

**Study on Post-Pandemic Psychosocial Competence Characteristics and Employment
Needs of College Graduates in Fuzhou, China**

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Abstract

The outbreak of COVID-19 had a profound impact on the development of all countries in the world, especially on college graduates. The learning style of college students has significantly changed during the pandemic, and their psychosocial competence and employment needs have

also been affected. Through semi-structured interviews with thirty graduates and ten career guidance counselors from colleges in Fuzhou City, China, it was found that the characteristics of college graduates' psychosocial competence in the post-epidemic era mainly include self-cognitive bias, insufficient self-regulation, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and negative social effects. There are three main aspects of college graduates' employment needs in the post-pandemic era: timeliness and effectiveness of information release, employability training, and improved psychosocial competence.

Keywords: *Post-pandemic era; college graduates; psychosocial competence; employment needs*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of COVID-19 at the end of 2019 posed significant threats and severe challenges to the lives, work, and studies of people worldwide. Many countries declared a state of emergency, with China prioritizing epidemic prevention and control. The COVID-19 pandemic has not only affected social development in China and globally but has also profoundly changed people's perspectives and concepts, particularly among college students. According to the survey results of the China National Mental Health Development Report (2019-2020), 18.5% of college students have a depression tendency and 4.2% have a high-risk tendency of depression. 8.4% have anxiety tendency (Fu et al., 2021). By the end of 2022, China's strict epidemic prevention situation will be fully opened up, which will cause university students to have comprehensive psychological and physiological symptoms (Chen et al., 2021). In particular, college graduates face the pressure of employment, which is more prominent, and it is easy to reduce the level of psychosocial ability, thus affecting their employment process. Therefore, exploring the characteristics of college students' psychosocial competence and employment needs in the post-epidemic era has an essential impact on improving the employment effectiveness of college graduates and social stability.

1.1 Research Problem

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought significant challenges to universities and society, especially in the employment of college graduates. First of all, the impact of the epidemic has affected all walks of life, especially the bankruptcy of many small and medium-sized enterprises and the narrowing of employment channels, the pressure of employment competition has intensified which seriously limits the employment choices of college students. In addition, to reduce the epidemic and avoid excessive crowd gathering, colleges and universities have to convert traditional offline courses into online courses, resulting in a decrease in social interaction among many college students, a lack of opportunities for social practice, and difficulty in combining theoretical knowledge with social practice, which limits the development of individual employability. Finally, the impact of the epidemic also affected the mental health of college students to a certain extent and had a significant effect on their self-cognition and social adaptation. Therefore, to understand the characteristics of college students' psychosocial competence and employment needs in the post-epidemic era, on the one hand, we can understand their mental health level and carry out targeted psychological counseling. On the other hand, we can understand the employment needs and difficulties, and carry out targeted assistance.

1.2 Research Gap

Previous studies on the mental health of college students in the post-epidemic era mainly involve general mental health problems and challenges caused by the COVID-19 epidemic, and the gap is the lack of research on the psychosocial competence required for successful

employment of college students. On the basis of previous research results, this study explores the characteristics of college graduates' psychosocial competence in the post-epidemic era from the perspective of psychosocial competence. It explores the employment needs of college students on this basis, providing valuable references for universities and society.

1.3 Research Objectives

The following are the objectives of this study:

RO1: To examine the characteristics of psychosocial competence of college graduates in the post-epidemic era.

RO2: To explore the employment support needs of graduates to help them improve their employability.

1.3 Research Questions

RQ1: What are the characteristics of college graduates' psychosocial competence in the post-epidemic era?

RQ2: What are the employment needs of college graduates in the post-epidemic era?

The research questions of this study focus on understanding the characteristics of psychosocial competence and the employment assistance needs of Chinese college graduates in the post-epidemic era. These questions aim to explore the specific challenges that college graduates may face in securing employment, as well as the gaps in employment assistance provided by colleges that may hinder their ability to support these students effectively. By addressing these questions, this study seeks to offer insights for enhancing the psychosocial competence of college graduates and improving employment assistance to better support their job placement outcomes.

