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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Study on the Construction and Translation of the "Gap Year" on social media from the Perspective of Life Course Theory Based on a Comparative Analysis of Chinese and U.S. Data

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| ABSTRACT
Based on the concept of "deinstitutionalization" in life course theory, this study seeks to reconstruct the representation and construction of the "gap year" concept on social media through data analysis of the Weibo and X (Twitter) platforms, to comparatively examine the action translation occurring in China, and to explore the deinstitutionalized implications embedded in the concept of the "gap year." Using the PMI algorithm, a textual co-occurrence analysis is conducted on posts from the two platforms, and thematic clustering is performed through a modular community detection algorithm to present the themes and intensities of related discussions across different platforms. Sentiment analysis is carried out using the SnowNLP analysis model and the TextBlob text-processing library in Python, with sentiment statistics and visualization conducted by date and related themes. From three dimensions—negative, neutral, and positive—the patterns of emotional evolution across different actions are analyzed, revealing the practical forms and emotional trends of the "gap year" concept in China. The analysis shows that gap year practices presented by actors on social networks exhibit clear thematic and emotional differences, and that emotional changes across stages display a pronounced ripple effect. When linked to life course theory, the "gap year" concept undergoes a transformation in the process of translation—from active to passive, and from practices of self-exploration to strategies of returning to the educational system.

| KEYWORDS

gap year; life course theory; semantic network analysis; sentiment analysis

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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A gap year refers to a period in which young people choose to pause for one year before entering further education or employment in order to experience different ways of living, such as traveling, volunteering, or undertaking internships. In the era of globalization, the definition of the gap year has become broader, encompassing a series of non-formal educational activities undertaken by individuals for a period of 3–24 months after leaving formal education, training, or the workplace. From the perspective of the life course, this indicates that the concept of the gap year can encompass different stages of life, such as between different stages of education, between graduation and employment, during periods of work or training, and even after retirement. As various groups within China have introduced and practiced the concept of the gap year, a distinctive landscape has gradually been constructed on social media. Whether the "gap year" phenomenon represents self-redemption or "lying flat" and disengagement has once again sparked contentious social attention.

1 Research Background

1.1 The Development and Introduction of the Gap Year

The concept of the gap year originated from the European "Grand Tour" in 1660 and was later embraced in Western countries. As a form of non-formal education, it has developed globally. Gap years in the United Kingdom and the United States are characterized by diverse modes of participation, diversified forms of collaboration, the prioritization of volunteer service, and multiple sources of funding. Society generally regards the gap year as a project that benefits individuals, society, and the state alike, exerting positive effects on individual growth, the alleviation of domestic employment pressure, and global cultural exchange. An increasing number of young people have joined the practice of taking a gap year, and governments and universities in various countries have openly expressed support for this culture. In the United Kingdom, approximately 2.5 million young people participate in gap year programs each year, and this number continues to rise.

In China, the concept of the gap year was introduced relatively late, beginning in 2009 with Sun Dongchun's book *The Delayed Gap Year*. Although the concept was welcomed by young people, for a considerable period of time it was still largely imbued with the connotation of long-term travel. With the deepening of globalization and the increasing convenience of transportation, the gap year has entered a golden stage of development. Various novel forms of travel have emerged, volunteer organizations have expanded, and an increasing number of young people have gained opportunities to engage in gap year practices firsthand.

A review of existing literature shows that since its emergence in the United Kingdom in the 1960s, the concept of the gap year has gradually attracted scholarly attention, providing perspectives from disciplines such as education, sociology, anthropology, and tourism studies.

In China, relevant academic research indexed in CNKI can be traced back to 2010. Following the publication of *The Delayed Gap Year*, the topic sparked widespread discussion. During this period, scholars focused on the development of gap years abroad, their significance for educational development, and their positive role in youth socialization, affirming the beneficial impacts of gap years. After 2012, as more young people began to practice gap years and discuss them on social media, scholars increasingly examined the phenomenon in terms of youth life-stage choice strategies, feasibility, reasons for its development in China, and its impacts. Subsequently, empirical studies of gap year practices became associated with keywords such as "travel," "volunteering," "job seeking," and "slow employment," while theoretical discussions were linked to individualization theory, risk society theory, rites of passage, and theories of self-construction.

