ISSN 2616-5902 Vol. 8, Issue 5: 63-70, DOI: 10.25236/AJBM.2026.080509

A Study on High-quality Employment Affected by Digital-Real Integration

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Abstract: *Under the background of the digital economy, the integration of digital and real industries has become a core strategy for industrial upgrading and national competitiveness improvement. Its influence on high-quality employment is growing increasingly obvious. Based on literature research, this paper reviews the impact of digital-real integration on high-quality employment from the perspectives of concept definition, measurement methods, and empirical research. The study finds that existing researches have achieved certain results in the fields of digital-real integration and high-quality employment, which are mainly reflected in the expansion of theoretical frameworks, method innovation and empirical support for policies. However, current studies lack systematic and comprehensive analysis of high-quality employment. There is insufficient macro quantitative research on the employment effects of digital-real integration. Besides, existing discussions on micro-level performances of enterprises and workers remain inadequate. Furthermore, the heterogeneous impacts of digital-real integration on different labor groups and their underlying mechanisms have not been fully explored. In the future, a multi-dimensional evaluation system should be built, focusing on the impact of digital-real integration on changes in employment structure and group differences, so as to provide reference for policy formulation and improvement of employment quality.*

Keywords: *Digital-real integration; high-quality employment; literature review*

1. Introduction

In the era of the digital economy, the integration of digital and real economies has become a core strategic direction. It drives global industrial transformation and upgrading. It also enhances national competitiveness. The Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China clearly states that we shall accelerate the development of the digital economy, advance the in-depth integration of the digital economy and the real economy, and build digital industrial clusters with global influence. The 14th Five-Year Plan for Digital Economy Development further emphasizes taking digital-real integration as the main task. It promotes digital industrialization and industrial digitalization in a coordinated way. It provides strong institutional and technical support for the construction of Digital China. At the same time, employment is the most basic livelihood issue. It directly affects social stability and sustainable development. It is also an important foundation for national governance and long-term strategy.

High-quality employment is the core essence of high-quality economic development and a concentrated embodiment of people's well-being. China formally put forward the initiative of promoting high-quality and full employment, and defined it as a core people's livelihood-oriented strategy in the process of advancing Chinese modernization. Guided by this macro strategy, digital-real integration has gradually become the core trend of current economic development. Through the extensive application of new-generation information technologies such as big data, artificial intelligence, cloud computing, the Internet of Things, and blockchain, the production and business models of traditional industries are undergoing profound transformation. This process exerts a far-reaching and complex impact on employment, presenting both new opportunities and new challenges.

Specifically, on the one hand, digital-real integration drives the emergence of new industries and business forms. It creates new digital jobs such as data analysts and artificial intelligence engineers. It also accelerates the digital transformation of traditional industries and gives rise to new occupations, including digital marketers and smart cultural tourism planners. In addition, supported by the rapid growth of the platform economy, flexible employment, part-time jobs and freelance work keep

ISSN 2616-5902 Vol. 8, Issue 5: 63-70, DOI: 10.25236/AJBM.2026.080509

expanding. Typical examples are online car drivers and e-commerce live streamers. These new forms inject continuous vitality into the overall employment supply.

On the other hand, with the continuous penetration of automation and intelligence, a number of repetitive and low-skilled jobs face the risk of rapid replacement, such as assembly line workers and basic administrative staff. This further intensifies structural employment contradictions. Meanwhile, workers are under growing pressure from outdated skills and unstable jobs, making the polarization of the labor market increasingly prominent.

Against this background, this paper systematically reviews existing literature and deeply discusses two core themes, namely digital-real integration and high-quality employment. It conducts a comprehensive review from the perspectives of concept definition, theoretical interpretation, empirical research and influencing mechanisms. A relatively complete research framework is constructed, and the limitations of current studies are summarized. On this basis, targeted suggestions are put forward to provide references for future academic research.

2. Research on Digital-Real Integration

2.1 Concept of Digital-Real Integration

In the late 1990s, Tapscott D (1999) first proposed the concept and theoretical framework of the "digital economy". He noted that the spread of information and communication technology would greatly affect global economic activities[1].After 2000, many countries introduced relevant policies. These countries include the United States, Germany, and Japan. They applied sensors, the Internet of Things, and digital technologies to production, manufacturing, and industry. They aimed to connect the physical and virtual worlds. This practice is an early explanation of digital-real integration[2].With further development of digital technology, the concept of digital-real integration has become clearer. However, there is no unified definition yet.