2. 0 LITERATURE REVIEW

To conduct the research more effectively and in accordance with the research questions and objectives of this study, the impact of the epidemic on the following three aspects is presented: college students' employment, the development of psychosocial competence, and changes in employment demand.

2.1 The Impact of COVID-19 on College Students' Employment

The outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020 has significantly impacted the world, particularly in terms of its effects on the employment of college students, as highlighted by existing studies. This impact can be categorized into three main aspects. First, there has been a reduction in employment channels; many small and medium-sized enterprises have either reduced their recruitment efforts, implemented layoffs or even gone bankrupt, resulting in a sharp decline in employment opportunities. Second, the shift from offline recruitment to online recruitment has imposed higher expectations on graduates, who must now effectively highlight their strengths. Lastly, the decrease in social practice and employment training has also been notable. To avoid crowd gatherings and reduce the risk of virus transmission, social practice and employment training have been restricted, which has adversely affected the employability of college students (Cao et al., 2020; Li et al., 2021).

2.2 The Impact of COVID-19 on College Students' Psychosocial Competence

Psychosocial competence refers to a person's comprehensive ability to respond effectively to the needs and challenges of daily life, maintain a healthy mental state, and exhibit adaptive and positive behaviors both personally and in relationships with others, society, and the

environment. Psychosocial competence enables a person to translate knowledge, attitudes, and values into practical competence, namely what to do and how to do it. According to the definition of the World Health Organization, it includes six essential aspects such as self-cognitive, interpersonal communication, emotional regulation, perspective-taking, problem-solving, and self-discipline (WHO, 1997). This ability is closely related to people's personality and external environment, which in turn affects people's attitudes and behaviors (Chen & Wang, 2020). Developing these competencies is crucial for young people, especially as they transition from education to employment. The impact of COVID-19 on college students' psychosocial competence is mainly reflected in their mental health. According to existing studies, college students' mental health experienced a process from relatively stable to fluctuating during the COVID-19 pandemic (Wang et al., 2020). In particular, they are affected by factors such as prolonged isolation at home, leading to reduced social interaction and increased feelings of loneliness and anxiety. From the perspective of future development, most college students are confused, and this effect is persistent (Xiang et al., 2020). The changing job market and heightened competition faced by graduates due to the pandemic have intensified the demand for strong psychosocial skills among them.

2.3 Impact of COVID-19 on the Employment Demand of College Students

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the employment demand of college students in many ways. First, employment stability has become the primary consideration for college students' employment needs, such as civil servants, public institutions, and large state-owned enterprises (Zhu & Zhang, 2020). Second, industry needs have changed. Online-related sectors, such as e-commerce, online education, and Internet technology, have seen increased demand for talent due to business growth during the pandemic, attracting more attention from college students (Chen et al., 2021). Additionally, there is a renewed emphasis on the need for vocational skills. With the rise of telecommuting and online business, college students have a

more urgent need for digital skills, online communication, and collaboration. Furthermore, innovative thinking and adaptability have become essential competitive advantages for college students in the job market (Zhang & Fan, 2020; Wang et al., 2021).

2.4 Conceptual Framework of Study

Guided by social cognition theory, the life skills framework, and stress and coping theory, this study focuses on the characteristics of psychosocial competence and the employment demands of college students in the post-epidemic era. The independent variables included psychosocial ability and employment demand. Psychosocial competence includes self-cognition, interpersonal communication, emotional regulation, perspective-taking, problem-solving, and self-discipline. Employment needs include timely information dissemination, targeted skills training, and psychosocial support interventions. Combining relevant theories and research questions, the conceptual framework is as follows:

