Rethinking Retention: The Paradoxical Role of Reward, Recognition, and Job Satisfaction in Turnover Intention among Young Faculty in Chinese Private Universities

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impact of reward and recognition on turnover intention among young academic staff in Chinese private universities, with job satisfaction examined as a mediating factor. Drawing on Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory and Social Exchange Theory, a quantitative survey was conducted with 287 early-career faculty members. Structural equation modeling revealed that reward and recognition had a significant but unexpected negative effect on job satisfaction and a positive effect on turnover intention. Furthermore, job satisfaction was found to positively predict turnover intention, contrary to conventional expectations. Despite these findings, job satisfaction partially mediated the relationship between reward and recognition and turnover intention. These results highlight the complexity of faculty perceptions in resource-constrained educational settings, emphasizing that the perceived fairness and alignment of reward systems are critical. The study offers theoretical insights and practical recommendations for improving faculty retention strategies in China's evolving private higher education landscape.

Keywords: Reward and recognition, job satisfaction, turnover intention, young academic staff, Chinese private universities

1. INTRODUCTION

Background

Over the past two decades, China's private higher education sector has witnessed rapid expansion, driven by growing demand for tertiary education, government reforms, and economic development. Private universities have become vital contributors to widening educational access and meeting the diverse needs of a knowledge-based economy. However, while enrollment has surged, these institutions face significant challenges in faculty management, particularly in recruiting and retaining qualified academic staff. This issue has been widely observed across the sector, with studies highlighting factors such as inadequate compensation, limited career progression, and high stress levels as major contributors to faculty attrition (Abbasi et al., 2022). Research in Yunnan has also shown that early-career faculty often leave due to lack of training, low pay, and limited institutional support (Li & Yao, 2022).

Faculty members are the cornerstone of educational quality and institutional development. They not only teach and mentor students but also conduct research, contribute to policy implementation, and shape the academic culture of universities. Retaining committed and competent faculty is therefore crucial for sustaining teaching quality, research output, and the overall reputation of an institution. Yet, faculty turnover—especially among early-career staff—has become an increasingly pressing issue in China's private higher education system. Studies have found that dissatisfaction with job security, limited development opportunities, and lack of institutional recognition contribute to the high turnover rates among young faculty (Chen & Wang, 2025). Research from Shandong Province also shows a strong link between low job satisfaction and high turnover intention among lecturers in private institutions (Wang & Jiang, 2024).

A study by Hussein et al. (2021) found that faculty turnover rates in private universities have consistently surpassed those in public institutions, with some institutions reporting annual turnover exceeding 18%. This challenge is particularly acute among junior faculty who often report lower job satisfaction due to limited support for professional development, unclear promotion pathways, and inadequate compensation. The disparity in work conditions between public and private universities contributes to a persistent sense of inequity and instability, encouraging many young scholars to seek opportunities elsewhere.

Moreover, reward and recognition—both monetary and non-monetary—are emerging as critical factors influencing job satisfaction and faculty retention. While these organizational practices have been widely studied in corporate settings, their influence within the academic context of Chinese private universities remains underexplored. Given the importance of a satisfied and stable academic workforce, it is imperative to examine how reward and recognition shape turnover intention, particularly through the mediating role of job satisfaction. This study addresses this need by investigating these relationships among young academic staff in private Chinese universities.

Problem Statement

Turnover intention among academic staff poses a growing concern for private higher education institutions in China. Excessive turnover disrupts teaching continuity, increases recruitment and training costs, and undermines institutional quality. Young academic staff—defined in this study as faculty with fewer than five years of experience—are particularly at risk of leaving due to unsatisfactory working conditions, limited support, and unclear career advancement pathways. This issue has been well documented in private institutions across China, where young lecturers report high turnover intentions linked to poor job satisfaction and lack of incentives (Zhang et al., 2022). Although existing research acknowledges the role of job satisfaction and organizational factors in shaping turnover intention, most studies have either focused on public institutions or explored the issue in Western educational settings.