It is worth noting that contemporary Chinese society exhibits polarized evaluations of the gap year phenomenon, accompanied by various contentious viewpoints. Some argue that gap years represent irresponsibility or unstable long-term wandering, merely a way of muddling through life under the guise of travel. The stark contrast between the idealized image of the gap year and everyday reality makes it difficult for participants to adapt to and reintegrate into normal life. Moreover, gap years are sometimes regarded as synonymous with wasting time or self-abandonment, and are seen as excuses for escaping reality or indulging in laziness and inaction. Against this backdrop, significant research gaps remain to be addressed. On the one hand, within China's employment environment, taking a gap year may result in certain career disadvantages; on the other hand, in an atmosphere dominated by an accelerated society and meritocracy, gap year actors have transformed the gap year into an "exam-preparation year," reconstructing and diluting its original meaning. This suggests that the development of gap year culture in China still faces a series of challenges.

1.2 Key Concepts of Life Course Theory

As an important field of sociological research, life course studies are often referred to as a perspective or research approach, and also as an entry point for examining social issues. They aim to understand individuals' developmental trajectories across different life stages, as well as how these trajectories are shaped by social, cultural, and individual choices, focusing on development, change, and adaptation throughout the entire life span.

"The institutionalization of the life course" is a central proposition in life course research, proposed in 1985 by Kohli, a representative figure of the continental paradigm. Kohli defined "institutions" as encompassing two dimensions: first, externally imposed compulsory rules, which include not only laws and regulations promulgated by governments but also unwritten ethical norms; second, rules that possess general validity and serve as internalized references for action among social members. He

emphasized that actors' practices play an indispensable role in the constitution and reproduction of social structures. Therefore, the institutionalization of the life course also requires an exploration of how individuals plan their own life courses with institutionalized structures.

The proposition of institutionalization emerged within the context of modern society. In modern societies, life courses revolve around the educational system and the wage labor system, and are structured through various social institutions via mechanisms of temporalization, sequencing, and individualization. This produces an ideal-typical structural whole divided into three stages—childhood and adolescence, adulthood, and old age—and further forms a normative conception of the life course at the level of individual actors. Modern states commonly shape the life courses of social members through universal systems of education, employment, marriage, and reproduction. Since the reform and opening-up period, China has established a progressive model of education–work–marriage and childbearing–retirement and elderly care through compulsory education, statutory marriage ages, and pension systems. Compared with Western countries, this progressive model is characterized by the setting of "mandatory" temporal milestones, whereby individuals are expected to seamlessly enter the next life stage upon reaching a deadline. Among these, the educational system exerts particularly strong constraints on the educational activities of life course subjects.

With the advent of postmodern society, scholars have proposed the concept of "deinstitutionalization of the life course," referring to a trend toward blurred stages and reversible sequences within the life course. Kohli pointed out that the main reason for this trend lies in the transformation of capitalist modes of production from Fordism to post-Fordism, and the shift of employment relations from standard to non-standard forms, such as the rise of short-term contracts and labor dispatch systems. This trend has affected the structural boundaries between different stages of the life cycle, leading to what Beck described as the "generalization of job insecurity."

Between childhood and adolescence and adulthood, the most notable change is the "expansion of schooling and the postponement of graduation." Although the original intentions of educational systems may vary, society generally agrees that they are closely linked to post-school work careers, reflecting an organic interaction between the educational system and the wage labor system. In postmodern society, however, work careers have become unstable. To cope with the risks of occupational change or unemployment, two possible changes in the life course have emerged. First, in order to accumulate qualifications, individuals may prolong their education before entering the labor market and delay graduation. However, delayed graduation does not necessarily imply later entry into the workforce, as many individuals engage in part-time work during their studies. Second, in order to obtain better qualifications, individuals may re-enter professional training and education after entering the labor market, resulting in a reversal of the life course sequence.

These changes have blurred the boundary between the educational stage and the work stage, highlighting the uncertainty and reversibility of the life course. This reflects the flexible strategies adopted by individuals in postmodern societies to adapt to volatile labor markets. China's reality differs from that of Western societies due to distinct cultural backgrounds, including factors such as urban–rural mobility, family expectations, and extended family traditions. Compared with their Western counterparts, Chinese youth experience greater uncertainty in gap year practices, and under the influence of China's rapid social transformation, life courses have become increasingly blurred and variable.

The concept of the gap year closely aligns with the development and core meanings of life course theory. As a form of practical resistance to existing life course institutions, life course theory and its deinstitutionalization proposition provide an interpretive framework for gap year research. Within this framework, the gap year can be viewed as a lived experience that offers individuals opportunities to act within specific periods, be shaped by historical moments, actively construct their life trajectories through personal choices, and form connections with others.

