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Research Article

Influencing factors of students' digital employment intention in higher vocational colleges: a qualitative research based on NVivo12.0

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ABSTRACT

Digital technology has significantly impacted university students' employment, but its effect on their intention to pursue digital jobs remains unresolved. This study aims to qualitatively explore the factors influencing the digital employment intentions of students in higher vocational colleges. A combination of purposive sampling and heterogeneity sampling, supplemented by snowball sampling, was used to conduct semi-structured in-depth interviews with 20 employment stakeholders from higher vocational colleges in Jiangxi Province, China. NVivo 12.0 was employed to construct an influencing factor model of digital employment intention based on the grounded theory coding method. The results indicate that behavioral attitude, external expectations, and behavioral perceived influence the digital employment intentions of these students, leading to the development of a theoretical model. Based on these findings, management recommendations are proposed for stakeholders.

Keywords: digital employment; employment intention; higher vocational colleges; qualitative research; grounded theory

INTRODUCTION

The continuous progress of artificial intelligence, big data, and other technologies has driven the development of the digital economy, accelerating digital transformation across various industries(H. Li & Yang, 2021). This transformation has given rise to numerous new industries and created a wealth of job opportunities(Siebel, 2019). According to the 2022 edition of the Occupational Classification of the People's Republic of China, new occupations related to digitalization and intelligentization have comprised about 60 percent of the total number of occupations in China since 2019.

Currently, the structure of China's digital labor force resembles a pyramid, characterized by a shortage of high-skilled labor, a large base of ordinary skilled labor(Zhang & Chen, 2019), and a significant gap in the supply of digital talent. The Manufacturing Talent Development Planning Guide forecasts that by 2025, China's new-generation information technology and robotics industries will face talent gaps of 9.5 million and 4.5 million, respectively(Ling Li, 2018).

Employment is a fundamental aspect of livelihood security(Jonna, 2012), and for China, a major player in vocational education, the employment issues of vocational students are particularly critical. While digital employment has expanded job opportunities for vocational college students, it has not fully alleviated their employment pressures. Students generally have limited understanding and mastery of digital technology(Haleem, Javaid, Qadri, & Suman, 2022), are unfamiliar with digital employment policies, and exhibit a low intention to pursue digital employment.

Current research on students' digital employment primarily focuses on the forms of digital employment, such as digital flexible employment (Liu, Xie, & Li, 2023; W. Wang, Zhao, Zhou, & Tan, 2019; Xiao, 2019)，digital entrepreneurship (Soltanifar, Hughes, & Göcke, 2021)，digital employment quality (Li Li, 2022; Y. Li & Wang, 2017; Pan, 2014) (T. Wang, Zeng, & Yang, 2011). However, there is a lack of studies on the impact of

digitalization on the employment intentions of students in higher vocational colleges, especially those employing qualitative methods.

In light of this research gap, this paper utilizes a qualitative research approach, focusing on stakeholders involved in the employment of higher vocational college students in Jiangxi Province. Through semi-structured in-depth interviews, this study explores the factors influencing the digital employment intentions of these students and proposes management strategies for stakeholders.

Literature Review

Research in psychology and behavioral science indicates that behavioral intention is a key factor in predicting and explaining behavior, directly influencing decisionmaking*(*Ajzen, 1991*)*. The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) provides an effective framework for understanding and analyzing employment intentions by examining attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control(Mohammed, Fethi, & Djaoued, 2017). However, the TPB model may have limitations in the context of digital employment. Considering the complexity of digital technology and its practicality in work, this study introduces the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) to address the gaps in research related to digital technology. According to TAM, perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use influence users' attitude toward using technology, which in turn affects behavioral intention to use it (Marangunić & Granić, 2015). TAM has proven advantages in digital technology research (Scherer, Siddiq, & Tondeur, 2019).

Digital employment is influenced by various factors, including market demand, technological advancements, and individual skills and educational background(Acemoglu & Autor, 2011). These external factors impact students' career choices and development. To gain a deeper understanding of students' digital employment intentions, it is essential to consider these external factors comprehensively. Human capital theory emphasizes that an individual's education, skills, and training directly influence their competitiveness in the labor market (Becker, 2009). This is particularly true in the digital employment market, where digital skills and relevant educational background determine job opportunities and career attractiveness. Expectancy theory provides a framework for analyzing individual motivation and behavioral choices(Vroom, Porter, & Lawler, 2015) , helping to understand students' expectations for digital careers and the likelihood of achieving these career goals (Moorman, 2011). By integrating human capital theory and expectancy theory, we can thoroughly explore the motivations, capabilities, and external environmental influences in the process of forming digital employment intentions among students, providing a richer theoretical foundation for the research.

