The New "Credential Game": The Disillusionment of Higher Education Promises and the Renarration of Education by Chinese and American Youth on Short-Form Video Platforms

Research Thesis

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Introduction

Over the past decade, the once-stable link between higher education and upward mobility has become increasingly uncertain. Across China and the United States, young people now speak about college degrees not only as credentials but as contested promises. Short-form video platforms (e.g., TikTok, RED, etc) have turned these sentiments into a visible vernacular: fragments of daily life, fleeting metrics, and template-driven storytelling that make structural pressures legible as feelings and formats rather than policy debates. This project takes these user-generated videos seriously as cultural texts that both reflect and reshape how youth evaluate education, work, and worth.

Rather than asking whether higher education "pays off," this study focuses on how young people talk about payoff and how such talk organizes subsequent choices. We read short-form videos as situated narratives. The puzzle is straightforward: why do youth in two powerful but institutionally distinct countries produce parallel narratives of exhaustion and disillusionment—and what do these narratives do? We therefore ask a guiding question: How do Chinese and American youth evaluate the realities of higher education and employment in short-form video narratives (e.g., risk, return, legitimacy)?

This study, by analyzing user-generated content on both Chinese and American platforms, explores how youth articulate emotional responses—ranging from anxiety to resistance—toward credentialism, unstable labor markets, and the perceived failure of educational promises. The project also aims to understand how these videos serve as cultural spaces for reinterpreting personal and collective aspirations.

At the core of this project is a puzzle: How do young people in both powerful countries articulate and perform their disappointment and disillusionment with higher education? Although the two countries differ in economic trajectories and political structures, youth in both contexts produce parallel narratives of regret, exhaustion, or retreat. This puzzle echoes what Sharone (2013) described as the "chemistry game" of American white-collar job seekers, where individuals internalized failure as personal flaw under neoliberal labor institutions. Lopez and Phillips (2019) later stated that, in the post Great Recession era, this game had become "unwinnable" and "rigged," leading workers to shift from self-blame to structural skepticism. This study extends this trajectory beyond the labor market into the educational domain, suggesting that young people today are engaging a new version of broken game; it might be called a "credential game," in which higher education itself has become the unstable site of aspiration, self-doubt, and ideological fracture.

What do these emotional expressions tell us about structural shifts in labor markets, cultural values, and the function of education in an era of uncertainty? This question matters because it reframes a global conversation on education and youth—not through policy reports or enrollment statistics, but through the lens of lived experience and cultural production. By framing this study from the post-2019 period, marked by pandemic disruptions, platformization, and algorithmic mediation, it updates the analytical horizon opened by Sharone(early 2000s moment of neoliberal optimism) and Lopez & Phillips (after the Great Recession). It allows us to see how macro-level transformations (e.g. automation, overeducation, wage stagnation) become personalized and expressed in digital vernaculars.

Also, by comparing the United States and China—two nations that share global power status but differ in political economy and cultural governance—this

research expands the cross-national dialogue initiated by Sharone's U.S.–Israel comparison. It demonstrates that similar grammars of exhaustion, irony, and skepticism emerge even under divergent institutional logics, revealing the global reach and localized reinterpretation of neoliberal disillusionment.

Studying this space gives us a rare window into how youth make sense of being "stuck" between institutional expectations and real-world constraints. These videos will be treated not simply as "evidence," but as cultural texts that mediate social change. By grounding this research in youth-generated media, the project contributes to our understanding of educational discourse, cultural emotion, and youth agency under neoliberal pressure. It argues that youth today are not simply victims of broken systems—but also cultural narrators who shape how society understands crisis, failure, and alternative futures.

This article will contribute a cross-cultural account of how youth convert macro pressures into narrative grammars and platform logics into everyday decision-making. It reframes youth not only as subjects of policy but as cultural narrators whose storytelling makes structural constraints actionable.

Literature Review

2.1 Structural Background: Constraints on Education-to-Work Transitions in China and the United States

Labor market entry for young people works differently in the USA and China. In both countries, internships function as pivotal roles in the labor market: in China, they often act as institutional mechanisms coordinated by schools, government bodies, and employers to integrate students into workplaces(Chan 2015); in the U.S., they play a signaling and screening role, helping firms evaluate potential hires while giving

students early exposure to professional norms (Tu, 2022). In the United States, internship arrangements—including a large number of unpaid or low-paid positions—are assessed under the legal standard of the "primary beneficiary test" to determine whether compensation is required. Within the existing institutional framework, many industries have developed a tolerance for the idea of “first accumulate experience/exchange passion for entry” through the primary beneficiary test. Mears (2020) describes this as the normalization of incorporating a “passion-based ethic” into early career entry. Here, this research treats it as an institutional context rather than an “individual case finding”: it helps explain why many young people in the United States, when entering creative industries, media, and technology-related positions, regard “short-term unpaid/low-paid work + long-term opportunities” as a reasonable trade-off.