2 Research Framework and Methods

2.1 Research Framework

Weibo and X (Twitter) are currently the most important and active arenas of public opinion for social communication, and they are the primary platforms where gap year–related groups are active. Analyzing discussions about the gap year on these two platforms—covering dimensions such as time, topics, and emotions—can effectively reveal how the gap year is constructed as an action on social media. This study uses the Octopus Web Data Collector with customized modules to crawl event-related content from Weibo and X, thereby building an experimental data corpus. PMI and SnowNLP methods are applied to conduct semantic

analysis and sentiment analysis of user comment texts, so as to intuitively reflect netizens' emotional fluctuations in typical events and further reveal users' levels of acceptance and identification with the gap year under different emotional experiences. The technical methodology is shown in the figure below.

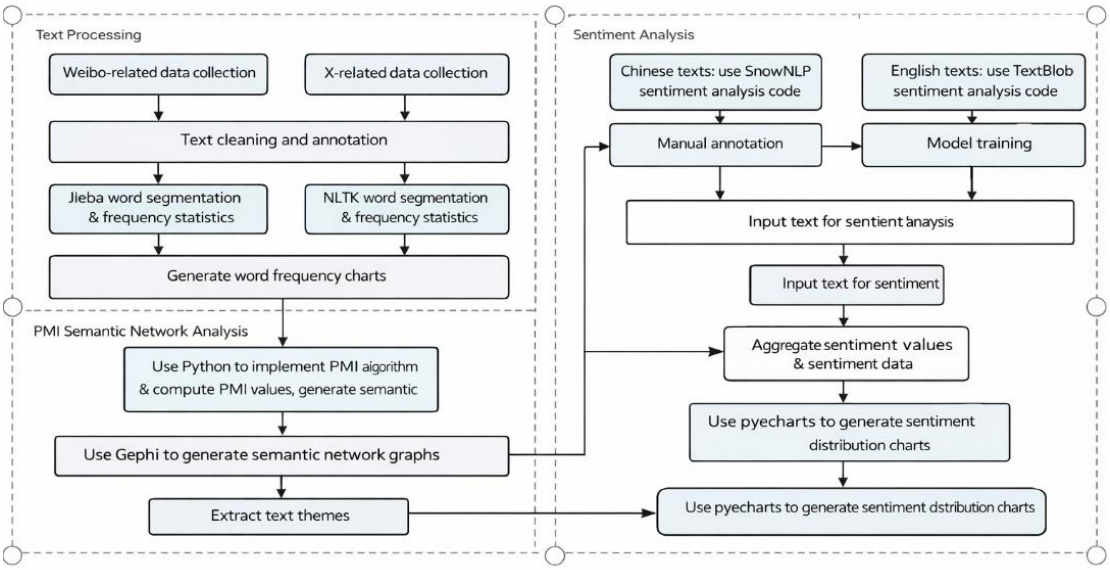

Figure 1 Technical Methodology Diagram

2.2 Research Methods

2.2.1 PMI Semantic Network Analysis

PMI (Pointwise Mutual Information) is a statistical measure used for semantic network co-occurrence analysis. It is typically used to measure the correlation between two random variables, and in natural language processing it is often applied to measure the probability that two words co-occur in a corpus. The calculation formula is as follows:

$$PMI(w_1, w_2) = \log\left(\frac{P(w_1 \cap w_1)}{P(w_1)P(w_2)}\right)$$

Where$P(w_1 \cap w_1)$ represents the probability that words w1 and w2 co-occur, and $P(w_1)$and $P(w_2)$ represent the probabilities of words w1 and w2 appearing independently. A higher PMI value indicates a stronger association between the two words. In semantic networks, a semantic relationship network can be constructed by calculating the pairwise PMI values of a set of words, where nodes represent words and edges represent the strength of semantic relationships between words. In natural language processing, PMI is commonly used in tasks such as word embedding models and topic models to capture semantic relationships between words.

In semantic network analysis, density is an indicator used to measure the degree of connectivity among nodes in a network. The density index represents the proportion of actually connected node pairs to all possible node pairs in the network. Its calculation formula is as follows:

$$\text{Density} = \frac{2 \times \text{Number of Edges}}{\text{Number of Nodes} \times (\text{Number of Nodes} - 1)}$$

The value of density ranges from 0 to 1. The higher the value, the denser the network and the closer the connections between nodes. In semantic network analysis, this is of great significance for revealing key information and identifying important nodes in the network. Based on density calculations, the number of nodes displayed in the visualization process can be adjusted, which helps to better understand the overall structure of the network.