Currently, the theoretical foundation in the literature on digital employment is relatively narrow, leading to weak explanatory power of research conclusions. Therefore, this study plans to use the theoretical frameworks of the Theory of Planned Behavior and the Technology Acceptance Model, incorporating expectancy theory and human capital theory. The research will design interview outlines and employ grounded theory methodology to explore the factors influencing the digital employment intentions of students in higher vocational colleges.

Research objectives

1. To analyze the current status of digital employment among students in higher vocational colleges.
2. To explore the factors affecting students' intentions to engage in digital employment in higher vocational colleges.
3. To study strategies to promote intentions for digital employment.

Methods

Grounded Theory is a cornerstone methodology of qualitative research, emphasizing the systematic data collection and analysis process to generate theories suitable for exploratory research and analysis of complex social phenomena(Glaser & Strauss, 2017).Grounded theory emphasizes constant comparison between material and code, identifying categories and concepts that occur in text, generative theory (Bernard, Wutich, & Ryan, 2016).

In Depth Interview is one of the main methods of qualitative research. Through in-depth interview with the interviewee, we can understand the interviewee's attitude, views and motivation towards the event, explore the formation process of specific social phenomena, and put forward ideas and methods to solve social problems(Babbie, 2020).

According to grounded theory, interviews, text analysis, and theory construction are an organically interactive and mutually reinforcing process. Interviews provide data and information for text analysis and theory

construction, while text analysis and theory construction guide the continuation of the interviews. In-depth interviews can generate a substantial amount of textual data, facilitating the comparison and differentiation of individual experiences through grounded theory. This process allows for the abstraction of concepts and categories, ultimately leading to the development of social theories that reflect real-life situations(Charmaz, 2014).

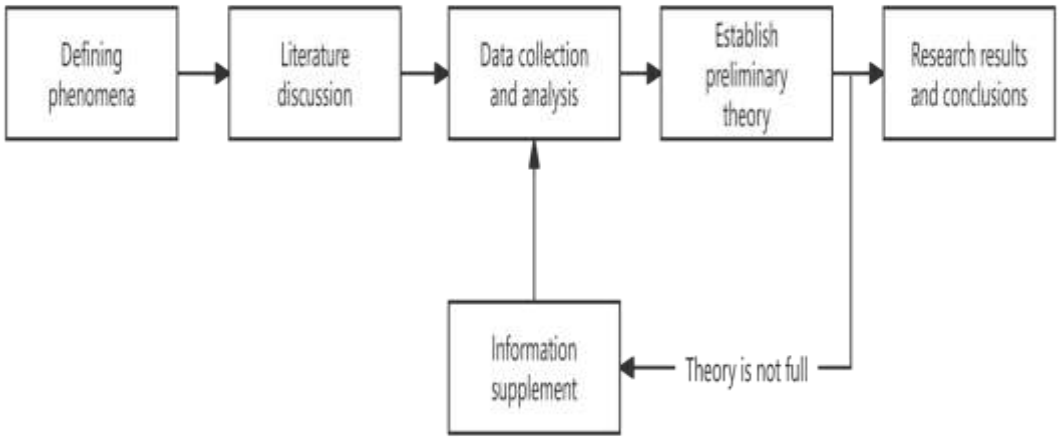

Figure 1 Flow model of grounded theory research

The Coding Process in Grounded Theory. Coding is a process of continuous analysis, generalization, induction, and identification of words, paragraphs, and other fragments in in-depth interview materials.
Open Coding: Conceptualizes and labels sentences and fragments in the interview materials.
Axial Coding: Clarifies the relationships between various concepts, integrating higherlevel categories and determining their nature and dimensions through repeated analysis.
Selective Coding: Systematically handles the relationships between categories, identifying core and secondary categories to form a theory based on these relationships (Corbin, 1990).

