping ability in the face of institutional dilemmas. The differences between Chinese and Western youth at the social practice level are mainly manifested in three aspects: anxiety attribution, coping strategies, and value orientations. Chinese youth rely on policies and collective approaches to alleviate anxiety, emphasizing stability and consensus; Spanish youth seek breakthroughs through individualized expression, institutional critique, and cross-border mobility, emphasizing personal choice and institutional responsibility. This difference shows the profound shaping effects of cultural traditions, social structures, and digital platform characteristics on discursive practices.

Through comprehensive analysis at the text, discursive practice, and social practice levels, Chinese and Western youth employment anxiety discourse exhibits significant cross-cultural characteristics: at the text level, Chinese youth use collective expression and metaphors like “involution” and “track,” emphasizing stability and resonance; Spanish youth use individualized expression and metaphors like “trash contract” and “no future,” emphasizing critique and mobility. At the discursive practice level, Chinese youth form anxiety resonance through comment interactions and like mechanisms; Spanish youth form cross-user critical discourse networks through hashtags and visual content. At the social practice level, Chinese youth’s values lean toward collectivism and policy dependence, while Spanish youth’s values lean toward individualism and institutional critique. This three-dimensional analysis reveals the complex construction mechanisms of youth employment anxiety discourse in the digital context and also reflects the profound shaping effects of platform characteristics, cultural values, and social structures on

discursive practices.

Additionally, the study also finds that cross-cultural differences are not only reflected in discourse content but also in strategic choices. When facing employment pressure, Chinese youth are more inclined toward internal adjustment, seeking psychological comfort and social recognition through pathways like “civil service exams” and “public institution exams”; Spanish youth, on the other hand, focus more on structural reforms and cross-border employment opportunities, seeking breakthroughs through discourse critique and actual migration. This indicates that digital discourse not only reflects youth emotions but also serves as an action tool for youth to cope with social structures and cultural values.

5. Conclusion

This study has explored the cross-cultural discourse construction of youth employment anxiety on social media platforms, revealing both shared patterns and culturally specific variations. The analysis demonstrates that digital discourse serves as a powerful medium for expressing and shaping the experiences of young people in an increasingly globalized and digitalized world. The findings highlight the importance of considering platform affordances, cultural values, and social structures in understanding the complex dynamics of employment anxiety. By combining corpus linguistics and critical discourse analysis, this study provides a comprehensive and nuanced account of how youth employment anxiety is discursively constructed in different cultural contexts. The insights gained from this research have significant implications for theory, methodology, and practice, contributing to a more informed and empathetic approach to addressing the challenges faced by young people in the contemporary job market. Future research could build on these findings by exploring additional cultural contexts, examining longitudinal changes in discourse, and investigating the relationship between online discourse and offline actions. Ultimately, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of youth employment anxiety in the digital age, with implications for policymakers, educators, and mental health professionals seeking to support young people navigating an increasingly complex and uncertain employment landscape.

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