In China, private universities face distinct challenges in faculty retention that are often overlooked in national education policy and institutional planning. A key issue is the inadequate reward and recognition system, which affects both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. For example, poor compensation and limited career development opportunities were found to significantly increase turnover intention among lecturers in Shandong Province (Otache & Inekwe, 2022). The absence of fair compensation, annual bonuses, promotion opportunities, and public acknowledgment of achievements contributes to feelings of underappreciation and dissatisfaction among young academic staff. Studies have also shown that fair reward and recognition practices are essential to improving job satisfaction, which in turn reduces turnover intention (Kristanti et al., 2021). Despite the awareness of these challenges, few empirical studies have systematically investigated how reward and recognition affect turnover intention in Chinese private universities, and even fewer have explored the mediating role of job satisfaction in this relationship.

Given these challenges, there is a critical need to better understand how institutional support—especially in the form of rewards and recognition—can shape young academics' job satisfaction and their decision to remain in or leave their positions. Addressing this gap is essential for ensuring the sustainability and quality of China's private higher education sector.

Significance of Study

This study is significant on both theoretical and practical levels. Theoretically, it contributes to the existing body of knowledge by examining the complex relationship between reward and recognition, job satisfaction, and turnover intention in the under-researched context of Chinese private higher education. It draws on Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory and Job Satisfaction Theory to explore how these constructs interact, offering a nuanced understanding of faculty retention dynamics.

Practically, the findings can guide policymakers, university administrators, and HR professionals in designing more effective faculty retention strategies. By identifying job satisfaction as a mediating factor, this study underscores the importance of creating a supportive, rewarding, and engaging work environment for young academic staff. Targeted interventions—such as performance-based incentives, structured recognition programs, and enhanced career development support—can help reduce turnover intention, improve morale, and build institutional loyalty.

In the broader context of China's rapidly evolving educational landscape, this research offers timely insights into how private universities can remain competitive and sustainable. As these institutions play an increasingly vital role in national educational development, understanding and addressing faculty turnover becomes crucial not only for institutional performance but also for achieving broader educational and economic goals.

Research Question

Given the challenges surrounding faculty retention in Chinese private universities, particularly among young academic staff, it becomes essential to examine the specific institutional factors that influence their intention to stay or leave. Among these, reward and recognition have emerged as particularly salient variables that directly shape employees' motivation and perceived value within the institution. However, whether these factors exert their influence directly or operate through psychological states such as job satisfaction remains a crucial question for both theory and practice.

To investigate this, the study focuses on two primary research questions:

- **RQ1**: What is the relationship between reward and recognition, and turnover intention among young academic staff in Chinese private universities?
- **RQ2**: What is the mediating effect of job satisfaction between reward and recognition, and turnover intention among young academic staff in Chinese private universities?

Addressing these questions will not only clarify the mechanisms through which organizational practices influence faculty turnover intentions but also provide evidence-based insights for policy makers and administrators aiming to enhance

retention strategies in private higher education institutions. The next section presents a review of relevant literature to ground these research questions in existing theoretical and empirical findings.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Turnover Intention in Higher Education

Turnover intention—defined as an employee's conscious and deliberate willfulness to leave their organization—is widely regarded as a reliable predictor of actual turnover behavior (Chen et al., 2014). In higher education, particularly within the private sector in China, this phenomenon has drawn increasing concern due to its detrimental impacts on institutional stability, student learning outcomes, and administrative continuity (Zhang et al., 2021). Studies have shown that private university instructors in China are more likely to express turnover intentions compared to their counterparts in public institutions, primarily due to limited professional development opportunities, inadequate pay, and higher workloads (Zhao, 2013). A large-scale national survey conducted by Du and Liu (2019) revealed that over half of Chinese university instructors have considered changing institutions or careers, with this percentage even higher among early-career staff.

The attrition of qualified academic staff imposes both direct and indirect costs on universities, including recruitment and training expenses, as well as loss of intellectual capital and disruption to teaching quality (Weng & Xi, 2010; Harris & Ellis, 2018). As turnover continues to erode organizational knowledge and culture, it is imperative to understand the root causes of faculty disengagement. Empirical studies consistently identify job dissatisfaction, burnout, and lack of institutional support as key predictors of turnover intention in academic settings (Zhang et al., 2022).

