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(IJEPC)**www.ijepe.com**THE IMPACT OF TRUST IN LEADER ON JOB SATISFACTION
AMONG TEACHERS: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF SELF-
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**Abstract:**

This study aimed to investigate how trust in leader impacts job satisfaction, mediated by self-efficacy, among teachers in higher vocational colleges in China. Data from 339 teachers were collected via an online questionnaire. Confirmatory factor analysis, structural equation modeling, and mediation analysis were conducted to assess the relationship. The results revealed that trust in leader significantly influenced both job satisfaction and self-efficacy. Furthermore, self-efficacy was found to positively influence job satisfaction and play a partial mediating role in the relationship between trust in leaders and job satisfaction. These findings highlight the critical role of building trust in leadership and enhancing teacher self-efficacy as an effective means to bolster job satisfaction among educators.

Keywords:

Higher Vocational College, Job Satisfaction, Mediation, Self-Efficacy, Trust In Leader

Introduction

Trust is acknowledged as essential for creating a nurturing work environment and promoting employee well-being (Guinot et al., 2021; Baptiste, 2008). Over recent years, scholars across various social science disciplines, such as management, sociology, psychology, and economics, have increasingly focused on understanding trust (Zeffane & Bani Melhem, 2017). Trust is a mental state where individuals are willing to embrace outcomes due to their optimistic expectations regarding the intentions and actions of others (Zhao et al., 2022; Rousseau et al., 1998). Within organizational contexts, employees experience greater security, positivity, and reduced insecurity when they perceive their leaders and colleagues as trustworthy (Li et al., 2018; Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). Conversely, low levels of trust result in feelings of alienation, powerlessness, and interpersonal conflict (Li et al., 2018; Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999). Extensive research highlights the pivotal role of trust in organizational dynamics. For example, team members' trust in their project manager significantly contributes to project success (Fareed et al., 2022). Trust in leaders influences work engagement (Ul Hassan & Ikramullah, 2024) and job satisfaction (Horoub & Zargar, 2022). Trust in supervisors diminishes employees' turnover intentions, consequently enhancing job satisfaction and commitment (Pathardikar et al., 2023a). Moreover, trust between teachers and principals indirectly impacts teacher self-efficacy (Çoban et al., 2023). Organizational trust positively correlates with organizational commitment (Oh et al., 2023; Silva et al., 2023), performance (Silva et al., 2023), employee engagement (Ilyas et al., 2020), teaching efficacy (Zhao et al., 2022), and job satisfaction (Meng & Berger, 2019; Oh et al., 2023; Pathardikar et al., 2023b; Zhao et al., 2022), while also negatively predicting teacher turnover intentions (Zhao et al., 2022).

It is evident that trust may be present among disparate groups (e.g., trust between colleagues, trust between subordinates and leaders, trust between employees and organizations) and lends itself to examination at multiple levels (e.g., individual-level trust or group-level trust) (Zhao et al., 2022; Wildman et al., 2012). This trust fosters positive work attitudes and enhances organizational performance.

Job satisfaction, widely studied in relation to subjective well-being at work (Guinot et al., 2021; Bakker & Oerlemans, 2011), is defined by Locke as a "pleasurable emotional state" resulting from alignment between the job and individual values (Locke, 1969). Individuals develop a set of values that shape their decisions and actions throughout their lives (Locke, 1969). Researches suggest that trust positively influences job satisfaction within organizational contexts. However, in educational research, exploration of the relationship between teachers' trust and their job satisfaction remains limited (Li et al., 2018). Furthermore, existing studies mainly focus on teachers' organizational trust, leaving the impact of trust in leaders on job satisfaction relatively unexplored. To fill this gap, this study will explore the relationship between trust in leaders and teacher job satisfaction in the context of education.