Most scholars believe that digital-real integration means applying digital technologies to the real economy. These technologies include big data, cloud computing, artificial intelligence, and blockchain[3].For example, Liu F (2024) pointed out that digital-real integration adopts modern information technologies to upgrade and transform traditional industries, foster new business forms and models, and realize the transformation of economic growth drivers as well as the optimization of economic structure [4]. Wang X et al. (2024) argued that digital-real integration refers to a process in which real economy enterprises rely on sound infrastructure, favorable development environment and efficient technical supply. They realize the innovation and restructuring of production factors, transform operation modes, carry out digital and intelligent production and management, and ultimately improve energy efficiency[5].

Some scholars focus on enterprise digital transformation[6]. It covers industries such as manufacturing, agriculture, and healthcare[7,8]. For example, studies analyze how real enterprises promote sustainable development through digital transformation. They highlight the potential of digital technology to enhance coordination between the digital and real economies. Although there are slight differences in the definition of digital-real integration among academic and economic sectors, a general consensus has been reached. Its essence is a dynamic process that relies on digital factors, digital technologies and digital platforms. It continuously expands and deepens the integration between the real economy and the digital economy[9,10].

2.2 Effects of Digital-Real Integration

Research on the effects of digital-real integration mainly focuses on the macroeconomy and sustainable development. Jing Wenjun and Sun Baowen (2019), as well as Xia Jiechang and Li Luanhao (2024), conducted theoretical analysis. They found that digital-real integration can optimize internal corporate processes, boost institutional and technological innovation and implementation, upgrade traditional consumption and service modes, and empower high-quality economic development[9,11]. Aleksandr P. Kupryushin (2020) pointed out that digital-real integration can stimulate innovation potential and optimize technological structure, thereby promoting import and export trade[12].

From an empirical perspective, Guo Huimin (2024) adopted panel data of 138 cities in China’s nine major urban agglomerations. The results show that the level of digital-real integration exerts a

ISSN 2616-5902 Vol. 8, Issue 5: 63-70, DOI: 10.25236/AJBM.2026.080509

significant positive impact on high-quality economic development[13]. Cheng Sainan and Feng Zhen (2024) concluded that digital-real integration has multi-dimensional heterogeneous effects on new quality productive forces. Specifically, every 1% increase in digital-real integration contributes to a 0.0061% growth in new quality productive forces[14].

In terms of sustainable development, empirical studies by many scholars prove that digital-real integration can accelerate industrial upgrading and technological progress, so as to realize urban green development. For instance, Liu Zhiqiang et al. (2024) found that digital-real integration promotes the green transformation of the logistics industry through the adjustment of innovative factors[15]. Yang et al. (2024) verified a nonlinear U-shaped relationship between digital-real integration and carbon emission efficiency, and such influence becomes stronger as the integration level improves[16]. Beyond macroeconomic effects, digital-real integration also helps enterprises reduce operating costs through digital transformation, and optimize the resource allocation of industrial clusters[17].

2.3 Measurement of Digital-Real Integration

Research on the measurement of digital-real integration is mainly divided into macro and micro research paths in existing literature. At the macro level, two major research methods have been formed. The first is to construct independent indicator systems for the digital economy and the real economy respectively, and adopt the coupling coordination model to measure their integration degree. For example, Cui Linhao and Feng Feng (2024) measured the development level of the digital economy from five dimensions, including urban internet penetration rate, proportion of digital economy employees, output of digital industries, mobile phone penetration rate and digital inclusive finance. Meanwhile, they adopted the added value of urban agriculture, construction, manufacturing and other industries to evaluate the development of the real economy. On this basis, they constructed a coupling coordination model to calculate the digital-real integration index[18].

The second method focuses on the connotation and multi-dimensional attributes of digital-real integration. It establishes a comprehensive indicator system covering basic integration, application integration, innovation integration and financial integration, so as to reflect the overall development level of integration. For instance, Hu Xijuan et al. (2022) constructed a digital-real integration development index system with four dimensions and 19 indicators, providing a standardized measurement framework for comprehensive evaluation[19].

At the micro level, relevant studies focus more on the internal integration degree of enterprises. A typical research method starts from the perspective of technology-driven industrial integration. It extracts technical correlation data from patent classification codes according to the correspondence between technology and industries, so as to quantify digital-real integration at the enterprise level[20]. In addition, some scholars analyzed the practical paths of enterprise digital-real integration. They pointed out that the application of artificial intelligence, the development of public data and the construction of digital infrastructure can effectively accelerate the digital transformation and upgrading of traditional enterprises[21,22].

Some studies also adopt typical enterprise cases as research objects, such as physical retail supermarkets and Yunnan Baiyao. They discuss how these enterprises improve production efficiency and operating performance through digital-real integration in daily operation[23,24]. In summary, the measurement of digital-real integration requires both systematic macro evaluation and practical micro exploration, so as to realize a comprehensive and objective depiction of its development level.