In contrast, China’s centralized campus recruitment system, the “tripartite agreement,” and related policy mechanisms provide recent graduates with a relatively narrow, time-sensitive window for job entry. This structure connects universities, employers, and personnel records in a one-time coordination process. During periods of economic downturn, the government also allocates targeted employment programs to stabilize the labor market, creating a structure of “single-entry linkage with institutional support.” The study(Li et al., 2024) points out that under this institutional arrangement, the “first-job entry window” is often assigned greater importance, which in turn reinforces the preference for establishment posts, formal status, and the quality of the initial position.

In summary, the U.S. logic of “early unpaid/low-paid experience → future opportunities” and China’s logic of “concentrated entry window → one-time coordination → formal status” constitute two distinct institutionalized pathways. They

do not directly determine how young people “speak,” but they constrain and guide how youth in short-video narratives interpret the relationship between risk, reward, and legitimacy. This provides a structural premise for our research question — how young people evaluate the realities of higher education and employment.

In the United States, the social security system is largely based on employer-sponsored health insurance (ESI), creating a strong link between employment and healthcare coverage. This results in a phenomenon known as "job lock" (Gruber & Madrian, 2002), where changing jobs or starting a business may lead to the loss of insurance or higher premiums. A large body of research suggests that “job lock” imposes significant constraints on labor mobility; although the ACA has made progress in expanding coverage, there is still disagreement or limited evidence regarding its net effect on labor supply and mobility. Recent study (Bailey et al., 2022) shows that even after policy adjustments, American workers with employer-sponsored insurance still face significant constraints when making job transition decisions.

In this article, we conceptualize “job lock” as a structural constraint that raises the threshold for young people to engage in “inter-organizational job-hopping, entrepreneurship, or freelancing.” The following sections will show how this structure is subjectivized by youth in videos as a narrative node of “health insurance – job attachment – risk avoidance,” rather than treating the objective question of whether it reduces mobility as our empirical focus.

In China, the social security system is even more complex due to its entwinement with both household registration (hukou) and employment institutions, particularly in the administration and transferability of city-level medical and pension insurance. This system, combined with the hukou-based thresholds for accessing public services and welfare, reduces the flexibility of intercity mobility and free job selection (Wang-

Lu & Mendoza, 2023). This empirical analysis by Wang-Lu et. al (2023) shows that differences in employment prospects and wage levels significantly influence the likelihood of youth migration across cities, while the linkage between social insurance and hukou increases path dependency in migration decisions.This means that the "binding of welfare/insurance to location/employer" increases the costs of inter-city mobility and career switching, and is therefore reproduced in youth narratives as the relative attractiveness of "stability, establishment posts, and large organizations." Accordingly, this study will focus on examining how these institutional constraints are translated into visible discourses and emotional labels in short videos (such as "security," "first job," "entry window," and "risk"), thereby shaping young people's evaluations of educational returns and career pathways.

In both countries, university degree is widely regarded as a standard ticket to a respectable social class. In the American cultural script, higher education is framed as a form of personal investment and human capital, emphasizing individual choice and financial return. In China, the degree is embedded in a fairness narrative derived from the imperial examination and national college entrance exam (gaokao), stressing the legitimacy of open competition. In both contexts, a degree is viewed as essential for upward mobility. Therefore, this article understands "investment/ROI" and "fairness/competition" as two types of legitimacy-bearing narrative resources. They are not mutually exclusive but are mobilized in differentiated ways under varying institutional and risk structures.

In China, there is a deeply rooted belief that exam scores equate to fairness, reinforcing the idea that success can be measured and visually represented. The gaokao, considered a major life event, is inherited from the imperial exam tradition and serves as a rare, anonymous, merit-based selection mechanism in a society

dominated by strong social ties—even though it may also reproduce inequality. The long-standing culture of high-stakes testing and limited opportunities has led to a strong association between scores, fairness, and mobility. Even when competition becomes overly intense or misaligned with labor market outcomes, the perceived legitimacy of the system is maintained through the narrative of scarcity.

In the United States, the dominant belief is that hard work yields success. Inequality is rationalized as the result of competitive meritocracy. As a result, poor returns on education are often attributed to personal factors such as choosing the wrong major, delayed graduation, or debt structure. This generates an ‘‘investment-ROI” narrative, where uneven outcomes are treated as market signals. As Zhao (2009) notes, American education emphasizes individual choice and innovation, framing education as a form of human capital investment and interpreting unequal returns as reflections of market efficiency. In contrast, China’s gaokao system is widely seen as playing a role similar to the imperial exam by ensuring “anonymous fairness,” even as it exacerbates social stratification in practice. This suggests the potential tension between the two in the reproduction of inequality.