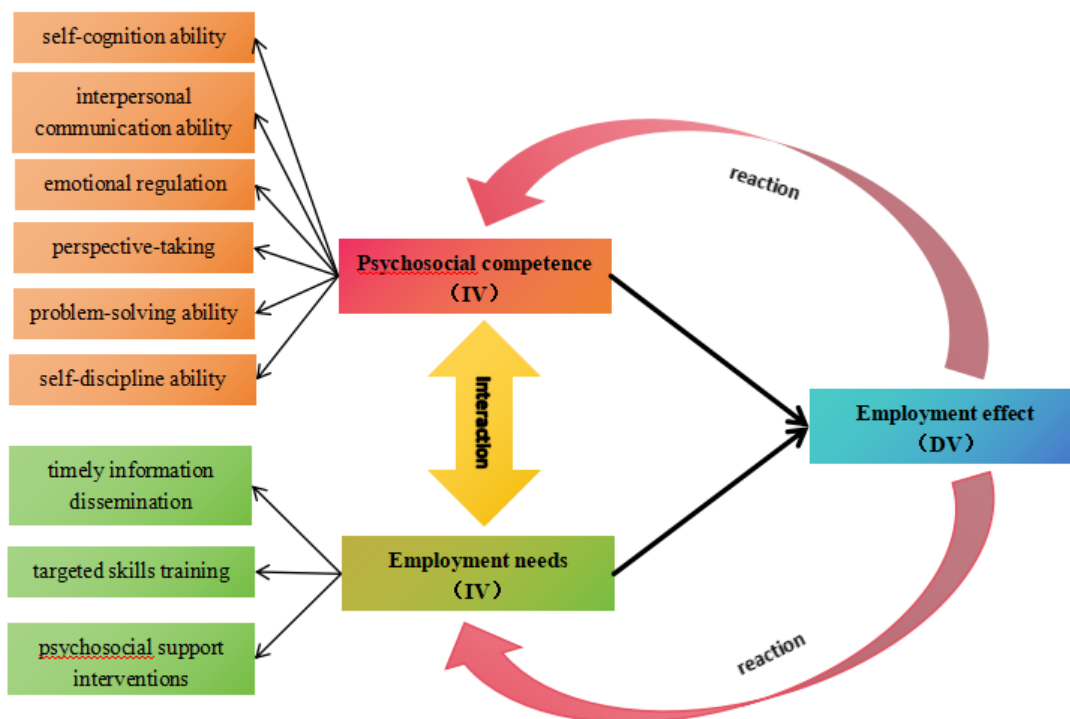


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

2.5 Underpinning Theories

The theory of this study is mainly based on the following theories, which jointly support the development of this study.

2.5.1 Social Cognitive Theory

Social cognitive theory focuses on how individuals acquire knowledge, form ideas, and guide their behavior by observing the behavior of others, their own experience, and the feedback of the external environment. According to this theory, human behavior, cognition, and

environment interact to influence individual development and learning (Bandura, 1986). Individuals in social situations observe the actions of others and their consequences and adjust their behavior according to these observations. Self-efficacy is a critical concept in social cognitive theory, which refers to an individual's ability to judge and believe whether he can perform a specific behavior. People with high self-efficacy are more likely to take proactive actions and have more perseverance in facing challenges. People with low self-efficacy tend to have negative emotions and are more withdrawn from action. In addition, social cognitive theory emphasizes the role of expectations. Individuals' expectations about the outcome of their future actions influence their current decisions and actions. This theory helps to understand how graduates' beliefs about their abilities and emotional regulation affect their employment.

2.5.2 Life Skills Theory

Life skills theory emphasizes the ability of individuals to adapt to daily life and cope with various challenges. These skills include self-cognition, emotion management, communication, problem-solving, decision-making, interpersonal relationship management, etc. (WHO, 1997). Self-cognition skills enable individuals to understand their strengths, weaknesses, interests, and values to make more appropriate choices for their lives and careers. Emotion management skills help individuals identify and regulate their emotions to maintain a good mental state. Practical communication skills are essential to building and maintaining good relationships. Problem-solving and decision-making skills enable individuals to analyze problems, develop solutions, and make informed choices in complex situations. Good interpersonal skills enable individuals to get along harmoniously with others and cooperate for win-win results. By cultivating and improving these life skills, individuals can better cope with various pressures and changes in life, improve the quality of life, and achieve personal growth and development (Goleman, D., 1995). This framework provides a theoretical basis for understanding graduates' competencies

for successful employment in the post-pandemic era.