3. Research on High-quality Employment

3.1 Concept of High-quality Employment

At present, no unified definition of high-quality employment has been formed among governments and academic circles at home and abroad. Its origin can be traced to the concept of Quality of Work Life first proposed in the United States. It not only focuses on material conditions such as salary and welfare, but also highlights the impacts of work-life balance, participatory decision-making, occupational safety and health, as well as interpersonal relationships on employment quality[25]. Later concepts including Decent Work and Quality of Job have further enriched the connotation of high-quality employment.

Scholars in China usually define high-quality employment from macro and micro perspectives.

ISSN 2616-5902 Vol. 8, Issue 5: 63-70, DOI: 10.25236/AJBM.2026.080509

From the macro level, high-quality employment is regarded as a comprehensive reflection of a country or regional employment performance in the quality dimension. Its evaluation system attaches importance not only to employment scale, but also to employment stability, fairness, security and sustainability. It also takes into account the adaptability and contribution of employment to economic and social development.

From the micro level, it focuses on the connection between individual workers and specific jobs. It centers on employees' subjective experience, rights protection and career development space in the working process[26]. It essentially explores how individuals realize self-value and improve comprehensive competence through work[27].

3.2 Analysis of Current Situation of Employment Quality

Current research rarely discusses overall employment quality, and most relevant studies focus on the employment status of specific groups and industries. Zhang Bin and Zhao Changjie (2024) found that in emerging industries, young workers are at a disadvantage in terms of social security and vocational skill development compared with those in traditional industries, despite higher labor remuneration[28]. Li Hao and Nian Meng (2024) analyzed the dilemmas faced by migrant workers under the current economic context, including shrinking employment opportunities, inadequate labor protection and low human capital levels, which hinder their access to high-quality employment[29]. Based on long-term tracking data, Shi Qiuheng et al. (2024) pointed out that college students possess strong general employability and comprehensive qualities. However, constraints in professional knowledge and the imperfect practical teaching system of universities contradict the realization of high-quality employment for graduates[30].

By constructing an evaluation index system for manufacturing employment quality, Wang Yang (2024) concluded that China's manufacturing employment quality has shown an N-shaped trend since 2008 and has continued to decline in recent years[31]. In addition, several scholars have conducted empirical research on the influencing factors of high-quality employment. Relevant factors cover micro-level elements such as working environment, job characteristics, labor relations, salary income and labor protection, as well as macro-level factors including industrial structure, technological progress, human capital differences and labor supply[32.33].

3.3 Measurement of High-quality Employment

The measurement of high-quality employment is mainly divided into macro and micro dimensions. From a macro perspective, relevant studies focus on the overall labor market conditions of a region or a country, concentrating on employment structure, labor market supply and demand, employment efficiency and other aspects[34]. At the micro level, research centers on employees' objective working conditions and subjective perceptions. In recent years, to reflect real employment experience and explore individual differences, a growing number of scholars have attached importance to workers' subjective feelings and self-value perception, and incorporated subjective indicators such as job satisfaction and work accomplishment into the evaluation system. Overall, existing studies at home and abroad mostly conduct analysis from single or multiple dimensions including employment scale, employment structure and employment quality, and construct measurement indicators of employment quality covering work income, labor market security, working environment and employment opportunities[35].

4. Research on the Impact of Digital-Real Integration on High-quality Employment

Current research on the employment effects of digital-real integration remains limited. Most relevant studies focus on the single or multidimensional impacts of digital technologies such as artificial intelligence, big data and cloud computing on employment scale, structure and quality. Beverelli C. (2019) explored the U.S. labor market and found that skill-biased technological changes benefit high-skilled labor while placing greater employment pressure on low-skilled workers. Such unequal technology adoption exacerbates labor market polarization, raising the share of high-income and low-income occupations and reducing the proportion of middle-income jobs[36]. Vallas S. and Schor J. B. (2022) argued that new platform-based employment forms help expand employment scale and enhance economic resilience, yet meanwhile trigger challenges in employment stability and social security[37]. Similarly, based on data of EU member states, Piroșcă G. I. et al. (2021) verified that the

ISSN 2616-5902 Vol. 8, Issue 5: 63-70, DOI: 10.25236/AJBM.2026.080509

development of digital technologies aggravates poor employment security, low income, intense work pressure, long working hours and unemployment, especially for groups lacking digital literacy and the ability to adapt to the digital environment[38].

Scholars in China hold similar viewpoints with different research emphases. Huang Xu et al. (2025) pointed out that the large-scale application of generative artificial intelligence brings potential risks including employment substitution, labor elimination and privacy leakage[39]. Based on cross-national input-output data, Ding Lin and Wang Huijuan (2020) found that technological progress in China's internet industry promotes employment in the service sector, but exerts a significant negative impact on employment in mining and technology-intensive manufacturing sectors[40], which is consistent with the findings of Li Hui (2023)[41].