2.2.2 SnowNLP Sentiment Analysis

SnowNLP is a sentiment analysis toolkit based on natural language processing (NLP). It adopts probabilistic and statistical methods and is widely used for sentiment analysis of Chinese texts. It relies on training with large-scale Chinese text data to learn sentiment patterns by performing word segmentation and feature extraction, and then using a Naive Bayes classifier to classify text sentiment. SnowNLP divides sentiment into two categories—positive and negative—and the returned value represents the probability of the sentiment. The sentiment score ranges from [0, 1], where values closer to 1 indicate more positive sentiment, and values closer to 0 indicate more negative sentiment.

2.2.3 TextBlob Sentiment Analysis

TextBlob is also a Python library based on natural language processing. Compared with SnowNLP, it is more suitable for multilingual text analysis and is therefore used for sentiment analysis of English texts. It is based on sentiment lexicons and rules, assigning a polarity score to each word in the text and then combining these scores to obtain an overall sentiment analysis result. TextBlob also supports phrase-level sentiment analysis and can better handle complex sentence structures through tokenization and tagging, making it suitable for sentiment analysis across different contexts.

3 Data Collection

3.1 Raw Data

With the help of Octopus Web Data Collector, in order to ensure the completeness of the temporal coverage of the dataset, the time when gap year–related keywords first appeared on the two platforms was used as the starting point. For the Weibo platform, data were collected on a monthly basis, with the top 600 posts ranked by popularity crawled each month and stored in Excel files, with one record per row. A total of two datasets comprising 26,963 records were obtained in this study. The column names include “id,” “content,” “time,” and “likes.” The distribution of the datasets is shown in the table below.

Dataset	Number of Samples (records)	Time Period
Weibo	26,528	2018.2–2023.11
X (Twitter)	2,435	2008.5–2023.11

Table 1 Sample Size and Time Distribution of the Datasets

3.2 Data Cleaning

Data obtained from Weibo often contain a large amount of webpage tag information, special symbols, emojis, images, and videos. Therefore, it is necessary to clean the text data by performing Chinese and English word segmentation, stop-word filtering, and part-of-speech tagging, removing comments with contradictory or unclear emotional expressions, as well as duplicate posts and spam content. The processed data are then stored as TXT files, with each line corresponding to one comment, forming the text corpus.

Because sentiment analysis aims to determine the emotional tendency contained in the text, such as positive, negative, or neutral, while semantic network analysis aims to construct associative networks between words to reveal their conceptual relationships, the two approaches focus on different aspects and therefore adopt different data preprocessing strategies. In general, semantic network analysis seeks to identify themes, topics, or keywords in the text. The selection of stop words tends to focus on removing words that may interfere with topic analysis, such as some common nouns and verbs, in order to ensure that the extracted keywords are more concentrated on the main themes of the text. Sentiment analysis focuses on the emotional tendencies expressed in the text, and stop words include common functional words, prepositions, and articles, so as to ensure that the analysis is more focused on emotional expression.

4 Data Analysis

4.1 Word Frequency Analysis

Using the Python programming language, Jieba and the NLTK library were employed to conduct word frequency analysis for Chinese and English texts, respectively. A total of 14,556 keywords with 150,963 occurrences were obtained from Weibo, while 4,897 keywords with 10,600 occurrences were obtained from X. The top 100 high-frequency words from each platform were visualized as word clouds, and the top five high-frequency words from the two platforms were compared.

Figure 2 Word Cloud of the Weibo *Platform*

Figure 3 Word Cloud of the X Platform

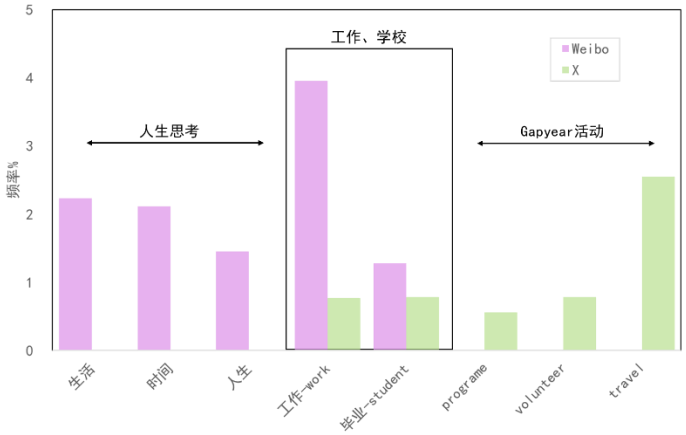

Table 2 Top 5 Keywords on the Weibo and X Platforms

The top five keywords on the Weibo platform are *work*, *life*, *practice*, *life course*, and *graduation*, while those on X are *travel*, *student*, *work*, *volunteer*, and *program*. It can be seen that the two platforms overlap in the two main topics of work and school. In terms of other topics, Chinese discussions place greater emphasis on reflections on life, while discussions in the United States focus more on various activities related to the gap year.