Job Satisfaction as a Mediator

Job satisfaction, broadly defined as the positive emotional state resulting from an individual's appraisal of their job experience (Locke, 1976), is considered a critical antecedent to employee retention and performance (Judge et al., 2020). Numerous studies have affirmed its mediating role between organizational practices and turnover intention (Jiang & Huang, 2020). Specifically in Chinese private universities, low levels of job satisfaction have been attributed to limited promotion pathways, insufficient mentoring, and lack of recognition—factors that particularly impact early-career academics (Liu, 2011).

From a theoretical standpoint, Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory provides a useful lens to analyze the role of job satisfaction in academic settings. The theory distinguishes between hygiene factors, which prevent dissatisfaction (e.g., salary, policies), and motivators, which promote satisfaction (e.g., recognition, achievement). When employees perceive a misalignment between their expectations and institutional support, their commitment declines, and turnover intentions rise (Alshmemriet al., 2017). Studies also demonstrate that job satisfaction partially mediates the relationship between organizational support and turnover intention, suggesting it plays a buffering role in reducing attrition (Zhang et al., 202).

Reward and Recognition in Faculty Retention

Reward and recognition systems are essential tools for motivating academic staff and enhancing institutional loyalty. These systems comprise both financial incentives (e.g., salary, bonuses) and non-financial elements (e.g., praise, awards, career development opportunities), which together influence faculty morale and retention (Victor & Hoole, 2017). Research indicates that recognition—particularly when timely and authentic—can have a stronger impact on job satisfaction than monetary rewards alone (Imran et al., 2014).

In the context of higher education, especially within China's resource-constrained private sector, non-monetary recognition holds strategic importance. Faculty often cite appreciation, professional autonomy, and acknowledgment of scholarly contributions as central to their organizational commitment (Gore et al., 2017). Despite this, private universities frequently lag in implementing structured recognition systems, contributing to disengagement and a sense of undervaluation among staff (Koo et al., 2019).

Moreover, the interplay between reward systems and job satisfaction has been well documented. Studies by Mabaso and Dlamini (2018) affirm that employees' perceptions of fairness and equity in reward systems significantly shape their levels of job satisfaction, which in turn affects their intention to stay. When institutions fail to establish transparent and equitable reward practices, especially for younger academics navigating early career pressures, turnover intention intensifies.

Integrated Insights and Gaps

Collectively, the literature highlights that while reward and recognition significantly influence faculty retention, their effects are mediated by job satisfaction—a variable shaped by both organizational culture and individual perceptions. However, much of the existing research has focused on public universities or Western settings, where structural conditions differ markedly from China's private sector. There is a dearth of empirical evidence assessing how these dynamics unfold among early-career academics in Chinese private universities, who face unique challenges including lower institutional prestige, constrained budgets, and performance-driven cultures.

Thus, this study seeks to fill this gap by empirically examining how reward and recognition impact turnover intention through job satisfaction. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of more effective HR strategies in the private higher education sector, with implications for faculty development, retention, and institutional performance.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory and Social Exchange Theory (SET). These theories jointly provide a solid foundation for understanding how organizational practices such as reward and recognition influence employee outcomes, particularly job satisfaction and turnover intention, within the context of young academic staff in Chinese private universities.

Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory

Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (1959) categorizes workplace factors into two types: hygiene factors (e.g., salary, work conditions, institutional policies) and motivators (e.g., recognition, achievement, opportunities for growth). Hygiene factors are necessary to prevent job dissatisfaction but do not intrinsically motivate employees, whereas motivators are responsible for increasing satisfaction and work engagement.

In applying this theory to the present study, reward and recognition are interpreted as both hygiene and motivational factors. Financial incentives such as competitive salaries and bonuses function as hygiene elements that reduce dissatisfaction, while non-monetary recognition—such as praise, awards, or promotion opportunities—act as motivators that contribute directly to job satisfaction. Herzberg's theory thus supports the hypothesized positive relationship between reward and recognition and job satisfaction, and the negative relationship between job satisfaction and turnover intention. When young academic staff perceive that their contributions are acknowledged, they are more likely to experience intrinsic motivation, feel satisfied with their roles, and remain committed to the institution.

