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Factors Influencing the Rural Employment Decision of Local Undergraduate College Students in Northern Guangdong Province of China - a perspective based on the Push-pull Theory

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Abstract

The continuous expansion of the scale of higher education has exacerbated the contradiction between the supply and demand of college students' employment. In the post-epidemic era, college students' employment in cities is even more difficult. At the same time, the continuous promotion of the rural revitalization strategy faces the talent bottleneck, and the rural development is in urgent need of intellectual support. Promoting college students to go to rural areas for employment is not only a feasible solution to the problem of college students' employment, but also a reasonable measure to alleviate the contradiction of rural talents. Improving college students' willingness to work in rural areas is an effective means to promote their rural employment behavior. Therefore, it is very necessary to explore the influencing factors of college students' willingness to work in rural areas. Based on the push-pull theory, this paper explores the factors that affect college students' willingness to work in rural areas. The research takes local college graduates in northern Guangdong as the research object, carries out a questionnaire survey, carries out descriptive statistics on the data obtained from the questionnaire, and uses the optimal scale regression to explore the influencing factors of college students' willingness to work in rural areas. The study found that college students' willingness to work in rural areas is jointly affected by urban thrust, rural pull, urban pull, rural thrust, individual factors and intermediate barriers. Both the urban pull factor and the rural push factor hinder the college students' willingness to work in rural areas. Both the urban thrust factor and the rural pull factor promote college students' willingness to work in rural areas. Among the individual factors and intermediate barriers, family income, cultural differences and distance have a greater impact on college students' willingness to work in rural areas.

Keywords: Rural employment decision, Push-pull theory, Urban thrust, Rural pull, Urban pull, Rural thrust, Individual factors, Intermediate barriers

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Introduction

China is a large agricultural country, and the three rural issues are fundamental to the country's livelihood. At present, the downward pressure on the economy has increased, the external environment has undergone profound changes, and with the impact of the new pneumonia epidemic, the situation at home and abroad has become more and more complicated, making the work on the "three rural areas" more and more important (Zhong

&Liu, 2019). Without the modernization of agriculture and rural areas, there would be no national modernization. Without the revitalization of rural areas, there would be no great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. In the critical period of achieving the goal of a well-off society, it is crucial to ensure the smooth implementation of the rural revitalization strategy (Yu, 2021).

Talent is the key to revitalising the countryside. Only when talents are brought into the countryside, stay in the countryside and develop the countryside will rural revitalization have the strength (Zheng, 2021). However, due to the existence of the dualistic system of urban-rural division, China's rural human capital has been moving to the cities for a long time and the return flow is weak, and the lack of rural talents has become a bottleneck to rural revitalisation (Cheng, 2022). In contrast to the serious lack of talents for rural revitalization, a large number of college students with high human capital have difficulties in finding employment in cities. According to statistics, the number of fresh university graduates in China is increasing, and the number of graduates from ordinary universities in 2023 is expected to reach 11.58 million, making the competition for employment among university students increasingly fierce. At the same time, the global economic development has been greatly affected by the new pneumonia epidemic, and in the context of the macroeconomic slowdown, the employment rate of university graduates in some regions continues to be low, and some of them even become unemployed upon graduation or become ants in the city because they have no choice but to find low-quality employment (Wang, 2018).

Encouraging university students to seek employment in rural areas not only guides urban human capital to the countryside and enriches the talent pool for rural revitalization, but also effectively alleviates the problem of difficult employment for university students. It is the starting point and driving force of rural employment behaviour. However, in the face of the gap between urban and rural development levels, most university students are reluctant to consider rural areas as their first choice for employment, and there is a certain degree of structural deficiency in rural employment among university students (Chen et al., 2019). According to a survey, the proportion of university students in China who are willing to work in rural areas is only about 30%, much lower than other Asian countries (60% in Bangladesh and Thailand, 50% in India and 33% in Vietnam) (Wanicha, 2016).