Another important factor is the cultural distinction between tight and loose societies. China is culturally ‘‘tight,” placing a high value on norms and low tolerance for deviation. The United States is culturally “loose,” emphasizing diversity and greater tolerance for nonconformity. Cross-national research by Gelfand et al. (2011) shows that such cultural differences influence not only macro institutions but also individual career decisions and risk preferences. According to tight–loose theory, the density of norms and the tolerance for deviation shape the social perception of the legitimacy of “deviating paths,” thereby influencing young people’s subjective interpretations of “stable” versus “nonlinear” choices.

Based on the above, we can more clearly see a subtle division of labor: the same pressure is translated in one context as a matter of "market signals/personal choices," while in another it is reduced to "scarcity and decency." This shapes not only what young people are willing to say, but also what they can say. Therefore, in the following materials, the focus is not on who is more "authentic," but rather on how they choose words, metaphors, and emotions: some employ direct statements and questioning, while others resort to self-mockery and avoidance.

Researches have increasingly come to show that regard emotions as an important dimension of evaluating returns, rather than as a subsidiary outcome. In what Papacharissi (2015) describes as affective publics, emotion acts as a medium for interpersonal connection and a valuable resource for mobilization. It captures attention, fosters solidarity, and encourages action. Concepts like "emotional capitalism" (Illouz, 2007) and "emotional labor" (Hochschild, 1983) highlight the growing importance of emotions in both market and personal relationships, requiring individuals to integrate emotional expression, empathy, and intimacy into their work.

This trend aligns closely with the pursuit of "meaningful work." Rosso et al.(2010) found in their research that the needs for meaning, belonging, and self-actualization are significantly associated with indicators such as satisfaction, engagement, and retention intention. Therefore, the sense of emotional/meaning fulfillment becomes an important consideration for young people when evaluating returns. Thus, "meaningful work" is not a singular occupational attribute, but rather a way for young people to organize self-narratives and adjust their sense of risk in an uncertain labor market: it expands the notion of "returns" beyond money and titles to include emotions, identity, and relationships.

The rationale behind this shift is shaped by structural conditions. In the United States, this perspective is further reinforced by a cultural expectation centered on "following one's passion(Cech, 2021)." While this mindset encourages exploration and self-fulfillment, it can also normalize low-paid or unpaid work. Consequently, both Chinese and American youth consider emotional value in their assessments of return. However, the emphasis varies: in the U.S., emotional return is often framed around personal fulfillment and passion ethics, whereas in China, it is more closely associated with maintaining social dignity and collective empathy, often expressed through humor, shared struggles, and emotional relief.

Within this framework, emotion is both the vocabulary of evaluation and the driving force of action; it connects individuals' pursuit of meaning with mechanisms of visibility, and it crystallizes in concrete narratives as formats that are "understandable" and "shareable." Entering through these formatted expressions, we can observe how young people incorporate 'meaning' into their assessments of education and work, thereby providing observable entry points for this research.

2.2 Social Networks and Opportunity Access: Weak Ties, Visibility, and Networked Self-Presentation

In both cultural contexts, the notion that visibility equals opportunity is widely accepted, and the rise of digital platforms has reinforced this belief(Hu, 2025). As Hu (2025) notes, both Chinese Wanghong and Western influencers depend on platform affordances to gain visibility, yet the legitimacy and monetization of this visibility are shaped by distinct institutional and cultural logics. Here, "visibility–opportunity" can be understood as a widely discussed mediating mechanism: platforms lower the threshold for information dissemination and connection, enabling individuals to

showcase credentials, work, and emotions on a broader scale, thereby creating greater possibilities for connection and discovery.

In high-mobility, weak-tie environments, more typical of the United States, individuals need actively present themselves to access new networks and opportunities through tools like personal branding, portfolios, and self-presentation. This is a pattern consistent with neoliberal expectations that workers must continuously market and sell themselves as employable commodities in the new economy (Lopez & Ibañez, 2025). Thus, the emphasis on continuous self-presentation reflects what Lopez and Ibañez (2025) describe as a "self-marketing" orientation, where employability depends on one's capacity to market the self across flexible, unstable labor markets.

In low-mobility, strong-tie environments—more typical of China—publicly visible metrics such as follower counts, likes, and certifications can serve as substitutes for relational endorsements. This pattern echoes the Wanghong economy in China, where algorithmic visibility and quantified endorsements translate directly into credibility and economic value (Hu, 2025). The corresponding theory comes from Granovetter's classic argument on "the strength of weak ties": weak ties cross community boundaries and provide non-redundant information, thus being more conducive to employment and mobility. In the platform context, mechanisms such as following–being followed, reposting, and shared hashtags are often regarded as digital forms of weak-tie bridging; meanwhile, visibility metrics (followers/likes/completion rates, verification) are understood by youth as a kind of "secondary endorsement" or "transferable social capital."