2.5.3 Stress and Coping Theory

Stress and coping theory emphasizes the physiological, psychological, and behavioral responses of individuals to stress, as well as strategies for effectively managing that stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Stressors can come from various life events, such as work stress, interpersonal problems, and significant life changes. When an individual perceives stress, the body will produce a series of physiological responses, such as increased heart rate, blood pressure, and changes in hormone secretion. On the psychological side, there may be anxiety, depression, anger, and other emotions. Coping with stress can be divided into positive coping and negative coping. Positive coping strategies include problem-solving, seeking social support, changing cognitive evaluation, etc. Problem-solving refers to directly acting on stressors to eliminate or reduce stress. Seeking social support, such as talking to family, friends, or professionals, can provide emotional support and practical advice. To change cognitive evaluation is to reduce the impact of stress by adjusting the perception and attitude toward stressful events. Negative coping strategies such as avoidance, denial, and excessive drinking often provide only temporary relief from stress but may lead to more severe problems in the long run. Effective stress management requires individuals to use various coping strategies comprehensively and flexibly adjust them according to specific situations (Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S., 1984). This theory helps to understand how graduates cope with the stress of finding a job in the face of employment challenges.

2.6 Theoretical framework

Based on the three underpinning theories, a theoretical framework for enhancing graduate

employability has been developed. Social Cognitive Theory provides a foundation for understanding how observational learning, self-efficacy, and self-regulation influence graduates' job-seeking behaviors and outcomes. The Life Skills Framework identifies critical life skills necessary for navigating the job market, including self-awareness, empathy, critical thinking, decision-making, and stress/emotion management. Stress and Coping Theory explains how graduates can manage job search-related stress through problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies.

This framework integrates the three theories to create a comprehensive approach to improving graduate employability by enhancing their cognitive, emotional, and practical skills.

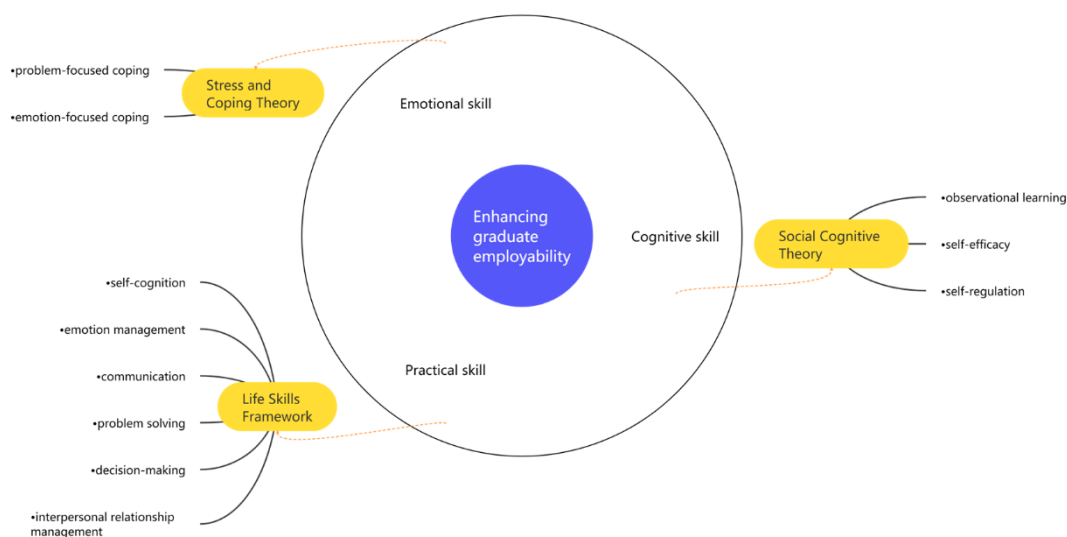


Figure 2: Theoretical framework

2.7 Summary

The literature review highlights the significant impact of COVID-19 on universities and society, particularly concerning college graduates' psychosocial competence and employment needs. It underscores the importance of psychosocial competence and employment support in the post-pandemic job market, informing the development of targeted interventions and support mechanisms. Furthermore, in alignment with the relevant research theories and problems, the

research concept is articulated, and the conceptual framework is formulated. Additionally, to clarify the theoretical foundation of the research, the relevant theories are briefly outlined.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

In general, this study adopts a qualitative research method to carry out research. Semi-structured interview method was used to collect data, and analysis software such as NVivo was used to code and analyze the data, to explore the characteristics of college students' psychosocial competence and employment needs in the post-epidemic era. In addition, the research design, participant selection, research instruments, data collection, and analysis are briefly stated in this part.