What are the influencing factors of rural employment decision-making of local undergraduate college students? Based on the Push-pull Theory and drawing on the ideas of Human Capital Theory and Social Capital Theory, this study constructs an analytical framework and conducts a questionnaire survey on local undergraduate college graduates in northern Guangdong Province, in an attempt to understand the current situation of college students' rural employment intentions in China, explore the influencing factors and the mechanism of action of rural employment decisions, and provide a targeted reference for ideas to enhance college students' rural employment intentions.

Literature Review

Push-pull Theory

The basic contradiction of less land and more people" is a strong push for migrant workers to leave the countryside, while the shortage of urban labour, modern urban lifestyles and urban residents' health insurance and pension insurance attract migrant workers to the city (Chen & Zhang, 2018). A good entrepreneurial environment, abundant employment opportunities, and higher wages attract suburban farmers to urban employment, and the younger the migrant worker, the more pronounced his or her willingness to settle in the city, while urban exclusion, the size of farmland in the hometown, and rural cooperative medical and pension insurance drive migrant workers to settle in their hometowns (Chen & Jiang, 2015). Factors such as backward economic development in rural areas, urban living quality, community security, living standards, government services, as well as educational attainment and time of inflow combine to drive the new generation of migrant workers' willingness to settle, and the strength of the new generation of migrant workers' individual

willingness in this process is the intrinsic driver for the push-pull factors to take effect (Liang, 2019). In addition to the obvious external nature of push and pull, it also reflects a strong subjectivity. The household registration system, however, remains the main institutional impediment, producing both counter-push and counter-pull effects (Liu, 2017).

The factors that drive migrant workers to work outside the country include urban-rural income differentials, urban healthcare, cultural and recreational resources, and a safe and stable social order, while the hindering factors are the household registration system, social security system, urban discrimination, food habits and beliefs (Pan & Li, 2021). Liu et al. (2020) used nighttime lighting data and questionnaire data to test the push-pull theory and found that the household registration system is not only the main reason for the difference between Chinese and foreign push-pull patterns, but also the main impediment to urban-rural mobility in China (Wang, 2022). The household registration system is not only the main reason for the difference between Chinese and foreign push-pull patterns, but also a prominent barrier to urban-rural mobility in China. Combining the Todaro model with the push-pull theory, the push factors for rural-urban migration were found to be urban income, reduction in arable land area and urban education, while the pull factors were the household registration system, rural land transfer system and urban cost of living (Zhang, 2019). The rural revitalisation strategy, entrepreneurial environment and resources, sense of belonging, and distance to start a business are among the pull factors in the input area, while the degree of marketisation, human capital reserves, information technology and infrastructure improvements hinder labourers from returning to their hometowns to start a business (Wang & Xiong, 2018). The pull factors include entering into marriage, invisible "benefits" of rural household registration, and improved living environment, while the urban push factors include household registration barriers, urban housing prices, and urban-rural differences (Zhu, 2017). The "push" is the inverse change in the relative value of urban and rural hukou, while the "pull" is government support for rural areas and the value attached to rural hukou, but the dualistic hukou system prevents the push and pull from working (Zhu, 2017). However, the dualistic household registration system can prevent the push and pull from working (Fan et al., 2019).

McMahon (1992) used Push-pull Theory to explore the sociological reasons behind study abroad behaviour, extending the application of push and pull theory to the field of international student mobility. By comparing the strengths and weaknesses between source and inflow countries, the push and pull factors that influence students' motivation to study abroad are identified (Soutar & Turner, 2017). The pull factors with the highest level of agreement include the incoming country's geographical location, living environment, quality of education and international reputation, internationalisation, safety and opportunities for English language training. The push factors include low quality higher education opportunities, lower quality of education, weak competitiveness of local students, inadequate subject offerings, political reasons in the country of origin and financial reasons for students' families (Perkins, 2014). Chinese students with high family income, prestigious institutions and good academic performance are more likely to study abroad, and students' values significantly influence their choice to study abroad (Yue, 2017). International social influence, safety, development prospects, and cultural history significantly influence foreign students to study in China (Yang, 2020). Five types of factors - China connection factor, subjective preference factor, choice factor, objective need factor and inside and outside factor - influence the behaviour of foreign students of Chinese origin to come to China, with foreign students staying in China for employment due to development prospects and self-fulfilment, and income factors driving them to return to their home countries (Yue & Qiu, 2019).