During the interview and data organization process, researchers continuously write memos to connect people, stories, concepts, and categories, exploring their logical relationships and gaining a deeper understanding of the participants' social lives and experiences.
This study focuses on students from higher vocational colleges in Jiangxi Province. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted using a semi-structured questionnaire with stakeholders (students, schools, enterprises, and government). The aim was to gain an in-depth understanding of the current state of digital employment among students, explore the factors influencing their digital employment intentions, and use grounded theory to construct a theoretical model reflecting these influencing factors after data organization.

4.1Sampling Method

In-depth interviews require detailed and in-depth interview data, which focuses more on the quality of interviews than the quantity of interviews(DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Therefore, this study uses a combination of purpose sampling and heterogeneity sampling, supplemented by snowball sampling. The initial participants, including students, teachers and HR managers as well as government employees, were first identified through the combination of purpose sampling and heterogeneity sampling, and then they were asked to recommend other potential interviewees who met the research criteria through snowball sampling. This approach helps build a network that can reach a diverse group of participants, leading to information saturation.

4.2 Sample Selection

The problem of student employment in higher vocational colleges is complex and multi-layered, involving education, society and economy. According to the stakeholder theory(Freeman & Reed, 1983), the interviewees were identified as the career guidance teachers, the graduating students （These two types of interviewees both come from G10 Alliance colleges in Jiangxi Province）, the HR managers of digital technology companies and the personnel in charge of employment in education departments. The research strictly abides by the principles of Informed Consent, Minimum Harm, Anonymity & Confidentiality and other interview ethics, and strictly protects the secrets obtained during the interviews(Pietilä, Nurmi, Halkoaho, & Kyngäs, 2020).

4.3Interview outline

Based on literature analysis and theoretical foundations, this study utilizes the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) to explore the impact of motivation on intention within the specific context of digitalization. Additionally, by integrating Human Capital Theory and Expectancy Theory, a semistructured interview questionnaire is designed to investigate students' digital employment intentions while considering potential external influencing factors. 4 subjects are invited for pre-interview. Through pre-interview, the questions and specific expressions of the interview are adjusted to lay the foundation for formal interview. According to the pre-interview text, three researchers were independently coded, NVivo12.0 software was used for coding consistency analysis, and then discussion was conducted. When the coding became consistent, the formal interview questionnaire was prepared.

Question 1: What do you think is the current state of digital employment among university students?

Question 2: Factors Influencing Digital Employment Intentions

1) Do you think the usefulness and ease of use of the digital technology platforms that students use affect their intentions to pursue digital employment?

2) What are your views on the current employment expectations of university students? Are government employment policies for university students effective? Do these policies influence students' decisions to choose digital jobs?

3) In the context of digitalization, what employment skills and capital do you think university students should possess? Do these factors influence their decisions to engage in digital employment?

Question 3: What suggestions and recommendations do you have for enhancing university students' intentions to pursue digital employment?

4.4Data collection

The semi-structured interview is conducted in the form of one-to-one interview. Each interviewee is interviewed for half an hour to one hour, and the interview content is recorded. All matters are carried out with the consent of the interviewee. The interview was jointly completed by two interviewers, one was responsible for asking questions, and the other was responsible for recording and supplementary questions. After the interview, the mobile phone recording was exported, and the voice data was sorted into written materials. A total of 20 interview texts were generated, forming a corpus of more than 40,000 words.

RESULTS

5.1 Visualization of the interview results

The encoding results are shown in the figure below:

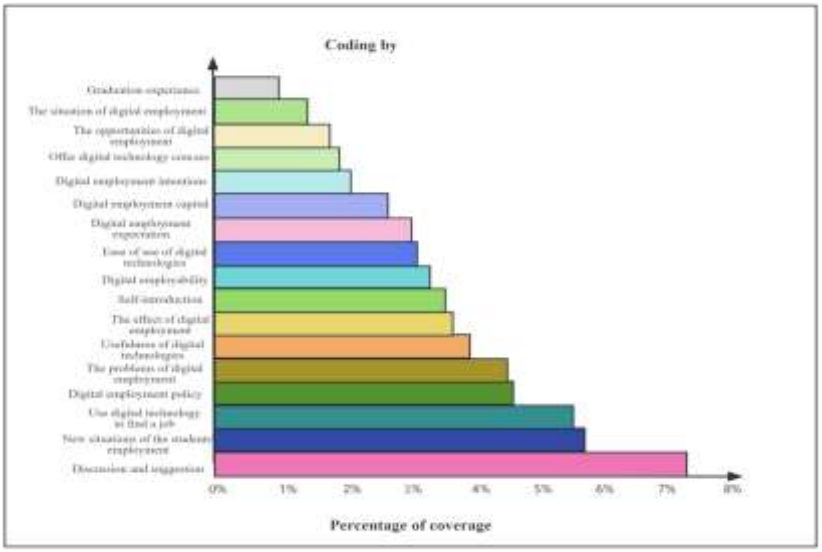

Figure 2 Node coding graph

To generate a word cloud with the 1000 most common words in NVivo12.0: import the interview texts, create a word frequency query (set the minimum word length to 3 characters and group by synonyms), run the query, customize the results, generate, and export the word cloud.

