

Research on the Social Mentality for the Buzzword “Wage Slave”

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Abstract: This paper takes the online buzzword of “wage slave” as the breakthrough point and crawls the data of 200,000 texts on Sina Weibo, to explore the social mentality of the current young employees from two aspects of cognition and emotion by combining the Baidu index of “wage slave” and the sales volume of peripheral goods. It is found that the youth aged 20-29 in the southeast coastal areas are the major participants in this buzzword carnival of “wage slave”. The text content of “wage slave” is mainly self-mockery and teasing, but there are positive and mutually encouraging emotions and self-cognition behind teasing, which is an aggregation discussion of young working class in cyberspace, as well as a self-presentation of relieving daily work pressure in a more positive way.

1. Origin and Background of Research

The contents related to “wage slave” began to be viewed frequently on social platforms such as WeChat Moments and Weibo from mid-October of 2020, and shortly became a new online buzzword. The netizens who participated in this hot event called their jobs “wage slavery” and called themselves “wage slaves”, to ease their dilemma in the workplace by self-mockery and self-deprecation.

The event originated on September 22, 2020, when a Tik Tok netizen named “Dai Lanzi” posted a video, in which he said with positive energy in front of the camera: “Friends, it is right to be tired, and comfort is just for the rich. Good morning! Wage Slaves!” And in October, A Weibo post about “wage slave” aroused people’s resonance, which further disseminated the “wage slave”. The content is: “When I passed the security check, the detector kept ringing, and the security guy asked me to take out everything but it just kept ringing. Then she asked me what I was, and I said I was a wage slave. She said no wonder I detected the iron will! Good morning! Wage Slaves!”

Since then, the word “wage slave” has officially become popular, and related content creations have emerged one after another. The entry of wage slave has also rushed to the hot search, causing people’s discussion and participation. It can be seen from Baidu index data the changes of the buzzword “wage slave”.

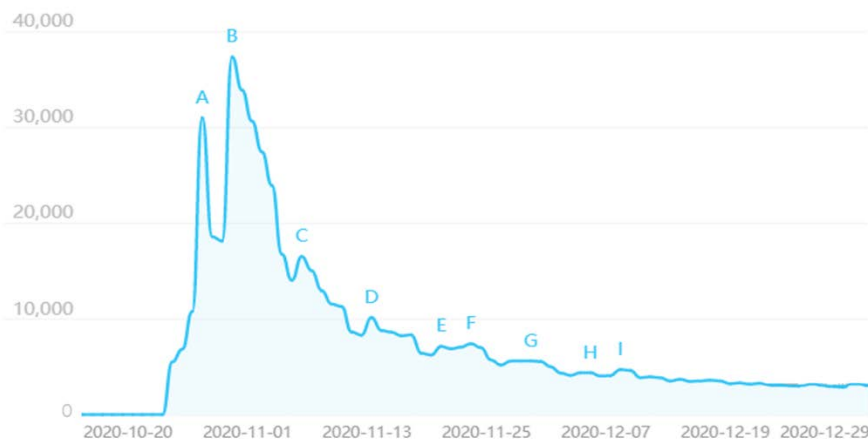


Figure 1 Baidu index change of the buzzword “wage slave”

The word “wage slavery” was introduced into mainland China from Hong Kong in the early stage of reform and opening up in 1980s, and became popular from Guangdong Province to all parts of the country. Some scholars define it as a slang describing social relations of production, which mainly refers to the labor means for employees to obtain certain living resources under a fixed or unfixed interest subject ^[1]. Although this definition reveals the connotation of wage slavery, it does not reflect the value and emotional tendency of the word in actual use. So, what exactly does the popular “wage slave” in the current Internet platforms refer to? What kind of social mentality does this buzzword reflect?

This paper aims to explore the social mentality for the buzzword “wage slave”, in which the self-proclaimed netizen portraits of wage slave on social media platforms are analyzed, as well as their social mentality from two aspects of emotion and cognition. And then the sales of products related to wage slave on Taobao are studied, in order to discover the true social mentality of “wage slave” and their degree of recognition of this label.