The level of human capital and regional economic development are important forces driving the inter-city employment mobility of college graduates, and the current southeast coastal region is still very attractive to talents from the northwest, and the phenomenon of brain drain will persist (Wang & Shen, 2019). Rural employment policies, the cost of living in rural areas, and rural employment publicity help to increase college students' willingness to work in rural areas, while the pace of urban life, the high cost of living, and competition for employment keep college students away from cities (Zhong, 2021). The push-pull theory's force is mainly manifested in four

aspects: the direction of force, the subject of force, the form of force and the mode of force. The most important pull factor affecting the return of high-level talents is the issue of domestic professional development environment. The most important factor affecting the return of high-level talents is the professional development environment in China. The price of housing, on the other hand, acts as a characteristic signal factor affecting four types of factors such as pull, push, intermediate barriers and personal characteristics (Xie, 2022).

Factors influencing university students' intention to take up rural employment

Individual characteristics of college students have a significant effect on their willingness to take up rural employment. Career motivation factors have no effect on college students' rural employment intentions, while parental education status plays a hindering role on college students' rural employment intentions (Baffour, 2021). External environmental factors have a push and pull effect on college students' willingness to take up rural employment. The level of community education and services significantly increases the rural employment intentions of college students, a rural pull (Amalba, 2016). Entrepreneurship is the highest quality employment, and the push of urban entrepreneurship-specific policies and the pull of rural entrepreneurship education units, among others, can effectively promote college students to start their own businesses in rural areas (Amalba, 2016). In addition to rural residential experiences, rural internship experiences can significantly influence college students' willingness to be employed in rural areas (Henry, 2019). Professional support at the national, state, and local levels, psychological preparation for rural employment, and educational opportunities are also important influencing factors (Courtney, 2022).

Chinese scholars have also explored the factors influencing university students' willingness to take up employment in rural areas from several perspectives. First, job characteristics and the urban-rural gap perspective. Work conditions, treatment and job power in the unit, and personal life and career development space all affect college students' rural employment intentions, with large differences in employment treatment and promotion opportunities between urban and rural areas having a greater negative impact on college students' rural employment intentions (Dong et al., 2017). Second, family social capital perspective. Family social capital significantly affects college students' willingness to work in rural areas, and the influence of mothers is stronger than that of fathers (Fan&Zhang, 2022). There is a large gap between the social capital possessed by urban and rural university students, and compared to urban university students, rural university students are at a disadvantage in terms of social capital when they are employed in urban areas, so they are more likely to seek employment in rural areas (Xiao&Fan, 2020). Family cultural capital indirectly affects rural employment intentions of agricultural university students through academic performance, and there are path differences in the way it affects them (Zhang et al., 2018). Third, human capital and employment policy perspective. College students' rural employment intentions are influenced by various factors such as college students' majors, national policy treatment and social bias pressure for rural employment, college students' own development and growth, and the higher education system (Lou, 2018). Individual endowment characteristics, external environment and policy guarantee coefficient are the main factors influencing college students to seek employment in rural areas. Students from rural areas or with agricultural background have stronger desire to seek employment in rural areas, and national policies, rural employment knowledge reserve, rural employment ability and rural practice experience can all contribute to the generation of college students' willingness to seek employment in rural areas (Zhao, 2022). Fourth, individual perception perspective. There is a positive relationship between university students' ideal beliefs and rural employment intentions, and ideological education can enhance graduates' ideal beliefs (Li, 2019).

Based on this discussion, this study hypothesized as follows:

- H1: Urban thrust helps college students generate the idea of going to rural employment.
- H2: Rural pull promotes college students' willingness to work in rural areas.
- H3: Urban pull hinders the generation of college students' willingness to work in rural areas.