Figure 3 Word cloud map

5.2 Three-level coding

Grounded theory emphasizes constant comparison between material and code, identifying categories and concepts that occur in text, generative theory (Bernard et al., 2016).

In this study, two experienced researchers independently read the text for formal Coding, when discrepancies arise, further discussion should be conducted until a consensus is reached. Nvivo12.0 is used to conceptualize, categorize and theorize the original data for Open Coding, Axial Coding and Selective Coding. To identify the influencing factors of vocational college students' employment in the digital context. The root level coding is as follows (To save space, the following table presents some of the initial concepts obtained.)

Table 1 Three-level coding of influencing factors of digital employment intention

Initial concepts	Open coding	Axial coding	Selective coding
Related to the major, used as a roll call,Digital learning tools are very good. I like to use digital tools,I have an active learning attitude ,Track classroom interactions ， Online discussion and learning meetings	Career Useful	Perceived usefulness	Behavioral attitude
used as homework, used as a question-and-answer after class, used as a test,Convenient assignment distribution， Convenient assignment distribution， Teacher-student communication and interaction ， Syncing classroom knowledge	Study Useful		
exercise practical ability, more efficient, good learning effect, improve grades Practical exercises， Simulation experiments， Online practice tools	Practice Useful		
friendly page,clear and easy to understand interaction,clear operating guidelines,Easy to operate and navigate,Clear interaction process,Intuitive to use	Easy to Understand	Perceived ease of use	
learning anytime and anywhere, quick hand,Skilled use of digital technology tools, Access via mobile,Learn anytime and anywhere,Mobile-friendly access	Easy to learn		
Mature technology, man-machine dialogue,technical support, rapid response, good after-sales service,Supports human-machine interaction,The school has digital software and platforms, The school has computer labs	Easy to Support		
Use digital communication tools frequently, expect to learn more digital technology courses, expect to learn	Expect Digital Learning		External Expectations

more digital knowledge,expect to find more digital employment tools		Digital employment expectation	
Expect to find a job related to the major,I am full of expectations for digital work in the future,My family wants me to engage in digital work, my friends support me to engage in digital work	Expect Future Digital Jobs		
Policy is important, policy is dependent, policy can promote employment,Internship subsidies,Entrepreneurial grants,Student career guidance center,Employment matching platform	Policy Boosts Employment	Digital employment policy	
policy can promote relevant training,policy can change the school training program,Promote digital technology courses,Provide relevant certification and qualifications,School-enterprise cooperation training programs	Policy Boosts Training		
policy can provide employment solutions,policy can affect the recruitment of enterprises,policy can reduce the difficulty of finding a job,policy encourages digital work, More digital jobs,Remote work,Work from home,flexible employment,Online recruitment platforms,Digital entrepreneurship	Policy Shifts Job Market		
complete digital knowledge system, strong skills, ability to learn, interested in new things,constantly learn new digital knowledge,rich knowledge of digital technology	Strong Learner	Digital employability	Behavioral perceived
More popular, competitive, academically excellent, school reputation,More recruiting on campus ， Dedicated digital career guidance department，High employment rate，More digital technology faculty	Strong Institutional Reputation		
confident, hands-on, strong execution,I am full of confidence in digital employment,Practical experience ， Digital technology certifications ， Excellent performance in digital courses	Proficient in Digital Technology		
I have social resources, I am well-connected, I am valued at school, school attaches importance to digital training,school encourages me to join the digital company	Social Support	Employment capital	
My family possesses connections,I have many people to help me, my family is well-off,my relatives are employed by digital companies	Family Support		