Furthermore, Herzberg's framework helps explain why simply improving pay without enhancing recognition may not be sufficient to reduce turnover among academic staff. Institutions must therefore address both sets of factors—ensuring adequate compensation while also fostering meaningful recognition—to sustain job satisfaction and reduce attrition.

Social Exchange Theory (SET)

Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 2017) suggests that workplace relationships are governed by reciprocal exchanges between employees and employers. When employees perceive organizational support—such as fair treatment, career opportunities, and sincere appreciation—they feel obligated to reciprocate with positive attitudes and behaviors, including increased loyalty, satisfaction, and reduced intention to leave.

n the context of Chinese private universities, where resource limitations often challenge faculty retention, SET is particularly relevant. Reward and recognition serve as key signals of institutional support and respect. When young academic staff feel their efforts are valued through consistent and equitable reward systems, they are more likely to develop a sense of belonging and commitment. This, in turn, enhances their job satisfaction, which acts as a mediating psychological state linking institutional practices to lower turnover intention.

By applying SET, this study posits that when organizations invest in both extrinsic (e.g., monetary rewards) and intrinsic (e.g., recognition, respect) incentives, they build stronger social bonds with employees. These bonds, built on trust and mutual obligation, reduce the likelihood of voluntary departure.

4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

The conceptual framework of this study is presented in Figure 1. It illustrates the hypothesized relationships between the independent variable (Reward and Recognition), the dependent variable (Turnover Intention), and the mediating variable (Job Satisfaction). This framework is grounded in Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, which suggests that recognition and rewards act as motivators enhancing job satisfaction, and in Social Exchange Theory, which posits that perceived organizational support fosters positive employee outcomes such as satisfaction and commitment.

Relationship between Reward and Recognition and Job Satisfaction

Reward and recognition are crucial organizational practices that shape employees' perceptions of value and fairness within their workplace. In educational institutions, particularly in private universities where resource limitations often exist, the presence of meaningful reward systems—including financial incentives and symbolic recognition—can play a decisive role in shaping academic staff satisfaction. Empirical evidence shows that when employees perceive their work is acknowledged and appreciated, they are more likely to report higher levels of job satisfaction (Knight & Kleiner, 2015; Koo et al., 2019). Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

• **H1: Reward and recognition have a positive effect on job satisfaction.**

Relationship between Job Satisfaction and Turnover Intention

Job satisfaction has long been identified as a key determinant of turnover intention. Satisfied employees are more engaged, motivated, and less likely to seek employment elsewhere (Madan, 2017). Conversely, dissatisfaction—particularly among young faculty who face pressures related to job security, career growth, and work-life balance—often leads to heightened turnover intention. Studies in Chinese private universities confirm that job satisfaction is significantly and negatively related to faculty turnover intention (Zhang et al., 2022). Therefore:

• **H2: Job satisfaction has a negative effect on turnover intention.**

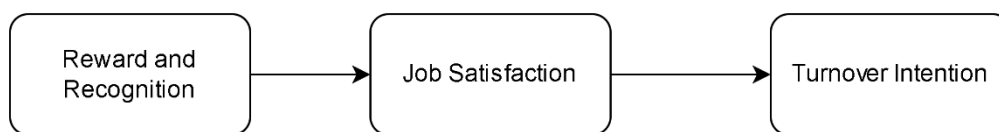**Relationship between Reward and Recognition and Turnover Intention**

Organizations that fail to provide adequate recognition or fair rewards may create an environment where employees feel undervalued and disengaged. This perception can directly lead to increased turnover intention, especially in institutions where high workloads and limited institutional prestige compound these effects (Azeem et al., 2020). While job satisfaction may mediate this relationship, evidence also suggests that reward and recognition can exert a direct influence on employees' decision to stay or leave (Vaiman et al., 2015). Thus:

- **H3: Reward and recognition have a negative effect on turnover intention.**

The Role of Mediating Job Satisfaction

Drawing on Herzberg's theory and Social Exchange Theory, job satisfaction is expected to mediate the relationship between reward and recognition and turnover intention. Rewarding and recognizing employees may not only lead to direct effects on retention but also work indirectly by fostering a more satisfying work environment, which in turn reduces employees' desire to leave. This mediating effect has been demonstrated in multiple organizational settings, including education (Zhang et al., 2022). Therefore:

- **H4: Job satisfaction mediates the relationship between reward and recognition and turnover intention.**

Source(s): Authors own work

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the study

5. METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, non-experimental, correlational research design to examine the relationship between reward and recognition and turnover intention, with job satisfaction as a mediating variable. The correlational design is appropriate for assessing the strength and direction of associations among variables without experimental manipulation. This design was particularly suitable for testing hypothesized structural relationships using survey-based data and structural equation modeling (SEM).

