

# The Employment Outlook of Urban Youth under Consumption Downgrading

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**Abstract:** This paper uses participant observation and semi-structured interviews to examine the presentation of urban youth's employment outlook in the context of consumer downgrading, and explores the shaping factors behind it to provide rational explanations. Through the classification and analysis of employment attitudes and expectations, it is found that the employment expectations of urban youths tend to be de-employerization and career digitization, lifelong learning and compound talents, embracing new industries and engaging in new occupations as amphibious youths and slash-and-burn youths, and presenting attitudes of pursuing the fulfillment of self-worth, and attaching equal importance to responsibilities and ideals. The emergence of employment attitudes and expectations is related to the acceleration of modernity and pressurized survival, as well as the awakening of self-consciousness among urban youth. In this regard, society at large should respect and adjust to their new employment mentality and expectations, so that they can firmly hold on to their ideals, which is also of great significance in promoting the in-depth optimization of the human resources structure.

**Keywords:** Consumer downgrading; Urban youth; Employment perspectives

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## 1. Introduction

Baudrillard, in his book "The Consumer Society", says that today's society has become a consumer society and that people no longer consume for survival, but for desire <sup>[1]</sup>. In recent years, the issue of "downgrading consumption" has become a focus of attention. In today's increasingly diversified social development, "consumption downgrading" has new connotations and characteristics, that is, people in the case of not affecting the quality of consumption, choose cheaper goods, that is, consumers will shift the focus of consumption to the use of the value of the commodity itself, so that the consumer price and consumption behavior are returned to a rational state <sup>[2]</sup>. In other words, consumers will shift the focus of consumption to the use value of the goods themselves. This brought a new thinking to the traditional consumption pattern, in which the income level will affect the level of consumption. However, in the context of consumer downgrading, people's income is reduced,

and the jobs are unstable, which also will inevitably affect the employment concept of urban youth. Hence, what characteristics will the employment outlook of urban youth under the consumption downgrading present, and what are the shaping factors of these characteristics is the question that this paper is trying to answer.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. From consumer society to rethinking consumption**

Since the reform and opening up, especially after the 1890s, Chinese society has gradually moved towards a consumer society under the influence of globalization and expansion of consumer culture, as well as the widespread proliferation of advertising discourse<sup>[3-4]</sup>. With people's desire and longing for consumption, the whole society has begun to focus on the sensual and pleasurable "well-off culture", and has shown distinctive characteristics of the consumer society<sup>[5]</sup>. The mass media and enterprises all emphasize consumers. The mass media and enterprises target consumers, thus seeking a modern and complex identity of "consumer citizenship" for the rising middle class<sup>[6]</sup>. Consumption is a "consumer citizen" identity. Consumption is the "raw material" for the formation of identity, as well as a kind of symbol, and the products and services that consumers obtain through consumption are also a process of "meaning" and "identity"<sup>[7]</sup>. However, in recent years, some studies have found that the contemporary youth group has a clear "anti-consumption" tendency toward consumption concepts, such as refusing to blindly follow the trend of consumption and choosing to be "consumerism retrograde"<sup>[8]</sup>.

### **2.2. Urban youth employment perspectives**

Throughout the world, since the reform and opening up of China, young people's outlook on employment has gone through three stages: obedience to distribution, openness to the world, and self-selection<sup>[9]</sup>. The trend of social structural change, the atmosphere of professional organizations, and the degree of influence of public opinion on young people's views on employment have all influenced their views on employment at different levels<sup>[10]</sup>. The rise of the Internet society and the development of the digital economy, in particular, have further influenced the employment views of young people, with mobility in the workplace, flexible employment, "slow employment" and "stable employment" becoming the norm<sup>[11]</sup>.

### **2.3. Consumption and employment**

Economic research has shown that there is widespread consumption myopia, that is, consumption that overreacts to current situations. In the context of a recession, unemployment and declining incomes are likely to cause an excessive downturn in consumption, which further has a negative feedback effect on the economy<sup>[12]</sup>. Samuelson points out that consumer demand is a key factor in the cyclical fluctuations of the economy<sup>[13]</sup>.

In summary, although academics have explored "anti-consumption" such as consumption downgrading and youth employment views separately, there are fewer studies on the relationship between the two. However, from the relationship between consumption and employment, it is easy to see that a decline in consumption will have a negative feedback effect on the economy and employment.

## **3. Research methodology**

This study adopts the qualitative research method of semi-structured interviews, while supplemented by

participant observation. Based on this, this paper takes the eligible urban youths around the researchers as the research object and selects 11 interviewees by snowballing method, the basic information of the interviewees is shown in **Table 1**.

**Table 1.** Basic information about the interviewees

Serial number	Sex	Age	Careers	Years of experience	Average monthly income
A1	Male	25	Private employee	3	5000
A2	Female	32	Solicitors	8	20000
A3	Female	25	Private employee	2	5000
A4	Male	24	New media operations	1	6000
A5	Male	25	Private employee	1	4000
A6	Male	25	Graphic design	2	5500
A7	Male	25	Private employee	2	4000
A8	Male	25	SOC facilitator	2	3500
A9	Male	27	Private employee	3	5000
A10	Female	25	Private employee	3	4000
A11	Female	26	Private employee	3	4500

## 4. Presentation of the employment outlook of urban youth under consumption downgrading

### 4.1. Types of employment attitudes

#### 4.1.1. Pursuit of self-worth fulfillment

“In a climate of downgrading consumption, my desire to spend has fallen along with it. Now I do not need to retire either so I don’t intentionally pursue a high-paying job, but I pursue more of my own personal growth as well as progress, it does not make sense to simply pursue a high-paying package if you do not grow.” (A3)

According to the above interviews, they are no longer pursuing the stability of the job alone, but their future development, they hope to achieve the realization of the sense of self-worth and sublimation of the employment, for the future development of the full power<sup>[14]</sup>.