From a macro perspective, Cui Yan (2023) indicated that digital technologies represented by artificial intelligence produce a prominent substitution effect and reduce labor demand in the initial stage, while technological progress will inevitably improve production efficiency and optimize employment structure in the medium and long run[42]. Zhang Shun (2022) stated that digital economy transformation leads to the polarization of labor productivity, with improved efficiency for high-skilled labor and declined performance for middle and low-skilled labor[43].Several scholars also confirmed that the digital economy effectively raises the wage level and job quality of highly educated workers [44,45].Nevertheless, contrary conclusions also exist. Some studies suggest that the digital economy exerts a more prominent influence on improving the employment quality of low-educated groups, especially in expanding job opportunities and increasing income [46].

Overall, the digital economy represented by digital technologies exerts multidimensional effects on employment, with significant heterogeneity across industries, regions and labor groups, and no consistent conclusion has been reached on its comprehensive impact.

Existing studies concerning digital-real integration and employment are mostly theoretical. They demonstrate that digital-real integration broadens employment channels and fosters new employment patterns, such as food delivery riders, online car-hailing drivers and live streamers on digital platforms. Some scholars also proposed that digital-real integration features universal accessibility. Compared with rising labor costs, its application cost keeps declining, which may further intensify structural unemployment risks [47].

In addition, a small number of empirical studies have discussed its employment impacts on specific groups. For example, based on big data from Zhaopin, Mao Yufei et al. (2024) found that the deepening of digital-real integration helps boost labor productivity and expand corporate recruitment demand, thereby improving the prosperity of the college graduate employment market[48].Against the backdrop of digital-real integration, platform-based occupations including food delivery riders, online car drivers and crowdsourcing couriers deliver higher employment inclusiveness, larger recruitment scale and better remuneration, with lower requirements for educational background and working experience.

5. Conclusions and Research Prospects

5.1 Research Conclusions

Overall, existing studies have made considerable progress in the fields of digital-real integration and high-quality employment. The main innovations are reflected in three aspects. First, theoretically, scholars have sorted out the interactive logic between the digital economy and the real economy, gradually improved the conceptual framework of digital-real integration, and expanded the multi-dimensional connotation of high-quality employment. Second, in terms of research methods, researchers have explored measurement approaches such as the coupling coordination model, integration development index and patent-based quantification, providing new ideas for the quantitative assessment of digital-real integration. Third, from an empirical perspective, relevant literature combining macro data and industrial cases has verified the positive effects of digital-real integration on economic growth, green transformation and employment structure optimization, offering empirical support for policy formulation.

Nevertheless, current research still has certain limitations. First, most studies examine single dimensions such as employment scale, employment structure and employment quality, without conducting systematic and comprehensive evaluation of high-quality employment. Second, although high-quality employment has been repeatedly emphasized as a key national strategy in recent years,

ISSN 2616-5902 Vol. 8, Issue 5: 63-70, DOI: 10.25236/AJBM.2026.080509

relevant discussions on the employment impact of digital-real integration remain largely qualitative, lacking macro quantitative analysis. Third, existing research focuses excessively on macro effects, with insufficient systematic discussion on micro-level performance, especially the employment quality of enterprises and individual workers. Fourth, in-depth exploration of group heterogeneity is scarce, and the internal mechanisms of digital-real integration in skill differentiation, occupational mobility and social equity have not been fully clarified.

5.2 Research Prospects

In view of the above deficiencies, future research can be further deepened in the following directions. Firstly, it is necessary to construct a systematic evaluation framework for high-quality employment. By incorporating multi-dimensional indicators covering employment quantity, structure, quality and individuals' subjective perceptions, comprehensive analysis from the macro to the micro level can be realized to clarify the overall characteristics and internal logic of high-quality employment.

Secondly, quantitative research on the employment effects of digital-real integration should be strengthened. With the adoption of panel data, coupling models and other econometric tools, subsequent studies can evaluate its macro impacts across regions, industries and time periods, so as to provide solid empirical evidence for targeted policy-making.

Thirdly, greater attention should be paid to micro-level mechanisms. Further research is required to explore the changes in corporate operation and individual employment quality, and analyze the specific role of digital-real integration in job restructuring, skill demand upgrading and workers' career development.

Finally, more attention shall be paid to the heterogeneous impacts on different labor groups. It is essential to reveal the influencing mechanisms of digital-real integration in skill stratification, occupational mobility and social fairness, so as to promote targeted and inclusive employment policies amid the in-depth integration of digital technology and the real economy.

Acknowledgements

Fund Project: University-level Scientific Research Project of Nanjing University of Science and Technology Zijin College (2025ZXSK0401003).

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