Population and Sampling

The population for this study consisted of full-time academic staff aged 35 or younger employed in private universities in Shijiazhuang, Hebei Province, China. According to the Shijiazhuang Municipal Education Commission, this population numbered 1,017 individuals across 11 institutions. The research focused on early-career academics due to their higher reported rates of turnover and vulnerability to job-related dissatisfaction.

Using Yamane's (1967) formula with a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, the minimum required sample size was calculated to be 280. To account for potential non-response, an additional 40% buffer was added, and 392 surveys were distributed. A total of 287 completed responses were collected, resulting in a 73% response rate. Due to practical constraints in accessing the population, the study employed non-probability convenience sampling, selecting participants who were available and willing to respond.

Instrumentation

This study employed a standardized questionnaire consisting of previously validated measurement items adapted from past research. The survey instrument included two sections: demographic questions and items measuring the core study constructs. All items were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The sources for the key constructs were as follows:

- Reward and Recognition: 6 items adapted from Koo et al. (2019)
- Job Satisfaction: 8 items adapted from Jehanzeb et al. (2015)
- Turnover Intention: 5 items adapted from Kissi et al. (2023)

These instruments were selected for their strong psychometric properties in prior studies and were slightly modified to ensure contextual relevance to Chinese private university settings. The content of the questionnaire was reviewed by academic experts to ensure clarity and appropriateness.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure validity, the study adapted measurement items from previously validated scales well-established in the literature. Content validity was further reinforced by review from a panel of academic experts in faculty retention and human resource management. This process helped ensure the appropriateness of each item for the study context.

Construct validity was assessed through Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) using SmartPLS 4. Convergent validity was demonstrated by high factor loadings (≥ 0.70), Composite Reliability (CR > 0.70), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE > 0.50) for all constructs. Discriminant validity was established using the Fornell-Larcker criterion, confirming that each construct was conceptually distinct from the others.

Reliability of the measurement instruments was confirmed through internal consistency analysis using both Cronbach's alpha and Composite Reliability (CR). All constructs surpassed the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70, indicating robust internal reliability.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected through an online questionnaire administered via Google Forms. The survey link was distributed to eligible faculty members through institutional email lists and social media platforms. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained before respondents began the survey. The questionnaire was anonymous to encourage honest responses and reduce social desirability bias.

Upon closing the survey, responses were exported to Excel for preliminary screening, including checking for missing data and outliers. The cleaned dataset was then analyzed using IBM SPSS 26.0 and SmartPLS 4. Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize demographic characteristics and construct-level data. Common Method Bias was assessed using Harman's single factor test.

To test the study's hypotheses and mediation model, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed. SEM allows simultaneous examination of measurement and structural relationships, offering comprehensive insights into both direct and indirect effects. This analysis approach was particularly suitable for validating the conceptual framework and assessing the mediating role of job satisfaction in the relationship between reward and recognition and turnover intention.

6. RESULTS

Demographics of Respondents

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the 287 respondents who participated in the study. The gender distribution was relatively balanced, with 51.56% male and 48.44% female participants. In terms of age, the majority of respondents (68%) were between 30 and 35 years old, while 32% were aged 25 to 29.

Regarding marital status, 45% of the participants were married, 32% were single, 18% were divorced, and the remaining 5% identified as others. With respect to employment tenure, a slight majority (56.44%) had been employed for 1 to 5 years, while 43.56% had more than five years of experience in private higher education institutions.

The data also indicates a diverse range of academic titles among respondents. The largest group held the title of Lecturer (54%), followed by Professor (21%), Associate Professor (17%), Assistant (6%), and None (2%). In terms of educational qualifications, the majority of participants held a PhD (61%), followed by master's degrees (31%), and bachelor's degrees (8%).