According to the principles of Expectancy theory, people determine the value of desired outcomes by evaluating their beliefs and expectations (Caldwell et al., 2008; Creed & Miles, 1996; Lewicki & Stevenson, 1997). Trust in a leader cultivates a positive work atmosphere marked by clear communication, mutual respect, and support (Çoban et al., 2023), wherein employees who have confidence in their leaders are more inclined to feel valued and appreciated for their contributions. This sense of fairness, openness, and encouragement (Çoban et al., 2023; Mishra & Mishra, 2013) contributes to higher job satisfaction among

employees. Choong et al. (2020) also claimed that teachers who trusted their colleagues, superiors, students, and parents would exhibit greater confidence in performing their duties. This confidence, known as self-efficacy, is a key predictor of job satisfaction as it helps mitigate the adverse effects of environmental challenges and work-related stress (Liu et al., 2023). Thus, in alignment with the Expectancy Theory, it is likely that trust in leadership, teacher job satisfaction, and self-efficacy are interconnected.

According to Zhang et al. (2019), job satisfaction in China ranks second to last among 36 countries. In the context of education, despite the Chinese government's efforts to advance higher vocational education through policies such as the 2019 National Vocational Education Reform (Council, 2019), teachers in these institutions face severe burnout and stress, leading to dissatisfaction (EOL, 2023). The 2023 National Survey Report reveals that full-time teachers struggle with heavy workloads, formalistic tasks, and limited professional development (EOL, 2023). Younger teachers, in particular, are more likely to consider leaving their positions and feel less connected to their schools (EOL, 2023). Therefore, this study aims to examine the direct effect of trust in leadership on teacher job satisfaction in higher vocational colleges in China, as well as the indirect effect mediated through self-efficacy.

Literature Review And Hypotheses Development

Trust In Leader

The concept of trust has been examined in various definitions. According to Mayer et al. (1995), trust can be defined as one party's willingness to be vulnerable to another party's behavior based on expectations of a specific action, regardless of their capability to monitor or regulate that party. Another definition by Rousseau et al. (1998) emphasizes trust as the readiness to embrace vulnerability rooted in optimistic expectations of another's intentions or behavior.

In the context of trust, two key parties, the trustor and trustee, play pivotal roles, especially in organizational settings (Pathardikar et al., 2023a). The trustor, referring to followers in this study, anticipates future outcomes and relies on leaders to fulfill promises (Pathardikar et al., 2023a; Whitener et al., 1998). The trustee represents the leader in whom followers place their trust to accomplish tasks (Pathardikar et al., 2023a; Whitener et al., 1998). Trust in leader fosters critical interpersonal relationships (Cai & Tang, 2021) and involves two dimensions: cognitive trust, founded on followers' objective evaluations of leader traits, and affective trust, which evolves through mutual social exchanges between leader and follower, demonstrating shared interests and concerns (Hassan & Ikramullah, 2024; Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Ul Zhu et al., 2013).

Trust in leader is particularly crucial in shaping supportive environments where treatments are recognized and utilized effectively (Cai & Tang, 2021), and where employees feel safe, valued, and witness moral conduct from their leaders (Farmanesh & Zargar, 2021; Horoub & Zargar, 2022).

Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is recognized as a fundamental psychological concept (Morandi et al., 2022), defined by Bandura (1977) as a person's confidence in his or her ability to succeed in particular circumstances. It revolves around three core principles: competence-based origins,

personal judgment and expectations, and its connection to actions and behaviors (Bandura & Locke, 2003).

Bandura (1977) emphasized the importance of self-efficacy, noting that individuals possessing high levels of self-efficacy are more inclined to actively enhance their work environment and persevere through challenges. It significantly influences cognition, affections, behaviors, and motivation, primarily via cognitive and affective pathways, shaping perceptions of life experiences (Kundu, 2020).

In organizational contexts, self-efficacy helps manage work-related stress and enhance job satisfaction (Jentsch et al., 2023; Smetackova et al., 2019), increase organizational commitment (Almutairi, 2020; Hameli & Ordun, 2022), and influence work behavior (Gülsün et al., 2023).

Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction is positive feelings stemming from employees' fulfillment and experiences at work (Locke, 1976), involving evaluations and comparisons between what is achieved and what is desired. It's fundamental to understanding how individuals relate to their work (Viotti et al., 2020), particularly in education, where it relates to how teachers perceive their work environment and interactions (Baroudi et al., 2022).

Teacher job satisfaction is a major global concern (Song et al., 2021), as it correlates with reduced burnout (Shim et al., 2022) and the likelihood of quitting (Li et al., 2022). Satisfied teachers also exhibit better job performance and higher work efficiency than dissatisfied teachers (Sadeghi et al., 2021). Consequently, many scholars conduct empirical research on job satisfaction to explore its determinants.

Polatcan and Cansoy (2019) provided an overview of previous studies on teacher job satisfaction and found that predictors include administrators' behaviors (e.g., leadership), individual variables (e.g., self-efficacy), and organizational variables (e.g., support).

Trust In Leader And Job Satisfaction, Trust In Leader And Self-efficacy

According to Vroom's (1964) expectancy theory, individuals are motivated to engage in specific behaviors to achieve desired outcomes or rewards (Nguyen & Prentice, 2022). The motivation is driven by three key elements: expectancy (the belief that effort leads to performance), instrumentality (the belief that performance leads to rewards), and valence (the value placed on the rewards) (Vroom, 1964). Extant research has identified various factors, including task, individual, group, and environmental factors that impact expectancy and valence (Chen et al., 2016). Among these, group-level factors such as communication, support, and commitment play significant roles (Chen et al., 2016), while trust in leaders contributes to fostering a constructive work environment characterized by transparent communication, mutual respect, and support (Çoban et al., 2023). Meanwhile, employees trust their leaders or organizations because they anticipate the fair judgment of their contributions and expect reasonable rewards in return, fulfilling unspecified requirements (Pathardikar et al., 2023b). Consequently, trust in leaders stimulates group factors that enhance expectancy and valence by mitigating uncertainty, risk, and misperceptions linked to task achievement and performance expectations (Chen et al., 2016; Tubbs et al., 1993).

Specifically, when teachers trust their leaders, they hold positive expectations regarding the fairness of evaluations and the fulfillment of organizational commitments (Çoban et al., 2023; Mishra & Mishra, 2013). This trust creates an environment where teachers feel valued and supported, reducing uncertainty and increasing their belief in achieving desirable outcomes (Chen et al., 2016). Consequently, teachers are more motivated to engage in their work, leading to higher job satisfaction as they perceive fair recognition and rewards for their efforts (Pathardikar et al., 2023b). Moreover, trust in leaders cultivates a sense of psychological safety among teachers, enabling them to manage risks effectively, exhibit greater involvement and creativity, and experience heightened self-efficacy (Horoub & Zargar, 2022).

Research has demonstrated that trust significantly influences both job satisfaction (e.g., Guinot et al., 2021; Horoub & Zargar, 2022; Oh et al., 2023; Pathardikar et al., 2023a; Pathardikar et al., 2023b; Zhao et al., 2022) and self-efficacy (e.g., Choong et al., 2020; Çoban et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2022) (see Table1). High levels of trust in leaders and colleagues enhance job satisfaction by reducing turnover intentions (Pathardikar et al., 2023a). Trust serves as a crucial psychological element (Horoub & Zargar, 2022), mediating the relationship between various leadership styles and job satisfaction (e.g., Horoub & Zargar, 2022; Oh et al., 2023). Moreover, trust in leaders and colleagues is vital for enhancing self-efficacy, with trust being a key element in improving teachers' self-efficacy in the school context (Choong et al., 2020).

As a result, teachers with strong trust in their leaders are more likely to perceive themselves as capable of effectively performing their roles and responsibilities, ultimately contributing to elevated levels of job satisfaction and enhanced self-efficacy. Thus, we propose:

H1: Trust in leader is positively related to teacher job satisfaction.