2. Literature Review

The research on the social mentality for the buzzword “wage slave” includes two aspects: “Internet buzzword” and “social mentality”. The former is the content and basis of the research on the latter. This study is essentially an exploration of social mentality.

First of all, the concept of social mentality is defined. The New Dictionary of Social Sciences edited by Ruxin records the earliest definition of social mentality in China: “the general name of social and cultural psychology and concepts as well as their reflection in a certain era” ^[2]; Wang Junxiu defined social mentality as: “formed under the influence of social and cultural environment in a certain period of time, showing relatively common and consistent psychological characteristics and behavior patterns among most members or specific groups in society” ^[3]; Basing on systematic research, Yang Yiyin explained this concept with the framework of interaction between group and individual, and summed it up as: “the macro social state of mind dispersed in the whole society or social groups/categories for a period of time, the sum of the emotional tone, social consensus and social value orientation of the whole society” ^[4], which is also a more common definition at present. On the basis of Yang Yiyin’s research, Ma Guanghai further defined it as: “the sum of emotions, affections, social cognition, behavioral intentions and value orientations widely existing in various social groups in a certain period of time”, and determined the social emotions, social cognition, social values and social behavioral intentions as the basic dimensions of social mentality measurement ^[5], which provides reference for the operation of this concept.

On the whole, although the definition of social mentality is inconclusive, consensus has been reached on several characteristics. For example, social mentality must be a macro psychological situation rather than an individual psychological state; It must be a dynamic process influenced by specific social thoughts rather than a static one; Basically, it includes three progressive aspects: emotion, cognition and value orientation. The buzzword “wage slave” in this study is the reflection of the new changes in the social mentality of young and middle-aged working groups in the current era. The research on the social mentality in this period will also be carried out from two aspects of cognition and emotion, and then go deep into the field of value orientation.

Secondly, from the perspective of relevant research content, social research is a research paradigm focusing on social transformation and social change ^[6]. At present, most of the studies on social mentality focus on a specific event, directly describing the social mentality phenomenon in the event or discussing the control measures. For example, COVID-19 pandemic has spawned a large number of studies on social mentality with sudden major disasters. Besides, some studies also focus on the social mentality of a certain group, such as disabled groups, migrant workers, youth subculture. Among them, the social mentality of youth groups is the key content of research. Since the youth groups is the backbone of social development and the reserve force of building a country, the social and psychological health of them is particularly important. Hu Jie analyzed the current situation and causes of youth social mentality from the perspective of historical development and different groups ^[7].

Internet buzzwords are often used as the research support of social mentality, especially the social mentality of youth groups. For example, Wang Jiapeng discussed the changes of Chinese youth's social mentality on the basis of buzzwords in recent ten years: gradually shifting from political ridicule to life ridicule, and positive energy gradually increasing and surpassing negative energy^[8]; Wang Jiapeng also summarized these kinds of buzzwords as "the feeling of carnival", with anger and banter as the main contents, which reflect the influence of rigid social structure on the minds of young people.

Finally, from the perspective of research methods, a large number of social mentality studies are mainly empirical analysis and theoretical discussion, while empirical research remains inadequate. And most of the empirical research go to the way of questionnaires to measure the attitude of a certain group. However, "Internet social mentality" has gradually become the focus of social mentality research when people use more of Internet media, social media reshapes social mentality in the new social space (i.e. cyberspace), and the method of social network analysis has gradually stood on the "main track" in the field of social science research. Empirical analysis methods based on Internet big data collection have also begun to emerge. Internet social mentality is defined as the sum of social cognition, social emotion, social values and social behavior tendencies existing in cyberspace or Internet groups in a specific period^[9]. This study is based on a large number of social media data crawled with Python, which not only fits the current trend of Internet social mentality research, but also innovates traditional research methods.