5.3 Theoretical saturation test

According to the principle of theoretical saturation, interviews and analysis are mutually reinforcing and inseparable in research. After each interview, data organization and analysis are conducted to develop theoretical hypotheses. Sampling interviews are then continued based on these hypotheses to further validate and refine them until the information obtained from the interviews begins to repeat. In this study, the actual number of people interviewed in this study was 24. After repeated testing during coding, it was found that the information provided by the four people after the 20th person began to repeat a lot, and rarely provided new valuable information. The "Theoretical Saturation " of grounded theory holds that if information obtained from an interview starts to repeat and there is no new and important information, it is considered that theoretical saturation has been reached and no further interview is necessary(Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Through in-depth analysis and non-comparison, no concepts that can affect the core category have been excavated. therefore, it can be concluded that the model has reached theoretical saturation and no further interviews are necessary.

Through continuous comparative research and in-depth analysis of the original interview data, the categories formed, and the summarized factors—behavioral attitude, external expectations, and perceived behavior control—it was found that these three main categories are key factors influencing digital employment intentions among higher vocational students. Ultimately, a theoretical model of the factors affecting digital employment intentions of higher vocational students was established (see Figure 4).

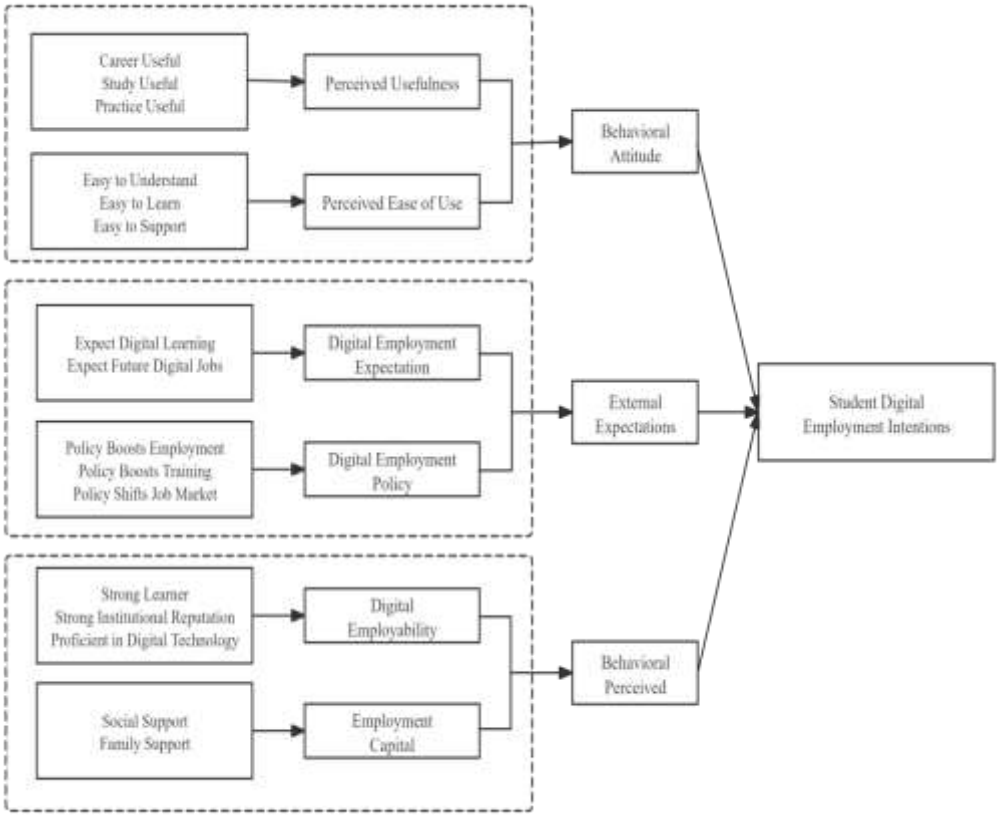

Figure 4 The influencing factors model of students' digital employment intention

Discussion

6.1 Model interpretation

The following describes the core elements, observed parameters, and their relationship with digital employment intentions in the theoretical model of factors influencing digital employment intentions among higher vocational students.