Digital platforms also encourage creators to address imagined audiences. Given the presence of classmates, colleagues, family members, and potential

employers, creators often rely on metaphor, ambiguity, and templated expression to avoid conflict while still conveying opinions or emotions. Here, in resonance with the earlier discussion of "expression style(tight/loose)," this reflects expression adjustment driven by audience diversification: Marwick & boyd (2011) emphasize in their concepts of "context collapse" and "imagined audiences" that users strategically perform self-presentation and engage in micro-celebrity/self-branding in front of multiple audiences.

From this view, the relationship between weak ties and visibility resembles everyday practices of "building bridges" and "shining lights": the former enables information to reach outward, while the latter makes people seen. Young people do not treat this as a grand social theory; rather, it is through these mundane choices that the question of "how to evaluate education and employment" becomes grounded in concrete practices (for example, which visibility signals to use to prove oneself, or how to narrate a change of major/career in a way that is more readily accepted). Meanwhile, the question of "how these evaluations shape pathways" often manifests as a gentle force — when responses and reposts from weak ties become possible, certain pathways (such as internship applications, content-based portfolios, or cross-domain attempts) are more easily imagined as feasible.

Short-form video formats introduce a persistent pressure toward narrative compression. With clips typically 15–60 seconds, creators often recast complex causal processes into replicable frame. For example, "poor ROI," "degree devaluation," "wrong major," "civil service fallback," or "lying flat." This framing can improve discoverability and shareability, yet it also tends to trade off nuance and heterogeneity, rendering broader policy or structural dynamics as simplified motifs rather than fully elaborated accounts.

Digital platforms also provide built-in templating tools (sound memes, caption formats, duet/stitch functions) that standardize how stories are told. These functions often guide users to reuse semantics and emotions within familiar templates — which some scholars describe as circumscribed creativity, a form of creativity that is enabled yet bounded by interface design, recommendation logics, and performance metrics(Kaye, Chen, & Zeng, 2021). In parallel, Douyin and TikTok exhibit "parallel platformization": they share a product genealogy and similar affordances while operating within different infrastructures, governance, and markets.

The so-called "circumscribed creativity" does not deny individual creativity; rather, it emphasizes how platforms, through functional design (such as splicing or imitation features), distribution mechanisms (driven by interactivity and watch time), and visible metrics (likes, followers, verification), connect these replicable pathways together. Under such "soft constraints," creators are more inclined to adopt low-cost and highly legible formats of expression (template phrases, fixed camera and subtitle layouts, commonly used audio templates). Recommendation mechanisms tend to favor content that is "emotionally clear and structurally replicable," thereby facilitating the aggregation of "emotional publics," which can mobilize solidarity while also fostering polarization and social comparison. While this can encourage peer support and provide emotional relief, it may also heighten anxiety and reinforce reductive narratives.

The pandemic accelerated the default use of short-form video and livestreaming, and platforms responded by expanding ready-to-use creation kits and recommendation levers that lowered entry costs and reduced conflict risk.

Data and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive research approach to examine how Chinese and American youth articulate their attitudes and emotions toward higher education and employment via short-form video platforms. Grounded in the cultural contexts of both societies, the research views these videos as narrative texts imbued with social significance and cultural symbolism. It investigates how issues such as credential inflation, employment challenges, and societal expectations are both reflected and reshaped within individual narratives. Differing from studies that rely on large-scale quantitative data, this research interprets user-generated content (UGC) to capture the authentic everyday experiences and emotional expressions of young people. In doing so, it provides a nuanced perspective on the complex structural tensions between education and the labor market, offering insights into the challenges and aspirations that characterize a generation.

The research materials were primarily collected from short-form video platforms, including TikTok, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu (RED), with the sample selection period spanning from 2022 to 2024. This time frame not only reflected the restructuring of educational systems and labor markets in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic but also coincided with the rapid growth and diversification of short-form video culture. A total of fifteen videos were selected for analysis, comprising seven from China and eight from the United States. The inclusion criteria were threefold: First, the videos needed to be publicly accessible user-generated content. Second, they had to directly address themes related to the value of higher education, credential anxiety, employment instability, or societal expectations. Lastly, the videos were required to exemplify narrative or expressive styles that are representative of typical cultural contexts. For instance, Chinese youth frequently expressed disappointment and disillusionment with education and employment through self-deprecating humor

and metaphor, while American youth often conveyed skepticism and dissatisfaction with institutional structures through direct critique and satire. Building on these criteria, the analysis proceeded as follows.

In the research process, all samples were collected and organized as video texts. The research materials encompassed not only the spoken language and visuals of the videos but also subtitles, titles, voice-overs, and interactions within the comment sections, which collectively formed a broader context for analysis. Instead of utilizing formal coding software, this study employed a manual thematic grouping approach, emphasizing the interpretive reading of cultural texts. Each video was examined multiple times, with detailed notes taken on its core content, emotional tone, and symbolic elements. The analysis unfolded across three dimensions: thematically, addressing key issues such as credential devaluation, career shifts, parental and educational pressures, and student debt; emotionally, identifying sentiments such as irony, resignation, anger, and self-deprecation; and stylistically, analyzing narrative techniques used by creators, including dialogic imitation, satirical commentary, meme culture, and everyday storytelling. By comparing and synthesizing these dimensions, the study aims to uncover both the commonalities and divergences in how Chinese and American youth express their cultural narratives.