3. Research Methods and Research Contents

Weibo is often a gathering place for contemporary young people to post their stories. It is of great significance to collect and study Weibo texts for studying young people's mentality. The researcher used Python to crawl 206,501 Weibo data from September 22 to November 22, 2020 with "wage slave" as the key word, and used jieba library to segment words, and further carried out word frequency analysis, emotion analysis and visual presentation.

It is difficult to fully restore the connotation of text data by complete quantitative analysis, and the analysis of social mentality depends on more in-depth and meticulous qualitative research. Furthermore, the words with high frequency are selected in this paper to trace the source of the text, and makes a qualitative semantic analysis of the corresponding netizens' posts.

Cultural consumption can often reflect people's demand and recognition for spiritual culture. The sales volume and evaluation of products related to "wage slave" in Taobao are also taken into account in this paper, which is helpful for the researcher to find out the recognition degree and concern of people for the label of "wage slave".

4. Research Results

4.1 Portrait of "Wage Slave"

As a buzzword emerged on the Internet, the popularity of "wage slave" indicates the social psychological change of a specific group - young workers. In order to better explore the living conditions of this group, this paper takes Baidu Index as the data source, and depicts its crowd portraits from the aspects of gender, age and geographical distribution.

From the gender point of view, there are more male than female in the search crowd of "wage slave", and male netizens have a higher participation in the carnival feast of this buzzword.

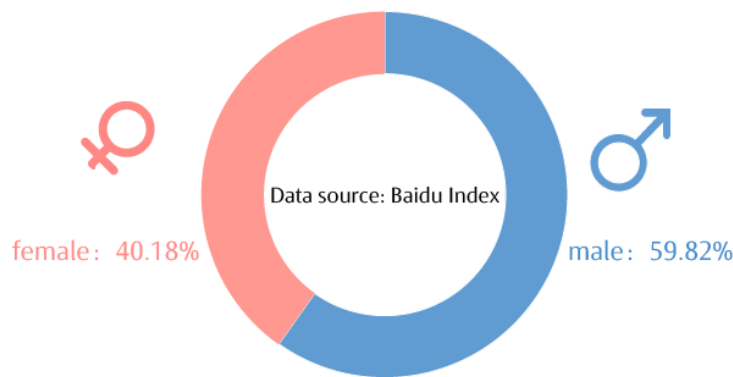


Figure 2 Gender characteristics of the “wage slave” buzzword retrieval population

In terms of age, more than half (53.94%) are aged between 20 and 29, which is an out-and-out “youth working group”. In order to avoid the influence of the proportion of netizens of different ages on the results, two indicators are incorporated, namely, the proportion of the total number of netizens and TGL index (target group index, which can reflect the strength or weakness of the target group in a specific research scope), for comparative analysis. It is found that people aged 20-29 are indeed the age-concentrated distribution range of netizens, and the proportion of netizens aged 30-39 searching for “wage slave” is nearly half (27.62%) lower than that of netizens aged 20-29, and netizens aged 20-29 also rank first in the target group index (TGL) of “wage slave” search, which is enough to see that netizens of this age group are the main force in this self-deprecating carnival of “wage slave”.

It is also worth noting that although only 10.46% of netizens under the age of 19 search for “wage slave”, their target group index (TGL) ranks second because of their small number, and “Youngsters”, as the succession force of wage slave at present, also shows high interest in this topic.