These demographics confirm that the sample primarily consists of early-career and mid-level academic staff, aligning with the study's focus on young faculty in Chinese private universities.

Table 1. Demographics of Respondents

Variable	Level	Frequency	Valid Percent
Gender	Male	148	51.56
	Female	139	48.44
Age	25-29	92	32
	30-35	195	68
Marital Status	Single	88	32
	Married	129	45
	Divorced	52	18
	Others	9	5
Length of employment	1-5 years	162	56.44
	More than 5 years	125	43.56
Academic title (Zhicheng)	None	7	2
	Assistant	16	6
	Lecturer	153	54
	Associate Professor	50	17
	Professor	61	21
Education level	Degree	24	8
	Master	89	31
	PhD	174	61

Descriptive Analysis

Table 2 summarizes the descriptive statistics for the three core constructs examined in this study: Turnover Intention, Job Satisfaction, and Reward and Recognition.

The results show that Reward and Recognition had the highest mean score (M = 5.742, SD = 0.757), indicating that most respondents perceived that their efforts and contributions were acknowledged and rewarded by their institutions. This suggests a relatively strong presence of reward and recognition practices among the sampled private universities.

Turnover Intention recorded a mean of 5.294 (SD = 1.321), reflecting a moderately high tendency among respondents to consider leaving their current institutions. The relatively larger standard deviation suggests variation in participants' responses, indicating differing levels of intention to leave across individuals.

Job Satisfaction had a lower mean score of 3.779 (SD = 0.713), implying that, on average, respondents held a moderate level of satisfaction with their job roles. Compared to the other constructs, job satisfaction also exhibited a lower variance (0.728), suggesting more consistency in responses.

Overall, while the reward and recognition climate appears positive, the findings point to a significant level of turnover intention, which warrants further analysis regarding the mediating role of job satisfaction.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Constructs

Construct	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Turnover Intention	5.294	1.321	0.850
Job Satisfaction	3.779	0.713	0.728
Reward and Recognition	5.742	0.757	0.958

Reliability Analysis

Table 3 presents the results of the reliability and validity assessments for the three constructs: Job Satisfaction, Turnover Intention, and Reward and Recognition. The internal consistency reliability of each construct was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, rho_A, and Composite Reliability (CR). Additionally, Average Variance Extracted (AVE) was used to assess convergent validity.

All constructs demonstrated strong internal consistency. Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.867 to 0.930, exceeding the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2010). Similarly, rho_A and CR values for all constructs were above 0.70, with composite reliability scores reaching 0.903 for Job Satisfaction, 0.904 for Turnover Intention, and 0.933 for Reward and Recognition, indicating robust scale reliability.

In terms of convergent validity, all constructs achieved AVE values above the minimum recommended threshold of 0.50, confirming that each construct explained a substantial proportion of variance in its indicators. Specifically, Reward and Recognition recorded the highest AVE value (0.701), followed by Turnover Intention (0.652) and Job Satisfaction (0.607). These findings support the reliability and convergent validity of the measurement model, justifying the use of these constructs in subsequent structural equation modeling.

Table 3. Construct Reliability Analysis

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	AVE
Job Satisfaction	0.872	0.884	0.903	0.607
Turnover Intention	0.867	0.872	0.904	0.652
Reward Recognition	&0.930	1.044	0.933	0.701

Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell and Larcker criterion, which compares the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each construct with its correlations with other constructs. As shown in Table 4, the square roots of the AVE values (displayed on the diagonal in bold) are all higher than the corresponding inter-construct correlations.

Specifically, the square root of the AVE for Job Satisfaction is 0.779, which exceeds its correlation with Turnover Intention (0.160) and Reward and Recognition (−0.047). Similarly, Turnover Intention shows a square root AVE of 0.808, higher than its correlation with Reward and Recognition (0.078). Reward and Recognition has the highest square root AVE (0.837), again greater than its correlations with the other constructs.

These results confirm that each construct is empirically distinct from the others, thereby satisfying the criterion for discriminant validity and supporting the distinctiveness of the constructs in the measurement model.