This study follows established academic ethical standards. All analyzed materials consist of publicly accessible short-form videos, and no private information or unauthorized content is utilized. The research does not reveal usernames or direct links to content creators; instead, it employs brief descriptions or translated excerpts as evidence for the analysis. For Chinese-language materials, English translations are provided to ensure the findings are accessible and can be disseminated within international academic contexts, thereby facilitating an interpretive and comparative

analytical framework. The objective of this research is to illuminate the relationship between cultural phenomena and social structures, rather than to assess or label individual behaviors.

Findings

This section presents a systematic analysis of 15 short-form video texts—seven from China and eight from the United States—based on the established research design. The analysis focuses on three interrelated dimensions: thematic (credential devaluation, employment instability, and life path reconfiguration), emotional (the spectrum of self-deprecation, powerlessness, and anger and its cultural distribution), and narrative-platform (narrative techniques, performativity, and platform mechanisms). Adopting a qualitative interpretive approach, the study treats fragmented user-generated content as cultural texts to explore their social significance. It aims to answer how Chinese and American youth express and reconstruct their understanding of higher education and the labor market.

China

Within the Chinese context, the disconnection between education and employment manifests vividly through experiences of degree–job mismatch and narrowing upward mobility. On the one hand, the accumulation of credentials has not yielded the expected returns; on the other hand, entry into institutionalized positions, such as civil service jobs, is perceived as a rare and increasingly scarce path to stability. A recurring cultural motif is the use of self-deprecating humor to narrate this gap and transition. One example is the popular phrase *"I almost forgot what I used to do,"* which, in a light comedic tone, signals a shift from professional or academic identity to platform-based roles such as livestreamers or content performers. In these videos,

the line is often delivered with a deliberate half-smile, followed by a montage of the creator's "previous life" archive photos of uniforms, studios, or medical wards juxtaposed with their current performance on camera.

In the Chinese video samples, this "self-deprecating frame" is not an abstract judgment but is repeatedly used by individuals from different professional backgrounds. These former professionals openly describe their transition, entering through recommendation, all employed the phrase *"I almost forgot what I used to do"* after turning to group livestreaming or fashion e-commerce. A veteran who once participated in major military parades now appears in a group livestream dancing competition; a provincial TV host with experience on CCTV programs now performs makeup tutorials and comedic skits in front of a ring light; a healthcare worker who had served on the COVID-19 frontline now models products in e-commerce livestreams; and a journalism graduate from the Communication University of China, once an award-winning Communist Party journalist, now introduces clothing items and responds to viewer comments during fashion broadcasts. This phrasing transforms the linear promise of "education–career–respectability" into an ironic narrative of broken commitments. Here, "forgetting" does not indicate memory loss but rather a satirical reframing of the broken promise of education.

The Chinese samples also frequently juxtapose this narration with cultural scripts of "stability and fairness." One particularly representative example is CN6, a video featuring a dramatic dialogue imitating the interaction between parents and children:

> *"That (food)'s delicious!"—"Then study hard, and you'll eat like this every day in the future." "It's so hot"—"Then study hard, because when you sit in an office with air conditioning, you won't feel hot*

anymore." "I'm tired"—"Then you should study hard; is studying more tiring or working?"

The rhythm of this exchange mimics countless parental admonitions, distilling the moral equation between studying and a comfortable life. This reflects a widely held causal expectation in society, but when such expectations fail to materialize, the self-deprecating phrase *"I almost forgot what I used to do*" functions as an inversion, rationalizing failure as a "transition" and using humor to cushion the identity gap. This opening pattern already signals how humor functions not merely as personal wit but as a collective emotional technology—an aesthetic of endurance that softens structural disappointment.

Emotionally, these videos trace a distinctive progression from self-deprecation to powerlessness and mild irony. Self-deprecating humor serves both as a way to emotionally neutralize personal setbacks and as a culturally embedded strategy to avoid direct criticism. The phrase *"I almost forgot what I used to do,*" which functions as a recurring topic in the Chinese video samples, essentially operates as a form of humorous "downshifting", reframing downward mobility as light-hearted self-mockery. Moreover, in the sampled videos, many users responded with comments such as *"so true," "I didn't know you used to do that!" or simply "hahahahaha,"* expressing surprise and agreement. This interactive atmosphere reinforces the "stress-relief" function of self-deprecation rather than encouraging direct critique. This mode of expression aligns with platform-friendly aesthetics, making the content more likely to be amplified by recommendation algorithms. The amplifying effect of algorithms means that templated, self-deprecating metaphors are more easily recognized and recommended (while direct critique is more likely to be suppressed by the platform or even flagged as violations), which further illustrates