To sum up, whether it is due to personal factors or the impact of consumer downgrading, people not only focus on the stability of the job but also tend to be more inclined to pursue growth, show individuality, and other factors driven by work that can realize personal values.

#### 4.1.2. Trade-offs between stability and freedom

“Personally, I would focus more on the long-term and stability of the career because we have to consider not only myself but also the future life, family, wife, children, parents, and so on, and you cannot give people a sense of security if you do not have some stable career.” (A4)

“I will pursue value for money in my life and believe that being happy is the highest quality of lifestyle, and I focus more on the job that allows me to have more personal time at my disposal, so I think freelancing is more suitable for me than civil service.” (A8)

To summarize, while stability is the main theme of urban youth's attitude towards employment, some focus on their use of personal time outside of work, and with the trend of new forms of employment, urban youth will join emerging industries with more flexible and elastic work styles and work attitudes.

#### **4.1.3. Responsibilities and ideals go hand in hand**

"I feel that downgrading consumption will reduce the financial pressure on an individual in one area, and the rewards from work will be able to be used in more ways, in which case the change in salary and lower spending power will increase satisfaction and happiness with work. Think of work as a duty." (A10)

According to the results of the above interviews, the attitude of urban youths towards their work is not like "quitting at the drop of a hat" or "firing the boss" as described in the online "Post-00s Rectification of the Workplace", but rather, they will identify more with their suitable work and take responsibility for their work in the context of consumer downgrading.

### **4.2. Types of employment expectations**

#### **4.2.1. De-employerization and digitization of careers**

"Now the economic situation of the whole society is not optimistic, consumer downgrading will definitely be a big trend in the future, and now the Internet is becoming more and more developed, for example, live streaming with goods, social media operation, network design, and so on, are all good flexible employment paths, which can be used as the main business or part-time. One more thing, the future of AI is a big trend, which is positive if one can do it." (A7)

According to the results of the above interviews, more and more urban youths are also sensitive to the poor economic and employment environment of the whole society, and they tend to choose careers such as internet trend-chaser, social media operations, small programs, and after-sales service.

#### **4.2.2. Lifelong learning and composite talents**

"In the case of job instability, I also thought about whether I could learn something about computers, learning PS, simpler programming, and so so, but then I had to think about whether I could grasp the knowledge and practice conversion, the allocation of time, and whether my personal ability was up to the task if I learned a wide range of knowledge and skills." (A4)

As a result, the downgrading of consumption will lead urban youth to consider not only their immediate jobs in terms of employment expectations but also to learn and update their knowledge and skills and develop in the direction of all-round talents. But what they learn must be used for themselves, and if they are only superficial, the result may not be satisfactory.

#### **4.2.3. Actively engaging in new business**

"Due to employment tension and income reduction, I will go to the choice of multiple occupations and identity, the first point, a single working environment will make people numb, multiple work that is, you can work in different identity cards to get inspiration, stimulate the potential. The second point, according to their own interests and hobbies work, the daytime is the corporate elite, and the night is "Batman" can make themselves more love life and also can increase income." (A7)

According to the results of the above interviews, under the environment of rapid development of the Internet and downgrading of consumption, urban youths will choose to have both main and side businesses,

multiple occupations and identities to improve themselves and realize their ideals, which reflects their employment attitude of pursuing the satisfaction of personal values.

## **5. Factors shaping the employment outlook of urban youth in the context of consumer downgrading**

### **5.1. Accelerated modernity and pressurized existence**

#### **5.1.1. Social acceleration**

“I do not focus on the salary and perks of the job, I personally focus more on the personal time the job allows me to have. There is no end to work, so why not get out more, see more, learn more, and please myself is my outlook on life.” (A8)

From the above interviews, it is clear that society’s accelerated erosion of personal time has led urban youth to place greater value on the personal time that work can give them, which echoes their employment expectations of more de-employerized and digital careers, and the pursuit of freedom and individuality from the perspective of their own needs.

#### **5.1.2. Pressurized survival**

“Today’s society is developing rapidly, all kinds of high-tech are coming out, plus the big trend of AI, you can’t just stay in a specific position anymore, you have to use online and offline resources to learn more as much as possible, there is no harm in it, and it is not good to say that you may really be replaced by robots in the future!” (A10)

From the above interviews, it can be seen that urban youths are keenly aware of the current environment of social acceleration, intensified pressure, and “involution”, and take the initiative to contact and learn new knowledge and skills, to maintain and improve their own competitiveness, not to be abandoned by the society, and to become all-rounded and composite talents who are versatile in one specialty and multi-specialties.

### **5.2. The awakening of youth self-awareness**

“I used to think that I would be a proper five to nine ‘office worker’, down-to-earth work, get married and have children....., but now with the acceleration of society, increased pressure and consumption downgrade gradually become a major trend, I cannot be stabilized and stagnant, so rather than be eliminated by society, it is better to take the initiative to adapt to the trend of the times.” (A11)

According to the interviews mentioned above, urban youths are not only focusing on the immediate future in today’s social environment, but also on their own practical needs and interests, which are not pursued blindly, but out of consideration for the background of the times and their development. In other words, such employment concepts of urban youths are the result of their awakening of self-consciousness.

## **6. Conclusion**

Through participant observation and interviews with several urban youths, this paper finds that they display different career perceptions and expectations from their predecessors. This new outlook on employment is a result of the compression of personal time and the intensification of stressful existence caused by the acceleration of modernization and the return of urban youth to self-awareness. In this regard, society should respect and adapt to their new employment attitudes and expectations, and create a favorable working

environment for them to strengthen their ideals and enhance their abilities.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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