4.2 Semantic Network Co-occurrence Analysis

Based on the PMI function, Python code was written following these steps:1.Use the *get_comatrix* function to construct a word co-occurrence matrix.2.Use the *get_pmi* function to calculate the PMI of word pairs to measure the correlation between two random variables.3.Use the *get_net* function to construct a word network with PMI as the weight.4.Use the NetworkX library to process the graph structure.5.Use NetworkX's *write_gexf* function to save the network in GEXF format for subsequent visualization and further analysis.

In the Gephi software, the modularity community detection algorithm and the ForceAtlas 2 layout model were used to conduct clustering analysis. The number of nodes in the network was adjusted based on density calculation results. The final results show that the Chinese text network contains 328 nodes and 34,794 edges, with a density of 0.649, while the English text network contains 82 nodes and 955 edges, with a density of 0.287. The average degree and semantic network graphs are shown below.

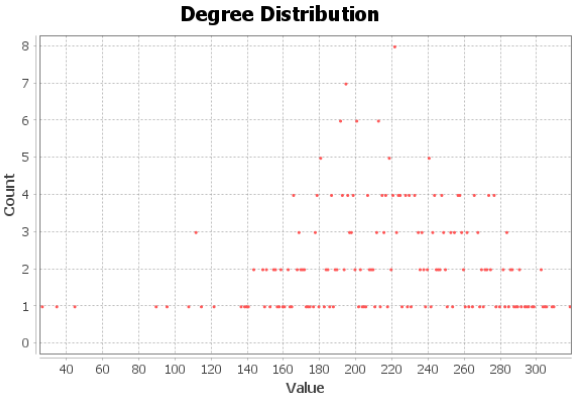

Table 3 Average Degree of the Weibo Semantic Network

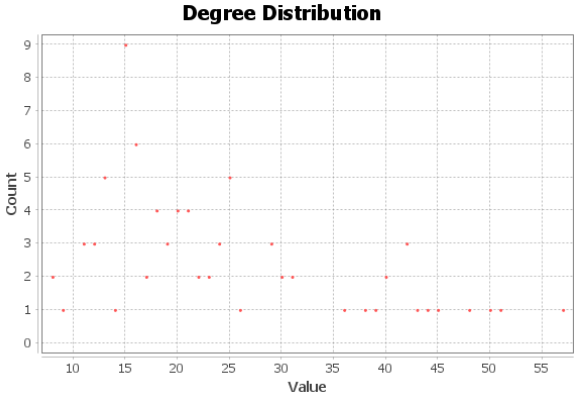

Table 4 Average Degree of the X Semantic Network

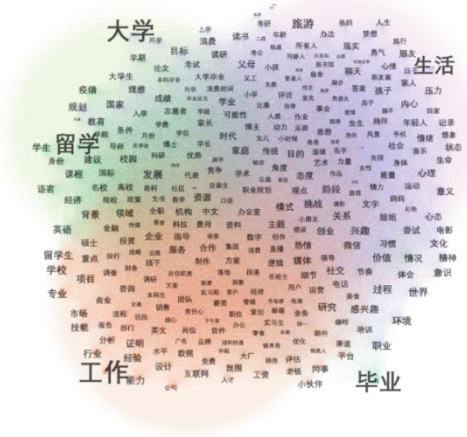

Figure 4 Weibo Semantic Network Graph

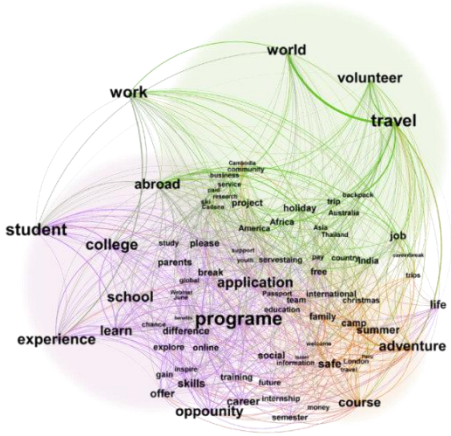

Figure 5 X Platform Semantic Network Graph

In the average degree distribution chart, the horizontal axis (X-axis) usually represents node degree, while the vertical axis (Y-axis) represents the number of nodes corresponding to each degree. The chart shows that the average degree distributions of both platforms roughly follow a normal distribution. For the Chinese text, most nodes have degrees in the range of 180–240, indicating that topic discussions are relatively concentrated and node connections are dense. For the English text, most nodes have degrees in the range of 15–20, indicating that discussion topics are more dispersed.