that emotional expression is not merely personal narrative but tightly bound to platform rules and logics. Many videos downplay personal frustration through phrases like "*I just took a different path,*" reframing structural obstacles as individual stylistic choices. Semantically, this individualizes systemic difficulties while avoiding risk, and through the appearance of "agency," creators simultaneously display resignation and provide audiences with an easy sense of resonance, thereby amplifying the emotional trajectory. Taken together, these examples align with the methodological observation that Chinese content tends to rely on metaphor and irony rather than overt critique. In this sense, emotion becomes not only a coping mechanism but also a socially legible performance, aligning affective moderation with algorithmic reward and reinforcing the circulation of acceptable discontent.

From an organizational perspective, the form of group livestreaming plays a particularly important role in this ecosystem. Multiple performers appear sequentially or simultaneously in the same scene, and viewers use virtual gifts to vote, determining screen time, performance order, and even the "winner." In a frequently viewed example, six livestreamers take turns dancing in the same studio, while flashing icons of virtual roses and cars float across the screen, indicating the monetary value of each gift. The host announces the rankings aloud, motivating others to perform harder and longer for visibility. This mechanism links attention, monetization, and advancement, driving creators to engage in quantifiable forms of performance to attract a steady flow of gifts. As a result, the popular phrase "*I almost forgot what I used to do"* functions not only as a meme or self-mockery but also as a marker of how platform mechanisms reshape identity narratives. The former identity based on professional or academic credentials is replaced by a measurable role as a livestreamer or performative worker. Value is demonstrated through performance, validated by voting

and tipping. Here, performativity operates as an economic logic: what was once "respectability" derived from credentials now translates into "visibility" sustained by metrics. This marks a shift from moral to measurable legitimacy in how success is defined.

Additionally, at the narrative level, Chinese videos often lack voice-over narration or explanatory subtitles. Instead, they rely on stable visual templates: consistent camera framing and character entry order paired with emotionally intense and lyrical background music to shape the viewer's emotional response. One viral video cut shows a journalist-turned-livestreamer standing in front of her former newsroom backdrop while melancholic music plays, before cutting to her new setup surrounded by ring lights and comments scrolling up the screen. Unlike earlier or alternative formats that include textual explanations, this strategy shifts the burden of meaning-making from language to audiovisual elements. The music lends a grand yet melancholic tone to narratives of career shifts, such as transitions from journalism, teaching, healthcare, or broadcasting to livestream-based work. In the absence of explicit narration, meaning construction depends more on the viewer and the platform environment.

Thus, third-party aggregator accounts are, therefore, more likely to reframe and reinterpret these videos. This interpretive gap is often filled by aggregator accounts that re-upload such clips with moral commentary. For example, one reposted video warns that "*career freedom is like a slippery slope—what you take off isn't just your scholar's robe, but your bottom line,*" comparing modern livestream culture to the fall of Yiping in Romance in the Rain and taking off Kong Yiji's long gown. Comments on such aggregator accounts often introduce moralizing terms such as "decline," "desensitization," or "crossing the line," amplifying public anxiety about

the mismatch between high educational credentials and platform-based labor. These reframings situate individual career transitions within broader and more contentious social narratives, shaping public discourse and emotional judgments. This interplay between creator expression, algorithmic amplification, and audience moralization underscores how meaning is continuously renegotiated across layers of mediation.

Finally, the Chinese samples reveal an underlying structural tension between institutional stability and platform-based performative labor. On one side, young people pursue stable positions through competitive exams; on the other, they turn to platform-based careers, relying on algorithmic visibility to generate income. This shift is not merely a downgrade in academic discipline, but a strategy to redeem the broken promise of education through alternative forms of value realization. In the video samples, we can clearly observe this stark polarization of fixed substitute paths. On one side, there is an emphasis on the relationship between education and future stable employment. Parental and societal discourse directly links it to a decent and less strenuous life. On the other side, there is the promotion of transforming from traditional stable professions into platform-based performative labor to obtain higher income (with former identities including highly specialized roles such as veteran, provincial TV host, healthcare worker, and award-winning Communist Party journalist).

Taken together, these examples capture a broader cultural reconfiguration: as institutional pathways narrow, Chinese youth negotiate between security and visibility, transforming humor, irony, and performance into adaptive currencies of survival and self-worth.

USA

In contrast to the Chinese case, American samples more directly attribute the disconnect to systemic and structural issues like student debt, unaffordable housing, and stagnating real income. The declining returns on degrees form a "calculative" narrative centered on return on investment (ROI). This "ROI discourse" appears explicitly in multiple American samples: creators rank *"Top 10 Most Useless Degrees,"* listing majors such as archaeology, film, photography, and dance in countdown style, each number emphasized with bold text and sound effects, directly framing "wrong major–low economic return" as a viral list. Another sample features a young graduate lamenting, *"I spent almost $40k a year for a useless music degree,"* accompanied by screenshots of tuition invoices and graduation photos, immediately followed by her working in a retail store. These emphasize student debt and unemployment rates through interviews and narration.