3.1 Participants

A total of 40 participants were selected from Fuzhou City, including 30 college graduates and 10 career guidance teachers. Among the 30 graduates, 14 were male and 16 were female, with 12 from liberal arts, 8 from science, and 10 from engineering. Additionally, 17 participants were from urban areas, while 13 were from rural areas. Among the 10 teachers, 4 were male and 6 were female. In terms of experience, 2 teachers had less than four years in career guidance, 6 had four to eight years of experience, and 2 had over eight years. In order to carry out the employment guidance work of college graduates more effectively, most career guidance counselors have been engaged in employment guidance work for more than four years, and all the participants had a Master's degree.

3.2 Semi-structured Interviews

Since this study aims to gain deeper insights into the characteristics of psychosocial competence and the need for employment support among college graduates in the post-epidemic era, a semi-structured interview is the most suitable and effective research instrument for this qualitative

analysis. Semi-structured interviews provide flexibility during data collection, allowing researchers to gather information that is particularly relevant to the study. These interviews were conducted using guidelines based on the research objectives. The guide includes general demographic information about the graduates, such as gender, major, and area of residence, and aims to investigate how these individual characteristics influence psychosocial competence and employment support needs. Additionally, the guide includes information on the years of experience of the career counselor participants to ensure they possess sufficient expertise to understand the psychosocial competence and employment needs of students.

The guidelines included open-ended questions such as, "What do you think will happen to the psychosocial competence of college graduates in the post-pandemic era?" and "What are the characteristics of psychosocial competence?". These questions were designed to elicit detailed responses from both teacher and student participants regarding their perceptions of psychosocial competence and the employment support needs of graduates.

3.3 Data Collection Procedures

The interviews were conducted over a three-month period, accommodating the preferences of the participants, and were held either face-to-face or via online video calls as appropriate. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. The interview questions were reviewed by relevant experts in the field to ensure their effectiveness. Before the interviews, the purpose was explained to the participants, who were then asked to sign an informed consent form. With their consent, the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

To ensure confidentiality, the information of the interviewees was anonymized: graduate

participants were labeled as S1, S2, S3, and so on, while career guidance counselors were labeled as T1, T2, T3, etc. Aside from demographic questions, no identifying information about the participants was collected, thus protecting their anonymity. Given that no manipulation of participants occurred, the expected risks associated with participation in this study were minimal. Data storage and processing procedures were subject to strict confidentiality agreements to prevent unauthorized access or disclosure.

3.4 Data Analysis

To further understand the characteristics of college students' psychosocial competence in the post-epidemic era, NVivo software was used to conduct an in-depth thematic analysis of the collected data. The process involved several steps:

First, is data preparation. Collect and organize relevant texts and other materials, and import them into NVivo software to ensure that the data format is correct.

Second, initial coding. Carefully read and understand the data content to create initial coding categories based on research questions and objectives. Critical information in the data is tagged and encoded to group similar content into the same category.

Third, query and retrieval. Use NVivo's query function to find the frequency and distribution of specific codes or keywords, and explore the relationships and associations between codes.

Fourth, analysis and summary. Perform statistics and analysis on the coding results to understand the weight of each category in the data. Delve into important codes and topics to uncover underlying patterns, trends, and perspectives.

Fifth, explanation and reporting. According to the analysis results, the research questions are

explained and answered. Quote directly from the interview to illustrate the main points.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Characteristics of College Students' Psychosocial Competence in the Post-Pandemic Era

Through data analysis, it is found that the characteristics of college graduates' psychosocial competence in the post-epidemic era mainly include self-cognitive bias, insufficient self-regulation, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and negative social effects.