6.2 Behavioral Attitude

Behavioral Attitude refers to an individual's positive or negative feelings toward a specific behavior(Marangunić & Granić, 2015)，It primarily encompasses perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use**.**

Perceived usefulness denotes the extent to which digital technology impacts learning and employment, reflected in aspects such as Career Usefulness, Study Usefulness, and Practice Usefulness. Teacher B4, for example, considers digital education platforms essential tools for completing digital teaching tasks, thus acknowledging their high usefulness. Similarly, Student A2 finds digital technology highly beneficial for their professional studies. This aligns with previous research findings of Venkatesh and Davis (2000).
Perceived ease of use refers to the ease with which digital courses and technology platforms can be learned and operated, reflected in aspects such as Easy to Understand, Easy to Learn, and Easy to Support. Student A4 noted that if the operation is cumbersome and course design is complex, students might feel resistant, reducing their willingness to use digital courses and platforms. Conversely, Student A5 highlighted that the current digital courses and training at their school, including the platforms and software, are user-friendly and straightforward, facilitating quick and easy learning. Therefore, Perceived ease of use positively influences students' continued use of digital courses and technology platforms. This finding is consistent with earlier research, which suggests that users are more inclined to continue using systems they find easy to operate and that offer substantial assistance (Lee, Hsieh, & Hsu, 2011).

HR managers and education officials agree that the usefulness and ease of use of digital platforms can enhance students' interest and intentions toward digital employment. Behavioral attitude itself is considered a leading predictor of behavioral intention (Compeau & Higgins, 1995)，thus, students' perceptions of the usefulness and ease of use of digital technology have a direct impact on their behavioral attitude, which in turn directly influences their choices and willingness regarding digital employment.

6.3 External Expectations

External expectations arise from societal, educational, familial, and peer pressures, significantly influencing individuals' behavior and decision-making (Biddle, 2013). This factor includes two main aspects: digital employment expectation and digital employment policy.

Digital employment expectation is influenced by future career plans, school support for employment, and the expectations of family and significant others. It manifests in areas such as expectations for digital learning and expectations for future digital jobs. For instance, Student A2 expresses that students anticipate future employment with good positions, salaries, and career growth opportunities. Student A1 notes that parents and friends view digital jobs as having great prospects and encourage them to pursue careers in this field. These factors foster positive career expectations, creating a sense of responsibility, self-identity, and confidence among students, which shapes more optimistic subjective norms.

Digital employment policy includes government-provided training opportunities, support policies, and the promotion of digital employment policies. This encompasses aspects such as policy Boosts Employment, Policy Boosts Training, and Policy Shifts Job Market. Teacher B3 indicates that government employment policies directly influence students' employment intentions. As the digital economy becomes a new growth point, the government is actively introducing new policies to support its development, thus promoting digital employment. Student A4 adds that if digital employment policies provide more solutions and training for students, these policies can further encourage digital employment. However, some officials have expressed differing views, suggesting that government policies often aim for employment fairness and may primarily focus on aiding students in difficulties. Whether these fairnessoriented policies affect students' digital employment remains unclear due to a lack of evident evidence.

Consequently, students who perceive recognition and support for digitalization from schools, families, and policies are more likely to form positive expectations towards digital technology and digital employment. This drives them to engage more actively in learning and career preparation, striving for success in the digital job market. The positive effect of external expectations on digital employment intentions aligns with previous research, which indicates that external expectations and pressures positively impact students' job-seeking intentions(Putra & Purba, 2020)。

6.4 Behavioral Perceived

Behavioral perceived refers to an individual's perception of the attitudes of their reference group and their level of conformity with these attitudes(Ajzen, 1991). It encompasses the extent to which students perceive the availability or lack of necessary resources and opportunities, as well as their self-control in performing the behavior.

This factor includes two main aspects: digital employability and employment capital.

Digital employability involves elements such as being a Strong Learner, having a Good School Reputation, possessing Strong Skills, and being Proficient with Technology. During interviews, Student A5 noted that better performance in digital courses and stronger skills in using digital platforms enhance their perception of their digital employability. Scholars have also found that employability positively influences behavioral perception (Bargsted, Yeves, Merino, & Venegas-Muggli, 2021).

Employment capital also includes being a Strong Learner, having a Good School Reputation, possessing Strong Skills, and being Proficient with Technology. Interviews with students, teachers, HR managers, and officials consistently indicated that individuals with better human capital tend to exhibit stronger employability and employment capital. Teacher B3 highlighted that students with positive self-confidence perceive their behavioral capabilities more strongly, which aligns with previous research on psychological capital (Chen & Lim, 2012; Ng & Feldman, 2010).