What's more, one example uses the slogan "*Millennials and Gen Z working on their houses / Cannot own a house, pretend to have one*". In the video, the author pretended to draw with a brush outdoors, attempting to turn the ideal picture of an apartment into reality in this way, thereby satirizing the dream of owning a house. Here, "pretending" functions as a form of symbolic consumption, using satire to replace the material upward mobility that cannot be achieved. This initial framing situates American youth discourse firmly within an economic rationality, where financial metrics, debt burdens, and cost–benefit calculations replace moral or emotional reasoning as the dominant language of crisis.

The emotional trajectory in the American samples follows a pattern of resentment, calculation, and confrontation. In one representative example, the creator mimics the rhythm of stand-up comedy, but the purpose is political critique:

> *"There has to be some overlap between the people who, a few years ago, were saying, 'Oh, if you're poor, it's because you're lazy—you need to pull yourself up by your bootstraps,' and the people who are now saying, 'Oh, I just voted for him based off the economy....If you're not making enough money at work, we don't need to worry about raising the federal minimum wage—you just need to get a better job. And if you can't find a better job, it's probably because you got a useless college degree in gender studies....Why is it that when other people are struggling, it's a bootstraps issue...but when you're finally feeling financial pressure, it's a systemic issue."*

This language channels frustration into a critique of systemic structures. These emotional expressions are not simply oppositional but together constitute the emotional politics of youth under uncertainty.

Chinese creators often maintain social composure through humor and highlight shared peer experiences, while American creators engage in direct critique to stimulate public discourse. For example, in the American video sample, the creator openly declares lines such as "*You chose a useless degree at 17… now you're stuck working retail until you die,"* and then turns that statement into a rhetorical challenge to universities, asking, "*Why are we pushed to invest tens of thousands before even knowing ourselves?... College is an investment; make sure you can afford the loss.*" This blunt language is not only an articulation of individual experience but also a provocation directed at public opinion, while the use of statistics transforms anger into a form of satirical protest. In short, American creators turn economic frustration into rhetorical confrontation, where sarcasm, numbers, and public address merge into a collective performance of accountability and outrage.

From a stylistic and structural perspective, the American samples, though also based on short-form videos, tend to adopt a monologue style that combines personal narrative with satirical commentary. These videos use data, facts, and sarcasm to construct "verifiable complaints." In the video sample mentioned previously, the creator presents a long rebuttal against the argument that "poverty is due to laziness":

> *"Maybe gas prices feel high to you because you drive a gas guzzler that you still owe 40k on… people wanna say groceries are expensive...but maybe the reason your groceries are $300 a week for a family of four is because ...you only buy snacks and convenience foods. Maybe if you shopped at Aldi and bought store brands, things wouldn't feel so hard for you."*

American samples are typically structured through verbal narration, sarcastic commentary, and numerical evidence. They rely less on musical frameworks and more on clearly stated messages, either through spoken text or on-screen captions. Since creators explicitly articulate their positions, reposts by aggregator accounts tend to amplify existing viewpoints rather than rewrite them. As a result, the space for reinterpretation is relatively limited. This discursive style underscores a broader epistemic confidence: rather than disguising disillusionment in irony, American creators foreground it through argumentation, treating frustration as evidence and critique as civic engagement.

Finally, the U.S. samples also illuminate how these critiques shape perceptions of educational choice and life trajectory. We can see creators expressing viewpoints such as *"…you put four years into your education, you should be able to find at least … but it's kind of limited and so now the option is for a lot of students like me to do a master's or PhD …"* or *"…post-secondary education is an investment … you*

could be doing it somewhere else and not spending that money." These statements reveal a pragmatic recalibration of aspiration: higher education remains valuable, but only insofar as it can be optimized, leveraged, or re-invested in measurable returns.

Altogether, the American cases expose an affective economy built around skepticism and self-accounting, where irony serves less to conceal vulnerability and more to demand structural explanation.

Comparative View

When viewed side by side, the analysis reveals a shared structural tension in both China and the United States: a growing mismatch between higher education and real-world employment. Across both contexts, higher education no longer serves as a straightforward ladder toward stability or prestige, but instead becomes a contested arena where value must be continuously redefined. It resonates with the Chinese trope of "self-deprecation and forgetting": the American samples use numerical calculation and sarcasm to directly confront systemic crises, while the Chinese samples employ humor and lyricism to soften structural disappointment. This difference underscores how cultural repertoires shape emotional management, where irony in China functions as a safety valve within social constraint, and sarcasm in the U.S. operates as public confrontation. This shift from material upward mobility to symbolic self-display highlights the rupture in the chain linking education, assets, and quality of life.