Table 4. Discriminant Validity- Fornell & Larcker Criterion

Construct	Job Satisfaction	Turnover Intention	Reward & Recognition
Job Satisfaction	0.779		
Turnover Intention	0.160	0.808	
Reward & Recognition	-0.047	0.078	0.837

Path Coefficient Analysis

Table 5 presents the structural relationships among the study variables. The path from Job Satisfaction to Turnover Intention was positive and significant ($\beta = 0.143$, t = 2.443, p = 0.007), indicating that higher job satisfaction is associated with a slight increase in turnover intention—an unexpected result that may reflect contextual or institutional factors.

The path from Reward and Recognition to Job Satisfaction was negative and significant ($\beta = -0.340$, t = 3.015, p = 0.001), suggesting that increased reward and recognition is linked to lower job satisfaction, potentially due to misalignment between expectations and perceived fairness.

Meanwhile, Reward and Recognition had a positive and significant effect on Turnover Intention ($\beta = 0.234$, t = 2.440, p = 0.007), indicating that higher perceived rewards are associated with stronger intent to leave, possibly due to dissatisfaction with how rewards are implemented.

All paths were statistically significant ($p < 0.01$), but the directionality of effects suggests complex perceptions among faculty regarding reward systems and job satisfaction.

Table 5. Path Coefficients

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation	T statistics	P values
Job Satisfaction -> Turnover Intention	0.143	0.131	0.058	2.443	0.007
Reward & Recognition -> Job Satisfaction	-0.340	-0.279	0.113	3.015	0.001
Reward & Recognition -> Turnover Intention	0.234	0.212	0.096	2.440	0.007

Mediation Analysis

The mediation analysis examined whether job satisfaction mediates the relationship between reward and recognition and turnover intention. As shown in Table 6, the indirect effect of reward and recognition on turnover intention through job satisfaction was statistically significant ($\beta = -0.049$, t = 2.070, p = 0.019).

This result indicates the presence of partial mediation, where reward and recognition influence turnover intention not only directly but also indirectly through their impact on job satisfaction. The negative coefficient suggests that higher reward and recognition lead to lower turnover intention through increased job satisfaction—although this indirect pathway contrasts with the earlier negative direct effect observed between reward and recognition and job satisfaction.

Table 6. Indirect Effect Results

	Coefficient	SE	T value	P Value
Reward & Recognition -> Job Satisfaction -> Turnover Intention	**-0.049**	**0.023**	**2.070**	**0.019**

7. DISCUSSION

Summary of Hypotheses Testing Results

Hypothesis	Statement	Result
H1	Reward and recognition have a positive effect on job satisfaction	Not Supported
H2	Job satisfaction has a negative effect on turnover intention	Not Supported
H3	Reward and recognition have a negative effect on turnover intention	Not Supported

H4	Job satisfaction mediates the relationship between reward and recognition and turnover intention	Supported

The findings of this study offer several important insights into the dynamics of faculty retention in Chinese private universities. Contrary to expectations and existing literature, the direct relationships among the key variables revealed unexpected patterns, prompting a need for deeper contextual interpretation.

Firstly, H1 was not supported, as reward and recognition were found to negatively influence job satisfaction. This unexpected result suggests that while reward structures may exist, they might be perceived as insufficient, inconsistent, or unfair, thereby reducing satisfaction. In private universities, where faculty often experience limited career advancement and high workloads, symbolic or inadequate recognition may exacerbate frustration rather than alleviate it.

Secondly, H2 was also not supported. Instead of a negative link, the results showed a positive relationship between job satisfaction and turnover intention, suggesting that even satisfied faculty members may consider leaving. This could reflect a phenomenon where younger faculty, though satisfied with their current roles, still seek better opportunities elsewhere—possibly in public universities or international institutions with more stable prospects.

H3 was similarly not supported, as reward and recognition were found to positively affect turnover intention. This paradox may point to a discrepancy between faculty expectations and actual institutional practices. When rewards are given but perceived as inadequate or misaligned with effort, they may inadvertently highlight dissatisfaction, triggering stronger turnover intention.