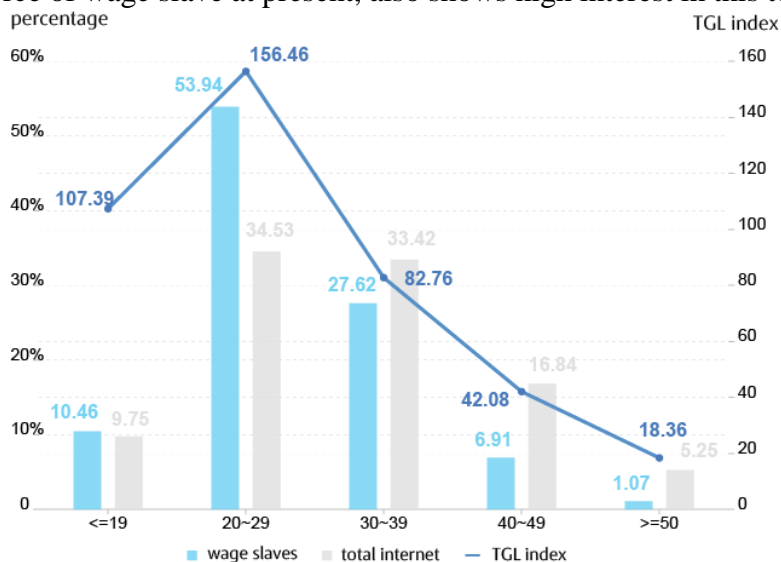


Figure 3 Age characteristics of the “wage slave” buzzword retrieval population

Geographically, netizens in the southeast coastal areas have shown high interest in the topic of “wage slave”. Among them, Guangdong Province ranks first, followed by Beijing and Jiangsu. As the largest province of wage slave in China, Guangdong Province has developed economy, convenient transportation, many employment opportunities and strong urban inclusiveness. The floating population here exceeds 30 million and the migrant population exceeds 20 million, which explains to a certain extent why netizens in Guangdong Province have a high degree of participation in the discussion of the topic of “wage slave”.

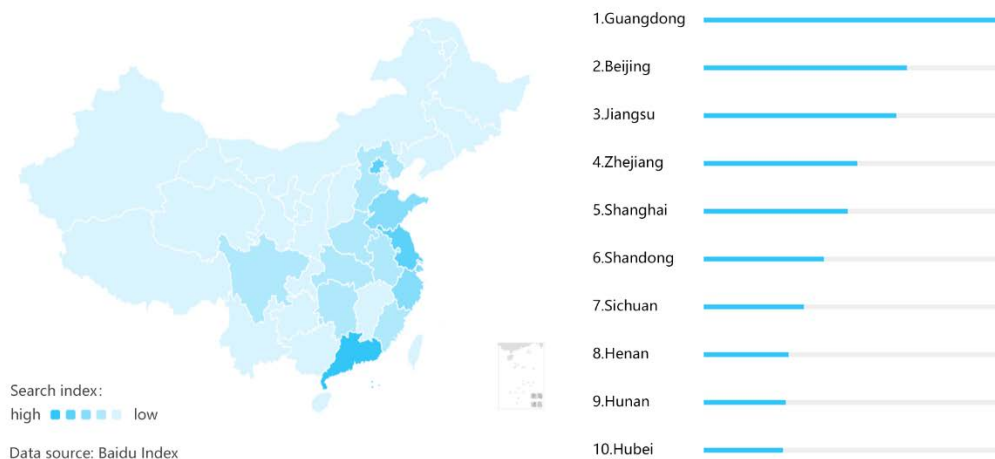


Figure 4 Geographical distribution characteristics of “wage slave” buzzword retrieval population

4.2 Weibo Word Frequency Analysis with “Wage Slave” as Key Word

The researcher arranged word segmentation results in descending order according to frequency, and eliminated the repetitive words “wage slave”, worthless words such as “ourselves”, “we”, “today”, “no” and “real”. Finally, the top fifteen related words are: cheer up (34593 frequency), good morning (23798 frequency), good night (14753 frequency), work (12088 frequency), hard work (9540 frequency), life (9351 frequency), off duty (8969 frequency), happiness (8789 frequency), expectation (7492 frequency), like (7066 frequency), go to work (6589 frequency), hard (5179 frequency), lovely (5049 frequency), youth (5030 frequency) and hold on (4841 frequency)