4.1.1 Self- Cognitive Bias

Self-cognition refers to an individual's degree of self-understanding and evaluation tendency. Self-cognitive bias is the phenomenon where an individual's self-evaluation is inconsistent with reality, encompassing two aspects: overestimating oneself and underestimating oneself (Li et al., 2018). In interviews, many graduates exhibited a "less than ordinary" effect, where their self-evaluation and cognition were lower than their actual abilities. For example, one student stated, "Since going to college, I often feel like I'm on vacation. Although we had online courses during the pandemic, I never felt fully engaged. I can't recall any specific content taught by the teachers." Some teachers noted, "Students now prefer to take civil service exams or seek positions in public institutions because they perceive private sector jobs as demanding and offering less personal time, while public sector jobs are seen as stable and less affected by the pandemic." This self-cognitive bias, particularly the tendency to underestimate oneself, poses a significant challenge for college graduates in the post-pandemic era, adversely affecting their employment readiness.

4.1.2 Insufficient Self-Regulation

Self-regulation involves individuals adjusting and controlling their behavior and attitudes to achieve internal balance and external adaptation. College graduates, at the "crossroads" of

social role change, often face challenges in this area. Although physically mature, psychological development is still in the "lactation period", relative to the "social human" development lag significantly. One student stated, "The pandemic has had a huge psychological impact on me. Sometimes I wonder, what if the epidemic returns? I felt safer in school, but entering the workforce felt like facing the virus directly. Additionally, if new prevention and control measures are implemented, even my income will be interrupted, and I feel anxious and depressed." Self-regulation is crucial for managing internal and external balance, and its deficiency among graduates significantly impacts their employment outcomes. Among the 30 students surveyed, 12 students directly proposed inadequate self-regulation, and seven indirectly expressed inadequate self-regulation, accounting for 63.33%.

4.1.3 Negative Social Effects

Negative social effects refer to psychological and physiological discomfort caused by adverse social environment factors, including online and peer environments. During the pandemic, the internet was flooded with information, impacting students' ideologies and sometimes leading to anti-social behavior. Teachers noted, " This year's graduates have been most affected by the pandemic, spending almost their entire university life in this period. During their crucial graduation period, they are bombarded with information, making them susceptible to negative public opinion." Some students were also criticized by relatives for perceived academic inactivity during the pandemic. A teacher said, "During the winter vacation, my students were beaten by their relatives. They think this year's graduates have been in the midst of the epidemic, almost on vacation, what can they learn?"

From the surface, the negative social effect is the influencing factor of college graduates' psychosocial competence. However, from a deep level, it is one of the characteristics of college graduates' psychosocial competence, because it is more reflected in the unique attitude and behavior pattern of college graduates under the influence of the external social environment.

4.1.4 Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

PTSD refers to delayed and long-term mental disorders following severe psychological trauma, manifested by repeated flashbacks and increased alertness (APA, 2013). In the context of the pandemic, some students experienced significant stress, contributing to PTSD symptoms.

One student shared, "I felt on the brink of death when my consciousness was blurred. I didn't know if I was scaring myself, and I stayed in the hospital for half a month before being discharged. Now I still feel a kind of uncomfortable feeling. Whenever I had a cough, I was scared and felt my body temperature rise and I had trouble breathing. I didn't feel better until my temperature was normal."

PTSD can be divided into three categories: acute, chronic, and delayed. From the collected data, most PTSD cases observed were acute. Educators must monitor graduates with PTSD symptoms and those they interact with to prevent the spread of this condition.

4.2 Employment Needs of College Graduates in the Post-Pandemic Era

The semi-structured interviews and secondary coding revealed three main aspects of college graduates' employment needs in the post-pandemic era: timeliness and effectiveness of information release, employability training, and improved psychosocial competence.

4.2.1 Timeliness and Effectiveness of Information Release

This aspect involves schools promptly and accurately forwarding recruitment information to students. It includes two dimensions: one is the time dimension, and the other is the validity dimension. The time dimension is easy to understand, that is, the speed level of the release time. The validity dimension refers to the accuracy or correctness of information release.