On the other hand, H4 was supported, confirming that job satisfaction plays a mediating role between reward and recognition and turnover intention. Although the direction of effects deviated from the initial assumptions, the significant mediation indicates that job satisfaction still functions as a psychological mechanism linking institutional practices to retention behavior.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the quality, fairness, and alignment of reward and recognition systems—not merely their presence—are critical. Moreover, job satisfaction alone may not be sufficient to retain young academic staff if broader structural issues, such as promotion pathways, institutional prestige, or long-term job security, remain unresolved.

These insights carry practical implications for university administrators and policymakers, urging a re-examination of how reward systems are designed and how faculty expectations are managed in China's evolving private higher education landscape.

8. IMPLICATION

Theoretical Implications

This study makes several contributions to the theoretical understanding of employee retention in higher education by examining the interplay between reward and recognition, job satisfaction, and turnover intention among young academic staff in Chinese private universities. While grounded in Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory and Social Exchange Theory (SET), the findings challenge some of the conventional assumptions embedded in these frameworks.

Herzberg's theory suggests that recognition and reward systems should enhance job satisfaction and subsequently reduce turnover intention. However, this study revealed a negative relationship between reward and recognition and job satisfaction, and a positive link between job satisfaction and turnover intention. These results imply that contextual variables—such as institutional prestige, perceived fairness, or unmet expectations—can disrupt the expected motivational impact of hygiene and motivator factors, thus signaling a need to revisit Herzberg's assumptions in non-Western, resource-constrained academic contexts.

In relation to SET, while the mediation effect of job satisfaction was supported, the directionality of the relationships suggests a more nuanced understanding of how perceived organizational support translates into employee attitudes and behaviors. It appears that when reward systems are seen as inadequate or insincere, they may violate the perceived reciprocity expected in exchange relationships, thus heightening dissatisfaction or turnover risk. Therefore, this study extends SET by illustrating that perceived fairness and alignment of rewards are critical moderators of social exchange outcomes in higher education.

Overall, the study contributes to advancing theory by demonstrating that the effects of organizational practices are not universally linear or positive, and that faculty perceptions play a central role in shaping behavioral intentions, even within theoretically supportive frameworks.

Practical Implications

The findings offer important implications for higher education leaders, HR managers, and policy makers seeking to reduce faculty turnover in Chinese private universities.

Firstly, institutions must move beyond simply offering monetary rewards or symbolic recognition. What matters more is how these rewards are perceived—particularly in terms of fairness, consistency, and alignment with faculty contributions and expectations. To this end, universities should implement transparent, well-communicated reward systems that include both tangible (e.g., salary increments, bonuses) and intangible (e.g., praise, professional growth opportunities) elements.

Secondly, the unexpected positive link between job satisfaction and turnover intention signals a need for universities to not equate satisfaction with retention. Even satisfied faculty may leave if they perceive better career development, job security, or institutional prestige elsewhere. Hence, universities must enhance not just work satisfaction but also long-term commitment through clear promotion pathways, research support, and inclusion in strategic decision-making processes.

Finally, the partial mediation effect underscores the importance of addressing faculty needs holistically. Investing in faculty well-being, recognition structures, and career planning mechanisms is not merely a motivational tool, but a strategic necessity for talent retention in a competitive educational landscape.

9. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined the influence of reward and recognition on turnover intention, with job satisfaction as a mediator, among young academic staff in Chinese private universities. The results revealed unexpected patterns—reward and recognition negatively affected job satisfaction, and job satisfaction was positively associated with turnover intention. However, job satisfaction did play a significant mediating role, highlighting its relevance in explaining turnover behavior despite the counterintuitive direct effects.

These findings suggest that how faculty perceive reward practices matters as much as the practices themselves. Inadequate or symbolic recognition may harm satisfaction and increase the likelihood of turnover, even when rewards are present. Institutions must therefore move beyond standard reward systems to ensure fairness, transparency, and alignment with faculty expectations.

It is recommended that universities revise their recognition policies, strengthen career development support, and engage faculty in meaningful ways to foster long-term commitment. Efforts to reduce turnover must focus not only on satisfaction but also on addressing deeper concerns related to fairness, opportunity, and institutional support.

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