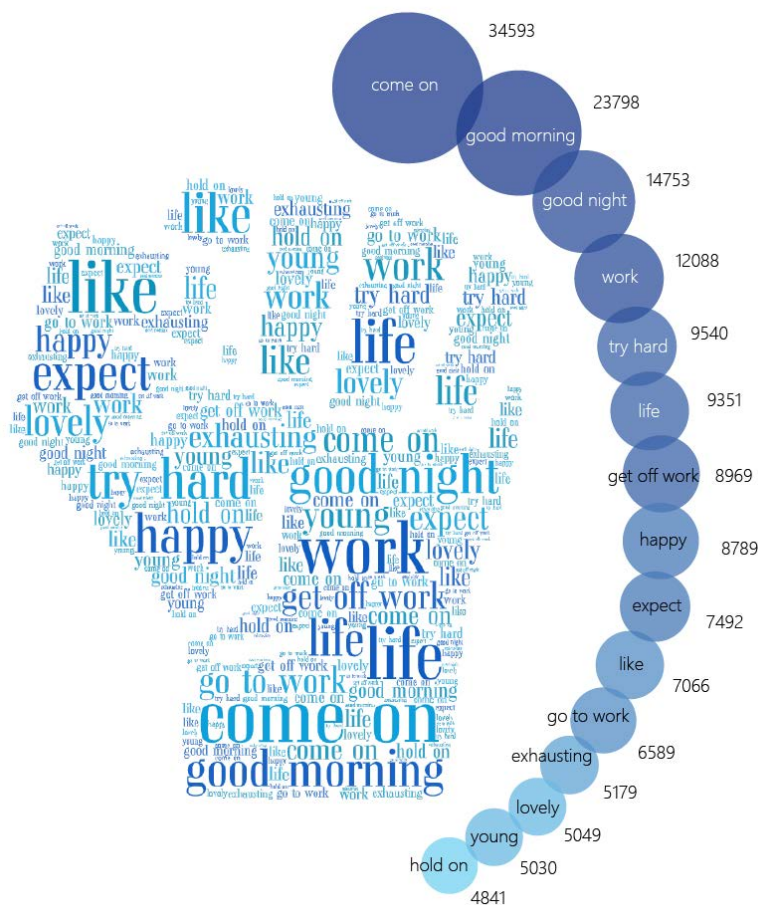


Figure 5 Weibo text data segmentation word cloud map with “wage slave” as key word

4.3 Semantic Analysis of Weibo Text of High Frequency Words

4.3.1 Labeling Identity and Slogan Inspirational

When analyzing the Weibo text, we find that there are 5,561, 6,190 and 3,066 texts with fixed sentence patterns of “Cheer up, wage slave”, “Good morning, wage slave” and “Good night, wage slave” respectively. According to the specific text, Weibo users have become accustomed to saying inspirational slogans such as “Cheer up”, “Good morning” and “Good night” to the whole wage slave. Every inspirational discourse is mixed with self-teasing, but such teasing is not negative. Repeated slogans and inspirations not only let out their negative emotions, but also deepen the internal mutual affirmation of the “wage slave” group. The slogan is easy to remember, concise and powerful, which also makes the “wage slave” group have their own unified internal and external propaganda discourse system. It has a very touching power and contributes to the frequent occurrence of the phenomenon of “millions of wage slaves speak together” on the Internet platform.

4.3.2 The “Work” Concerned by Wage Slaves

According to the statistical results of the word frequency of Weibo text, the word frequency of “work” is 12,088, that of “off-duty” is 8969, and that of “go to work” is 6589. These work-related words always show together with “wage slave”, which is enough to show the importance of work in the minds of wage slaves.

“He quitted his three jobs, so he decided not to do wage slavery work for a living.”

“If you are destined to do wage slavery work, play it well.”

“Where there is a job, there is no home, and where there is a home, there is no job. To those who do wage slavery work outside the home!”