Some interviewees said: "Because we understand the limited employment channels, the recruitment information is not comprehensive, and we are afraid of encountering fraud in the form of recruitment, so we pay more attention to the recruitment information released by the school. But a lot of the job postings are very close to the deadline, and the preparation time is very tight." A graduate said: "The college does not classify the recruitment information according to the major, but puts all the majors together. We can't find suitable professional recruitment information quickly, and sometimes we miss it because of too much information." Teachers noted, "Some excellent students struggle with resume writing or interview skills, often getting eliminated early. Hence, teacher recommendations are crucial for students' employment."

From the school level, the timeliness and effectiveness of information releases need schools to take the initiative to help employment, which is one of the critical links of the employment mechanism of college graduates in the post-epidemic era.

4.2.2 Employability Training

Employability, as first proposed by British economist Beveridge (1909), refers to the ability to obtain and maintain employment. In 2005, the American Council on Education and Employment further clarified employability. Employability includes not only the ability to find a job in a chivalrously understood sense but also the ability to continue to complete work and achieve good career development (ACE, 2005).

Some of the interviewees said: "During the university, basically did not receive professional guidance or training related to employment, only took a career guidance course in the freshman year, occasionally there are lectures, but not targeted, so the interest in learning is not high.

Now it is time to find a job interview, only to find that targeted employment training is still very necessary. I think if there were such training now, graduates would take it."

Employment ability is not the discontinuity and assault to carry out the work; it is continuous and progressive to carry out the work. Employability training is a "course" that graduates need most during their employment, and it is also a work that universities often ignore or attack. In the post-epidemic era, the characteristics of psychosocial competence of college graduates put forward higher requirements and expectations for this work.

4.2.3 Improvement of Psychosocial Competence

Some students mentioned, "I'm nervous about job hunting and don't know how to find the right job. I'm also scared of interviews and often go blank when speaking in front of strangers, I do not know what to say. I didn't answer the interviewer's question because I was nervous. When I came out, I realized it was a very simple question."

Teachers observed, "Graduates today are like greenhouse flowers, overly protected by schools and families, lacking basic interpersonal skills. The pandemic has exacerbated this, they have less contact with the outside world, making graduates more reserved."

Psychosocial competence encompasses an individual's developmental level and represents the highest standards of personal quality. The level of psychosocial competence development among graduates in the post-epidemic era directly influences the effectiveness of solutions to the challenges they face. Consequently, it plays a crucial role in their employment prospects.

5. CONCLUSION AND PROPOSED FRAMEWORK

5.1 Conclusion

The post-pandemic era has highlighted significant psychosocial characteristics among college graduates, including self-cognitive bias, insufficient self-regulation, PTSD, and negative social effects. These factors directly influence their employment process. To help graduates effectively complete the employment work, colleges should focus on addressing these characteristics through targeted psychological education, correcting self-cognitive, improving self-regulation, clearing goal positioning, improving self-emotion and behavior regulation ability, and using techniques like "attribution theory" and "ABC theory" (Ellis, 1962; Weiner, 1985). Graduates with PTSD require timely interventions such as "imagery dialogue" and "sand table therapy" to minimize the risk.

In terms of employment assistance needs, graduates require timely and adequate information dissemination, employability training, and enhanced psychosocial competence. Universities must address these needs by improving psychosocial competence, mobilizing teachers to actively seek and recommend employment opportunities, and providing continuous employability training. Survey data indicated specific needs for resume making (17 students), interview skills improvement (21 students), and interpersonal communication and expression skills enhancement (12 students).

5.2 Proposed Framework

The analysis of the psychosocial competence characteristics and employment needs of college graduates in the post-pandemic era has practical significance for improving employment support in universities. Future research should further explore the establishment of employment mechanisms that meet current societal needs and new measures to support graduates.

Firstly, Improving Psychosocial Competence: Universities should focus on enhancing graduates' psychosocial competence, and fostering self-awareness, emotional regulation, and interpersonal skills.

Secondly, Proactive Information Dissemination: Universities need to ensure the timely and accurate release of employment information, leveraging teacher networks for personalized recommendations.

Thirdly, Continuous Employability Training: Implement targeted and ongoing employability training programs, covering resume writing, interview skills, and communication abilities.

These strategies aim to address the unique challenges faced by college graduates in the post-pandemic era, promoting their successful transition into the workforce.

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