The semantic network graphs further support this conclusion. After modularity calculations, the Chinese text network presents three clustered communities, shown by edges of different colors in the graph. These can be categorized into three themes: school, work, and life. The main keywords include *life*, *university*, *study abroad*, *work*, and *graduation*. It can be seen that *graduation* is an important node between the themes of life and work, while *study abroad* is an important node between the themes of school and work. This, to some extent, provides evidence for the "de-institutionalization" of the life course, referring to the separation between the educational system and the wage labor system.

In the semantic network graph of the English text, three clustered communities are also present, but there is substantial overlap among them and the semantic themes are not clearly differentiated. For example, *student* and *life* appear in the same community, *travel*, *volunteer*, and *work* appear in another, and *adventure* and *camp* appear in a third. This indicates that gap year actions and experiences are important topics on social media, and that the systems of school, life, and work interact organically.

It is worth noting that the words *program* and *project* are located at the intersection of the three communities and have relatively high weights. On the X platform, *program* mostly refers to gap year–related projects and plans released by governments, relevant institutions, and universities. This suggests that policies and programs play a positive role in promoting gap year practices.

4.3 Sentiment Analysis

For Chinese texts, the SnowNLP model was used to determine the sentiment score of each text. A 1:9 ratio of data was manually labeled: the researcher manually annotated 2,029 texts, aggregating 90% of the positive and negative texts into *Pos* and *Neg* files for model training, with the remaining 10% used for accuracy testing. After three rounds of accuracy testing and re-annotation, the model achieved an accuracy rate of 0.894. English texts were processed using the TextBlob library, with 10% of the texts labeled and used for accuracy testing, resulting in a model accuracy of 0.822. Sentiment was divided into three levels: values below 0.4 were classified as negative, values between 0.4 and 0.6 as neutral, and values above 0.6 as positive. Combining sentiment scores with text timestamps, the overall sentiment distribution chart was plotted using the *pyecharts* module, as shown below.

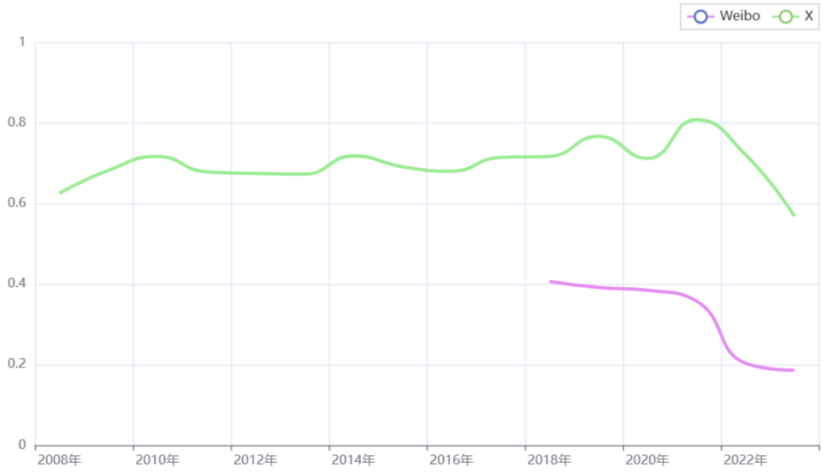

Table 5 Overall Sentiment Distribution Table

From the table above, it can be seen that related topics on the Weibo platform exhibit predominantly negative sentiment, with a sharp decline in sentiment values in 2021. In the text data, discussions over the past two years are strongly associated with topics such as *involution*, *GPA year*, *failure in postgraduate entrance examinations*, and *unemployment*. This reflects the tension between public expectations of the gap year and the life course under conditions of changing social structures.

Topics related to the gap year on the X platform show an overall positive sentiment, with values above 0.5. Sentiment values fluctuate upward from 2008 to 2021, but show a downward trend after 2021, shifting toward neutral sentiment. Analysis of the text data reveals that in the past two years, due to the impact of the pandemic, discussions on X have focused on issues such as the meaning of the gap year and whether it is a waste of time.

4.4 Temporal and Sentiment Analysis of Themes

Table 6 Weibo Theme Sentiment Distribution Table

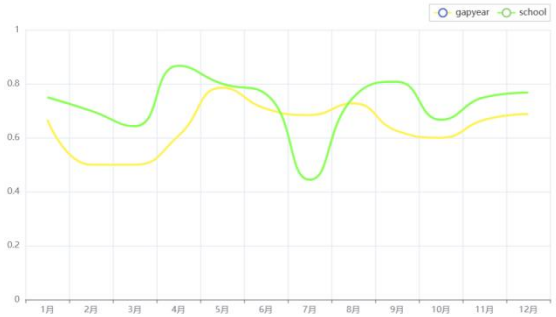

Table 7 X Platform Theme Sentiment Distribution Table

The thematic keywords identified in the semantic network co-occurrence analysis were matched with document sentiment values, and data on date, theme, and sentiment were aggregated. Dates were divided by month, and the *pyecharts* module was used to plot the thematic sentiment distribution chart, as shown below.