By searching and reading a large number of texts, we find that “wage slaves” often choose the emotional tone when referring to their work. They will complain their work on Weibo to let off their dissatisfaction, and at the same time, they will talk about their work and share their experiences on Weibo. Under the pressure of work, netizens are easy to be depressed emotionally, and it is not uncommon for them to say “work pressure is great”, “colleagues are not kind” and “working environment is not satisfactory”. The label of “wage slave”, on the one hand, contains self-deprecating feelings, on the other hand, is also the support and resonance of people in the same situation that the tired groups hope to get. The Weibo platform has become a “healing place” to let off their emotions and seek resonance.

4.4 Label of “Wage Slave” under Emotion Analysis

In order to study the emotional tendency of the keyword “wage slave” on Weibo more intuitively and objectively, Python’s SnowNLP library is used to encode and digitize more than 200,000 Weibo texts. The emotional prediction value greater than 0.5 indicates positive emotion. Less than 0.5, negative emotion, and equal to 0.5, neutral emotion (0.5 is relatively rare in text processing). Finally, the data are obtained as follows:

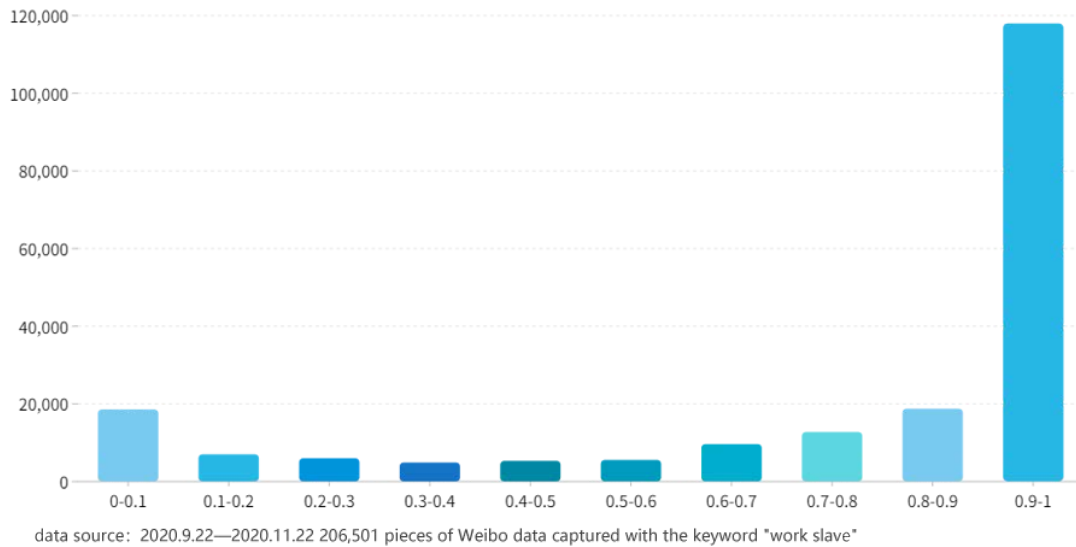


Figure 6 Branch distribution interval of emotion analysis on Weibo text

The results of text emotion analysis show that there are 165,471 “positive emotion” texts, accounting for 80.1%, and the text whose emotion prediction value is concentrated in the “0.9-1” range accounts for 57.1%; There are 41,030 “negative emotion” texts, accounting for 19.9%, and 9.0% of the texts whose emotion prediction values are concentrated in the range of “0-0.1”.

It can be seen that most of the netizens’ emotions reflected with the buzzword “wage slave” are positive. Netizens have made many humorous short sentences with the word “wage slave”, which are used to tease and encourage themselves, such as “wage slave, wage slave soul, and wage slaves are all elite people” and “Are you tired? That is right, comfort is just for the boss” “There is no difficult job, only brave wage slaves”, etc. in order to release their pressure.