In the TPB model, behavioral perceived directly influences employment intentions(Ajzen, 1991). Digital Employability and Employment Capital enhance students' perception of their behavioral capabilities, which positively impacts their digital employment intentions.

Conclusion

7.1 Employment status of students in vocational colleges in the context of digitalization

With COVID-19 raging and the overall global economic situation declining, China's economic growth has shifted from high speed to medium to low speed. Changes in the core macro variable of economic growth are transmitted to the labor market, which will inevitably affect the employment of students in higher vocational colleges and bring employment difficulties. In addition to the impact of macroeconomic environment, the

existing talent training programs, major Settings and course arrangements in higher vocational colleges have not adapted to the market demand, which will also cause the employment difficulties of students. Finally, due to the social reasons such as the concept of career choice, value orientation and family status, the employment of students in higher vocational colleges is becoming more and more difficult. The concrete performance is as follows: first, the number of graduates has increased year by year, reaching a record high repeatedly; Second, because the current economic situation is still in the process of bottoming out and has not yet reached the level before the epidemic, the market has limited absorption capacity for students' employment, and so on.

Digitalization has led to the development of the digital economy, which has provided new employment opportunities and brought new challenges to the labor market(Almeida, Santos, & Monteiro, 2020). Through interviews, this paper has an indepth understanding of the current situation of vocational college students' employment under the background of digitalization, and draws the following conclusions:

1. Digital employment is a new thing, but the development trend is obvious, and the development momentum is very good. There are new trends in digital employment, such as diversification of employment methods, platformization of organizational models, real-time employment information, and higher requirements for job seekers. Digital employment provides more jobs and higher salaries.
2. Digital employment also has some problems and challenges. From the perspective of students, the quality of students can not meet the needs of digital work, and students lack digital skills; From the perspective of the school, the digital curriculum is lagging behind, the school's publicity and guidance on digital employment are insufficient, the school's digital employment policy is relatively few, and the school's employment department is not fully prepared for the market and slow to respond; And the employment policy of the education department is not in place, and the supporting policy is immature.

7.2 Factors influencing the employment of vocational college students in the context of digitalization

Through interviews with 24 respondents (students, teachers, corporate HR managers, and educational administrators), this study examined the current employment status of vocational college students in the context of digitalization. Using grounded theory analysis and drawing on the TPB, TAM, Human Capital Theory, and Expectancy Theory, a theoretical model of factors influencing the digital employment intentions of vocational students was constructed. The study found that behavioral attitude, external expectations, and behavioral perception are direct factors influencing the digital employment intentions of vocational college students. Perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, digital employment expectation, digital employment policy, digital employability, and employment capital are indirect factors affecting their digital employment intentions.

7.3 Suggestions

The employment issues faced by vocational students in the context of digitalization are complex and require the combined efforts of the government, educational institutions, society, and the students themselves to alleviate the current severe employment situation. Based on the theoretical model of factors influencing the digital employment intentions of vocational students established in this study, strategies are proposed from four aspects—students, schools, enterprises, and government—to promote the digital employment of vocational students.

Students: Improve personal ability and adaptability, pay attention to the dual training of professional knowledge and digital skills, enhance digital employability, actively improve their digital employment capital, take the initiative to understand the employment policy and market demand, and improve the core competitiveness in the job market.

Schools: Strengthen digital employment guidance, and increase publicity of national digital employment policies. The construction of majors should be rationally planned and integrated into digital courses to guide students in digital skills.

Enterprises: Strengthen school-enterprise cooperation, take the initiative to connect schools, help schools understand the talent needs of the digital job market, and promote the organic connection of the education chain, talent chain, industrial chain and innovation chain.

Government: establish a digital employment information platform, create multiple employment channels, strengthen the publicity of digital education in higher vocational colleges, and promote the deep integration of enterprises and higher vocational colleges. Provide digital technology training, digital entrepreneurship support and other support policies.

Limitations and Prospects

This study was conducted the rigorous procedures and standards of grounded theory, but some limitations remain and need further improvement. First, due to the characteristics of the research method itself, although multiple researchers participated in the coding process, the results are inevitably influenced by the subjective experiences of the researchers. Second, the limited sample size presents constraints in identifying factors influencing students' digital employment intentions.

Future research could expand the sample size and employ methods such as scale surveys and structural equation modeling to deeply analyze the relationships between various influencing factors and to test the scientific validity of the theoretical model of factors affecting vocational college students' digital employment intentions.

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