While both ecosystems enable monetization (e.g., live gifts in China; creator funds, brand deals, and affiliate links in the U.S.), American creators rarely transform expressive participation into an occupational pathway. Their use of platforms centers on critique and emotional release rather than sustained career conversion. While some users profit through YouTube or TikTok's creator funds, these remain rather than the dominant logic. In this sense, platform architectures and revenue pathways are not

neutral backdrops; they channel what counts as credible expression and, in turn, how young people narrate the links between education, work, and identity. A considerable number of American youth also aspire to influencer careers, seeing social media as a possible form of work. However, unlike in China, where many professionals have publicly transitioned into livestream-based labor and made it a popular trend and hot topic in a short time. The U.S. has not witnessed such widespread transformation or normalization of this shift. In contrast, Chinese short-form ecosystems actively blur the boundary between performance and livelihood, where group livestreaming, tipping, and ranking systems transform self-expression into measurable labor. The U.S. model, by comparison, demonstrates how digital participation functions more as civic engagement than economic substitution.

Overall, both Chinese and American youth articulate the theme of "diminishing educational returns and reconfigured career pathways," but Chinese samples emphasize transforming frustration into humorous memes, while American samples rely more on ROI frameworks and social critique to highlight structural issues. In essence, both sets of narratives dramatize the same crisis of expectation—yet they diverge in tone, affect, and the moral language through which disappointment becomes publicly legible.

These expressive contrasts, however, are not purely stylistic. They reflect not only distinct rhetorical traditions but also the expectations shaped by the platforms and their respective audiences. Chinese short-form platforms privilege emotional containment, aesthetic cohesion, and algorithmic repetition, making irony a form of social diplomacy. U.S. platforms, by contrast, reward assertion and argumentative framing, encouraging creators to brand personal frustration as evidence of systemic critique. This contrast illustrates that similar predicaments are characterized by

different forms of emotional politics within divergent cultural contexts. In China, platform governance and social norms channel discontent into humor and collective endurance; in the U.S., individual critique becomes a mode of civic expression. Together, these tendencies reveal how platform infrastructures mediate not only content but also culturally acceptable emotions.

At the level of life strategy, both Chinese and American youth show a shift from interest-driven to employment-oriented academic choices. Majors with strong job prospects are increasingly favored—such as computer science, finance, engineering, and data science—while the humanities and social sciences have declined. However, the available alternative pathways differ across the two contexts. American creators frequently point to "portfolio-based" solutions—vocational training, additional credentials, or self-branding through content creation—while Chinese counterparts oscillate between civil service examinations and livestream economies. When educational credentials no longer guarantee secure returns, youth begin to reorient the pathway from ability to opportunity and recognition toward domains where success is more easily quantified and rewarded. These include metrics such as gift value, view counts, conversion rates, and employment statistics. The logic of measurability thus replaces the logic of merit. Whether through tips or test scores, young people translate uncertainty into data, seeking tangible proof of worth instead of institutional assurance. In this context, platform-based performance indicators increasingly replace traditional educational returns, marking a global convergence toward algorithmic valuation even as the emotional grammars that sustain it remain culturally distinct.

Conclusion

This study examined how short-form videos render the crisis of educational promise palpable in two distinct contexts. Across China and the United States, youth narrate a shared tension between credentials and jobs: degrees no longer map cleanly onto security, wages, or status. Yet the rhetorical and practical resolutions diverge. While Several limitations remain. The sample (15 videos, 2022–2024) is necessarily narrow; creator demographics and platform moderation are only inferentially visible; cross-platform dynamics and audience analytics are beyond the present scope. Future work could scale the corpus, combine interpretive reading with computational trace data, and incorporate creator interviews or longitudinal tracking across pivotal life stages.

Answering research question (evaluation): Across cases, youth do not ask whether education "pays" in the abstract; they use culturally available legitimacy languages to make payoffs legible under local constraints. In the United States, an investment/ROI idiom—often paired with direct system critique—translates debt, rent, and degree–job mismatch into calculable risk/return. In China, scarcity/fairness and stability scripts reframe the same tension through dignity-preserving humor and indirect critique. In both settings, emotions operate as valuation devices, anger, irony, resignation, and relief signal how "return" is felt. While platform grammars (templating, narrative compression, visibility metrics) privilege versions of those emotions that travel.

Beyond the findings above, the patterns identified in this study suggest directions for further exploration. Future research might examine how youth evaluations of education and employment intersect with their long-term decision-making, such as career reorientation, reskilling, or creative entrepreneurship. While this study centers on cultural expression, subsequent work could extend the analysis to how these evaluative frameworks materialize in practice.

If policy debates often ask whether education still “pays,” youth answer with forms and feelings: lists, jokes, songs, and staged routines that make structure tangible. Attending to those forms does not resolve the crisis, but it clarifies where legitimacy now resides—and how young people, in telling their stories, are already sketching the contours of possible futures.

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