On the other hand, there are still 9.0% of “wage slaves” whose emotional prediction values are concentrated in the range of 0-0.1, and these Weibo texts tend to let off their troubles and dissatisfaction at work. To some extent, complaining about some workplace realities and ridiculing the burden of life indicate that many young people who have realized their awakening in self-awareness. Even though they are doing seemingly glamorous white-collar jobs, the long commuting time, greater work pressure and competitive pressure make young people no longer see their occupations into different classes, and everyone is “wage slave” to make a living. Such a situation is conducive to young people to know themselves, recognize the status quo, and not waste too much time and energy in unrealistic dreams and fantasies. Seeing the essence of things clearly and positioning themselves as wage slaves, these people will continue to complain, but they will not be confused. Instead, they will better devote themselves to work after adjusting their mentality, which is a benign state.

Generally speaking, by analyzing the data of more than 200,000 texts on Weibo platform, we can already see the positive side presented by the youth in contemporary society - self-adjustment through self-mockery, which seems humble and sad, but in fact is full of positive and strong attitude towards life.

4.5 Recognition of the Label “Wage Slave” from the Perspective of Cultural Consumption

Cultural consumption can often reflect people’s demand and recognition for spiritual culture. Studying the sales volume and comments of products related to “wage slave” in Taobao is helpful for the researcher to find out people’s recognition of the label “wage slave” and their concerns.

The researcher searches for products with “wage slave” as the keyword in Taobao, and arranges them in descending order according to sales volume, collecting the data of top 65 bestsellers including product types, sales volume, comments, etc. According to the results, the products related to “wage

5. Discussion

6.1 Social Transformation and Group Identity Behind Internet Buzzwords

Internet buzzwords have always been an important carrier for the investigation of social mentality. With the rapid development of economy and society, China is changing from traditional society to modern society, which is followed by increasing work pressure and competition intensity, as well as a series of problems such as social injustice and class solidification in the social transition period. Young working groups gradually realize that no matter what kind of work they are engaged in, what kind of career promotion they have got, they are still in a very ordinary working class who gets labor remuneration through daily “wage slavery”, and will face social reality problems such as “less salary”, “more overtime” and “difficulty in buying a house”. The anxiety and fatigue of life need to be let off urgently, and cyberspace just provides a platform for such groups to break the limitation of time and space, find resonance and complain with each other, which makes scattered individuals gather, focus and enlarge their emotions, and produce a consistent sense of class identity, thus forming Internet buzzwords in a certain period of time.

6.2 From “Corporate Slave” to “Wage Slave” - Constant Social Anxiety and More Positive Mentality

The buzzword “wage slave” does not come out of nowhere, but essentially comes succeeding to the words “996”, “code farmers”, “corporate slave”, “mourning culture” and “Buddhist youth”, reflecting the constant social anxiety under the social transformation. However, compared with other buzzwords, “wage slave” is milder and more positive, which is no longer decadent and evasive when facing pressure, but self-ridicule, self-encouragement and mutual encouragement after recognizing the reality, and also contains the equal connotation of treating all occupations equally.

6. Conclusion

To sum up, the youth aged 20-29 in the southeast coastal areas are the main force in this buzzword carnival of “wage slave”, and the related remarks of “wage slave” are mainly self-mockery and self-teasing, but behind the teasing, there are positive and mutually encouraging emotions and self-awareness.

The word “wage slave” often has hidden meanings such as “employed by others, working for others”, “engaged in tired and low-paid jobs”, “dependent on others, hold their voices”, “low academic qualifications” and “migrant workers who work in cities”. However, the majority of young people in today’s society laugh at themselves and ridicule with “wage slave”, reflecting the disenchantment of the concept of “white collar” and the dispelling of the “job contempt chain” among the working classes. Young working groups gradually find that whether they are engaged in physical work or mental work, they will face the problems of being busy with work and trapped in reality. In this case, taking a step backwards to self-mock and calling themselves as “wage slaves” become a means for them to relieve stress. This is an aggregation discussion of young working classes in cyberspace. Compared with buzzwords such as “code farmer”, “corporate slave” and “mourning culture”, the buzzword of “wage slave” reveals a kind of tenacity that is neither humble nor supercilious, and it is the self-presentation of young working groups to relieve daily work pressure in a more active and peaceful way.

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