From the chart, it can be observed that in discussions of gap year topics on the Weibo platform, the sentiment associated with the school/study abroad theme shows a significant low value in May. According to the text data and the Chinese higher education system, May is a critical month in the graduation season, when students face graduation assessments. It is a transitional point between the educational and employment stages and also the peak period for graduation-travel–style gap year practices. As a result, social media discussions during this period convey overall negative emotions such as anxiety, confusion, and envy.

In discussions of gap year topics on the X platform, the sentiment associated with the school theme shows a low value in July. According to the text data and the U.S. education system, the summer vacation lasts 2–3 months, making it the optimal period for taking a gap year and also the peak promotional period for various gap year programs. Based on the text data, negative sentiment during this period mainly appears in the promotion of gap year programs and organizations (e.g., *graduate jobs hard to come by, why not take a gap year?*).

5 Discussion and Reflection

Based on the results of the data analysis, this section further reflects on the construction and translation of the gap year in China, as well as its embedded relationship with the life course.

5.1 Resisting Institutions: Swinging Between Education and Occupation

An individual's life follows a division based on "age" as the unit of time, experiencing various social events over time and assuming different social roles at different stages in a specific sequence, completing socially expected life plans at designated ages, and thus passing through life. Looking at the life course as a whole, temporal nodes and the ordering of events are particularly important—"what one should do at a certain age," such as studying, advancing to higher education, graduating, finding employment, getting married, and having children. As a result, individuals are taught and accustomed to living step by step, afraid to make mistakes, with each age requiring the completion of corresponding tasks to meet social expectations and to achieve a smooth transition of social roles.

At the same time, the individualized consciousness of "living for oneself," breaking free from the constraints of existing social structures and norms, has gradually awakened. Society is showing a trend toward diversification, and individuals aspire to pursue individuality and freedom, hoping to truly plan and decide their own lives and to break away from rigid social arrangements.

In discussions of the gap year, there is a clear separation between the school system and the work system. Located in the transitional period between youth and adulthood, the practice of a "gap year" is essentially an attempt to explore and re-recognize oneself. In response to confusion and dissatisfaction with real life, individuals temporarily step out of a predetermined,

standardized life trajectory, using this period for holistic adjustment—slowing down, returning to life itself, and exploring diverse life experiences. Its essence lies in pausing in resistance to the social clock, a courageous refusal of social discipline.

5.2 Passive Entry: The Shift from Active to Passive

In fact, the emergence and popularity of the gap year concept align closely with the background of the de-institutionalization of the life course. In a sense, this is an inevitable group phenomenon shaped by specific social conditions, rather than an active choice made by some individuals purely in pursuit of personal freedom.

Against this backdrop, the Chinese gap year phenomenon has its own particularities, rooted in structural employment difficulties. Due to the dual pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic and economic downturn, young people have increasingly chosen to pursue postgraduate entrance examinations or civil service exams to avoid uncertainties in the labor market. This has led to surging application numbers for national civil service exams and postgraduate exams, while admission ratios have declined year by year. By the end of 2022, the unemployment rate among urban youth aged 16–24 had reached 16.7%. Faced with a grim employment situation, young people who are unable to secure employment quickly turn to gap year practices. The Chinese-style gap year phenomenon is deeply embedded in the structural dilemma of "difficulty in employment" and has become a barometer of socioeconomic development. University graduates often struggle to transition smoothly into society, spending half a year, a year, or even longer searching for jobs, a situation exacerbated by the pandemic. The expansion of higher education has increased the number of graduates, while job opportunities have decreased; supply–demand imbalance and corporate layoffs have intensified employment competition. This structural employment dilemma has given rise to the Chinese-style gap year phenomenon.

5.3 Convergent Actions: A Default Choice Under Social Media Reference

It can be observed that Chinese groups, as translators of action, exhibit a high degree of convergence with Europe and the United States in both the content and form of their practices. These actions include traveling, volunteering, and related activities, while travel routes and forms of spiritual consumption also show convergence. This phenomenon has further solidified into a fixed behavioral reference through widespread dissemination on social media.