- H4: Rural thrust hinders college students' willingness to work in rural areas.
 H5: Individual characteristics, human capital and family social capital factors affect the generation of college students' willingness to work in rural areas.
 H6: Three intermediate barriers, namely, registered residence type, distance and cultural differences, hinder the generation of rural employment intention of college students.

Methodology

Sample and Data Collection

A sampling frame criterion was adopted in this study to select the sample from the population (students from Jiaying University and Shaoguan University). A sampling frame criterion was adopted in this study to select the sample from the population (students from local undergraduate universities in northern Guangdong, China). All the included participants were fresh graduates to ensure the obtained data's validity and reliability. Random sampling was used to select the cases that required answering the research questions (Sarstedt & Mooi, 2019). Simple random sampling was used in this study because it allowed the researcher to select the sample without bias; the sample selected by this technique can be representative of the target population and as such, is the best and most appropriate sampling technique in cases with an accurate target (Saunders et al., 2019). The questionnaire for this study was administered to the population of the study. The questionnaire for this study was administered during participants' working hours together with a covering letter clarifying the study's purpose. The questionnaire for this study was administered during participants' working hours together with a covering letter clarifying the study's purpose, the aim of the research, and the data's security to promote a high response.

Measures

In this study, the factors influencing college students' willingness to take up rural employment were taken as dependent variables, and urban thrust, rural thrust, urban pull, rural pull, individual factors and intermediate barriers were taken as independent variables, measured by 20 items and responded on a 5-point Likert-type scale that reflects their level of agreement with each statement (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) (Nikpour, 2017).

Data Analysis and Results

This study uses the statistical software SPSS (26.0) to conduct an analysis of the factors influencing the willingness of university students to take up rural employment in relation to the data collected. Ordinary linear regression has certain requirements on the type of data, and when categorical variables are encountered, linear regression cannot accurately reflect the distance between different values of categorical variables (Zhao, 2018). For example, gender variables, males and females themselves are level and there is no difference in size or order, if categorical variables are directly included in the linear regression model, the original meaning of the variables may be lost. This study therefore uses optimal scale regression to analyse the data. This method is good at quantifying the different values taken by categorical variables and converting them into numerical variables for statistical analysis, avoiding this shortcoming of linear regression when dealing with categorical variables (Byrne, 2016).

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 1 showed the demographic and profile details of the respondents; the total sample of the study was 1239 new graduates.

Table (1) Demographic and Profile Details of the Respondents

Characteristics	Category	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	491	39.6
	Female	748	60.4
Registered residence type	Agricultural registered residence	532	42.9
	Urban registered residence	707	57.1
Major	Science and engineering	416	33.6
	Economic management	169	13.6
	Medical	83	6.7
	Agroforestry	28	2.3
	Grammar	115	9.3
	Normal education	428	34.5
Academic record	College level	121	9.8
	School level	271	21.9
	National level	130	10.5
	Others	717	57.8
Father's occupation	Agricultural laborer	379	30.6
	Worker	359	29
	Individual business	309	24.9
	Professional technician	90	7.3
	Senior management	57	4.6
	Others	45	3.6
Monthly household income	<2000	157	12.7
	2000-5000	522	42.1
	5001-9000	352	28.4
	9001-15000	149	12
	>15000	59	4.8

Assessment of Measurement Model

The Push-pull theory suggests that the objective push and pull factors of outflow and inflow can only come into play through the subjective perceptions of individuals (Lee, 1966). Therefore, the measurement of urban push and pull and rural push and pull in this paper focuses on investigating university students' subjective perceptions of these four types of factors to inter Connections are made.