This indicates that in the process of translating the gap year, Chinese youth have not constructed the concept through action itself, but rather have unilaterally conformed to the concept. Paradoxically, despite engaging in similar practices, the original negative emotions brought about by pressures related to education and employment—such as anxiety—have not been alleviated. Instead, the gap year concept has been imbued with an illusory meaning, and social media displays a generally negative emotional tone.

5.4 Purpose Translation: From Self-Exploration to Returning to Education

In the Chinese social context, the "gap year" has been alienated into a "GPA year" (with GPA referring to grade point average), manifesting as another form of intensified competition, or merely a continuation of competition on a parallel track. This clearly deviates from the original intention of choosing a gap year—pursuing a freer life—yet traps individuals in a self-contradictory vortex.

In the Chinese context, this year is not used for rest, travel, or experiencing life, nor is it a pause for life exploration and replanning, but rather an excellent opportunity to overtake others on a curve. Fierce competition in the labor market has made postgraduate study a way to delay employment and enhance competitiveness, but this has led to the awkward reality of degree devaluation, plunging individuals into endless cycles of exam preparation.

At the same time, because foreign universities generally show a high level of acceptance and recognition of gap years, some overseas study applicants have incorporated gap years into their application strategies. This is reflected in some international students deliberately emphasizing their longing for a gap year in application essays to cater to universities' preferences. However, this does not mean that these students genuinely desire a profound gap year experience; rather, it often reflects an exam-oriented mindset, treating the gap year as one means of enhancing application competitiveness. This trend causes some application essays to focus more on superficial descriptions of gap year experiences rather than on genuine pursuits of exploration, growth, and personal development. Consequently, when using a gap year as an application strategy, international

students often carefully shape this experience in their essays to better align with foreign universities' preferences, which may to some extent obscure their true motivations and expectations.

The employment market offers policy advantages to fresh graduates, making fresh graduate status an implicit advantage in job hunting and a highly competitive asset. Conversely, job seekers who do not meet the criteria for fresh graduate status face differentiated treatment, employment discrimination, and are forced into more competitive social recruitment channels. In particular, résumé gaps caused by gap year practices are often repeatedly questioned by human resources personnel and may even lead to elimination during initial résumé screening, further increasing job-search difficulty. Faced with such realities, some young people, in order to retain their fresh graduate status, strategically choose to delay graduation, gaining an extra year of preparation to enhance individual competitiveness. This choice of delayed graduation represents a strategic decision made after weighing pros and cons based on personal circumstances.

In summary, whether through postgraduate study, overseas study, or delayed graduation, the purpose of the gap year has shifted from self-exploration to a practice of returning to the education system.

5.5 Guarding Against Fragmentation: Revisiting the "De-institutionalization" of the Life Course

The "de-institutionalization" of the life course is a social phenomenon that emerged under specific historical conditions, but this does not imply that the institutional framework of the life course lacks rationality. The Chinese-style gap year phenomenon is deeply embedded in the institutional background of the life course, while simultaneously disembedded from the postmodern awakening of autonomous consciousness centered on "living for oneself." It can be seen both as an individual's pause in resistance to the social clock and as a free imagination of exploring more life possibilities. To some extent, such a pause can be regarded as a system-embedded self-protection mechanism: pausing is not only permissible but necessary. Moving against the social clock is not shameful; stepping out is for the sake of better reintegration.

However, Chinese-style gap year practices have deviated from their original intentions. What appears to be a resistance to the social clock and a departure from the main track—oscillating between education and society—has been alienated into a springboard for avoiding employment and returning to education. Under such actions, the "gap" between education and society risks becoming a "fracture." The ambiguity of adulthood brought about by new social contexts, such as fluctuations in university students' self-identity, not only negatively affects young people's socialization and development but also poses serious challenges to societal development.

For young individuals, the gap year should return to its intrinsic meaning—as an opportunity to enrich and enhance oneself, to reflect and adjust plans, to explore and clarify goals, and to better adapt to the next stage of the life course. Through practice, it may be possible to explore new stages of the life course distinct from traditional ones. This is also what this paper seeks to examine: how young individuals complete the transition from school to society under rapidly transforming contemporary social mechanisms, resolve uncertainties and ambiguities about their life paths brought about by modernity, conclude their gap year life course, and ultimately achieve genuine personal growth.

It must be clarified that young people's exploration of life during a gap year is not determined solely by individual choice, but is deeply shaped by structural social institutions. The extent to which young individuals complete their gap year life course is closely related to the historical period and social system in which they are situated. Therefore, discussions of gap year youth and their performance and transitions within this life course must be conceptualized at the level of social institutions, providing young people with more opportunities to experience gap years and achieving outcomes that benefit individuals, society, and the state alike.

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