Table (2) Regression Analysis Variables of Influencing Factors

Category	Variable	Mean	standard deviation
Dependent variable	Rural employment willingness	2.88	0.979
Individual factors	Gender	1.60	0.489
	Major	3.44	2.190
	Academic record	1.96	1.322
	Father's occupation	2.40	1.160
	Monthly household income	2.54	1.017
Intermediate barriers	Registered residence type	1.43	0.495
	Distance	2.24	1.311
	Cultural difference	3.36	1.077
Urban pull	Wage income	2.37	1.077
	Decent degree	3.68	0.834
	Material conditions	3.52	0.951
Rural thrust	Rural environment	2.94	0.681
	Professional matching	2.37	0.842
	Parental attitude	2.91	0.949
Urban thrust	Employment policy	2.79	0.779
	School publicity	3.26	0.875
	Employment pressure	3.27	0.783
Rural pull	Cost of living	1.69	0.922
	Rural prospects	3.42	0.895
	Local government support	3.71	1.030

Hypothesis Testing and Results

This study examines the impact of the above variables on university students' rural employment intentions by conducting optimal scale regressions on urban thrust, rural pull, urban pull, rural thrust, individual factors, and intermediate barrier factors. The analysis results are presented in the table below, where $R^2 = 0.452$ and ANOVA significance = $0.000 < 0.05$, indicating a good model fit.

Table (3) Regression Results of the Optimal Scale of Factors

Category	Variable	B value	standard deviation	F value	Sig.
Urban pull	Wage income	-0.078	0.043	3.216	0.040
	Decent degree	-0.035	0.041	0.736	0.391
	Material conditions	-0.083	0.041	4.097	0.003
Rural thrust	Rural environment	-0.062	0.083	0.563	0.453
	Professional matching	0.172	0.027	39.523	0.000
	Parental attitude	-0.107	0.030	12.945	0.000
Urban thrust	Employment policy	0.196	0.041	23.239	0.000
	School publicity	0.057	0.064	0.791	0.454
	Employment pressure	0.041	0.056	0.526	0.665
Rural pull	Cost of living	0.066	0.039	2.806	0.061
	Rural prospects	0.132	0.033	16.490	0.000
	Local government support	0.192	0.035	30.658	0.000
Individual factors	Gender	-0.003	0.026	0.010	0.990
	Major	-0.136	0.028	23.077	0.110
	Academic record	0.047	0.046	1.036	0.355
	Father's occupation	-0.040	0.028	2.043	0.130
	Monthly household income	0.089	0.029	9.631	0.000
Intermediate barriers	Registered residence type	-0.020	0.024	0.711	0.491
	Distance	-0.042	0.031	1.818	0.080
	Cultural difference	0.088	0.033	7.365	0.007
R ² =0.452, Sig.=0.000 < 0.05, N=1239					

Discussion

The urban pull factor refers to the factors in cities that can keep university students in urban employment. Wage income and material conditions are significant barriers to the creation of a desire to take up rural employment among university students. The level of economic development and modernisation in cities is better than in rural areas, and this gap will be difficult to overcome in the short term. One of the reasons for university students and their families to invest in higher education is to get a good return, so they are naturally attracted to urban wages and material conditions and choose to stay in urban employment. The dependent variable of decent degree does not have a statistically significant effect on the willingness of university students to take up rural employment. The abundance of resources such as health care and education, and the convenience of infrastructure that enhances the sense of professional decency of those employed in cities, are undoubtedly strong inducements for university students to take up employment in cities. However, university students are also aware that the decency of urban jobs is only superficial under the pressure of high housing prices and high cost of living in cities, and this factor has a limited effect on university students' employment drive.

Rural thrust factors are factors in rural areas that are not conducive to college students staying in rural employment. Professional matching and parental attitudes significantly influence

university students' willingness to take up rural employment. Parents are key figures in influencing college students' decisions, and college students will refer to their parents' advice in the employment process to make their choices. At the same time, the employment resources support given by parents to college students will also influence their employment judgment to a certain extent. If parents give high support to college students' employment in rural areas, it will alleviate their worries, and college students can feel free to go to rural areas to show their skills. Some university students see rural employment as a springboard rather than a lifelong career for themselves. After completing their service in rural grassroots projects, university students can obtain a more desirable career path through further education or policy preferences when choosing a career, so the poor living environment in rural areas is only temporary for these university students and will not be an obstacle for them to go to rural employment.

Urban thrust factors refer to factors in the city that push university students to seek employment in rural areas. The three factors of employment policy, school publicity and employment pressure all contribute to the generation of university students' willingness to take up rural employment. Students are more concerned about the effectiveness of policies than the content of the policies themselves. Only policies that can be implemented can stabilise students' desire and belief in rural employment and thus increase their willingness to work in rural areas. Although colleges and universities have responded to the government's call to guide college students to seek employment in rural areas, the lack of systematization and regularity has led to college students still choosing to work in cities.

The rural pull factor refers to the factors that can attract university students to work in rural areas. The low cost of living in rural areas (especially housing prices) has a strong pull on fresh university graduates, especially poor university students. At the same time, in the process of implementing the rural revitalization strategy, local governments have gradually introduced some preferential policies to attract and cultivate talents in order to attract more university students to work and start businesses in rural areas, which has a greater pull on university students to work in rural areas.

Individual factors have an impact on college students' willingness to work in rural areas. The effect of gender on college students' willingness to work in rural areas is not significant. Agricultural and forestry college students have a higher willingness to work in rural areas. Academic performance is one of the indicators for employers to measure the quality of applicants. College students with good performance tend to stand out from the fierce urban employment competition and get ideal jobs. But at present candidates for village employment positions are mostly selected through recruitment. College students with good grades are more confident to pass the exam, and their willingness to apply for the exam is also not low. The selection problem brought by this dual advantage may be the reason why the learning results have no significant effect on college students' willingness to work in rural areas. The higher the professional level of college students' fathers, the lower their willingness to work in rural areas.

Intermediate barriers include distance, language and cultural differences. There are still many inconveniences in rural transportation compared with urban areas, and the distance still has a weak influence on the willingness of university students to work in rural areas. At the same time, the long-standing urban-rural dichotomy makes urban and rural areas still two different fields with different cultures. Not only are urban university students unfamiliar with rural culture, but rural university students are also gradually alienated from rural culture because they have been away from their hometowns for a long time, and the cultural difference between urban and rural areas has become a structural obstacle to the migration of university students from urban to rural areas.

Conclusion

At present, the willingness of university students to work in rural areas is at a low level. The number of college students who have a clear intention to work in rural areas is lower than those who are not willing to work in rural areas, and the distribution of the number of students shows a

pattern of "small at both ends and large in the middle"; most students still have a wait-and-see attitude towards rural employment, and there is much room for efforts to improve the willingness of college students to work in rural areas. In addition, students who are willing to work in rural areas also show an obvious tendency of short-term employment and a low willingness to be rooted in rural areas. Most students only use rural employment as a springboard or a means to escape from employment pressure, and will choose to leave rural areas after their service period to find better development or employment opportunities.

The willingness of college students to engage in rural employment is comprehensively affected by urban thrust, rural pull, urban pull, rural push, individual factors and intermediate barrier factors, but the direction and significance of the forces acting on different factors are different. The urban thrust and rural pull together constitute the force to promote the rural employment of college students, while the urban pull and rural thrust hinder the pace of rural employment of college students, and individual factors and intermediate barriers also play an important role.

Limitation of this Study and Future Directions

When analyzing the study's findings, it is essential to consider that There are certain limitations of the study. In this study, when exploring the factors influencing college students' rural employment intentions, it was limited to exploring the direct influence of each factor on the independent variable of college students' rural employment intentions, ignoring the interactions among the factors. Future research can use structural equation modeling to explore the intricate relationships among the push-pull factors and map out the mechanism of action of the push-pull factors to provide a more effective reference for enhancing college students' rural employment intentions. Another weakness is that this study only includes a region in Guangdong Province, China with limited sample size. Hence, it is not easy to generalize the findings, and as such, future research should include a larger sample size by including those from different regions.

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