H2: Trust in leader is positively related to teacher self-efficacy.

Table 1: Studies About Trust In Leader, Job Satisfaction, And Self-efficacy

No	Author(s)/ Year	Findings
1	Horoub & Zargar, 2022	Trust in a leader is a crucial psychological factor that can mediate the link between empowering leadership and job satisfaction.
2	Oh et al., 2023	Inclusive leadership fosters positive emotions that build trust, ultimately enhancing employee job satisfaction and organizational commitment.
3	Pathardikar et al., 2023a	Increased trust in superiors boosts job satisfaction and affective commitment by reducing employees' intention to leave.
4	Pathardikar et al., 2023b	Organizational trust has a significant positive impact on job satisfaction.
5	Guinot et al., 2021	Employees' perception of managers' trust in subordinates positively affects job satisfaction and mediates the relationship between employee participation and job satisfaction.

6	Zhao et al., 2022	Organizational trust positively affects job satisfaction and teaching efficacy among rural kindergarten teachers, with higher teaching efficacy leading to greater job satisfaction.
7	Choong et al., 2020	Trust is a key factor in boosting teachers' self-efficacy, with trust in colleagues and principals significantly impacting both general and personal teaching efficacy.
8	Çoban et al., 2023	Teacher-principal trust indirectly affects teacher self-efficacy by enhancing principals' focus on instruction and promoting teacher collaboration.
9	Özdemir et al., 2024	Self-efficacy directly enhances job satisfaction among teachers and mediates the relationship between professional learning and job satisfaction.
10	Khan & Gupta, 2024	Self-efficacy significantly enhances job satisfaction by motivating teachers to achieve their goals.
11	Demir, 2020	Higher levels of teachers' self-efficacy beliefs are correlated with increased job satisfaction.
12	Ismayilova and Klassen, 2019	There's a positive relationship between self-efficacy and job satisfaction, with teaching self-efficacy being the most influential predictor.
13	Liu et al., 2023	College teaching self-efficacy mediated the negative correlation between job stress and job satisfaction.

Self-efficacy And Job Satisfaction

Self-efficacy, plays a central role in human life (Bandura, 1977), shaping individuals' actions, motivations, and emotional states based on their beliefs rather than mere circumstances (Islam & Ahmed, 2018). Teachers' job satisfaction is commonly understood as the emotional responses and cognitive appraisal of their daily work experiences (Chan et al., 2020). Numerous studies have shown that individual variables, such as self-efficacy, significantly contribute to job satisfaction (e.g., Demir, 2020; Ismayilova & Klassen, 2019; Khan & Gupta, 2024; Liu et al., 2023; Özdemir et al., 2024) (see Table 1). Özdemir et al. (2024) reported that self-efficacy not only directly enhances job satisfaction among teachers but also mediates the relationship between professional learning and job satisfaction. Khan and Gupta (2024) found that self-efficacy enhances job satisfaction by motivating teachers to achieve their goals. Ismayilova and Klassen (2019) identified a positive relationship between self-efficacy and job satisfaction, with teaching self-efficacy being the most influential predictor. Liu et al. (2023) elaborated that college teaching self-efficacy mediated the negative correlation between job stress and job satisfaction.

This relationship can be attributed to the tendency of teachers possessing higher self-efficacy levels to adopt a positive attitude towards stress, feeling confident in their ability to cope with workplace challenges (Bandura, 1977). Consequently, work-related self-efficacy is a crucial asset for effectively managing work-related stress and enhancing job satisfaction (Jentsch et al., 2023; Smetackova et al., 2019). Self-efficacy also significantly influences behavior (Bandura, 1977), as teachers with high teaching self-efficacy continuously think about their teaching tasks and find ways to complete them, leading to increased confidence,

enjoyment, and satisfaction in their work (Liu et al., 2023). Therefore, this study hypothesized that:

H3: Self-efficacy is positively associated with job satisfaction.

Self-efficacy As A Mediator

Drawing from our earlier discussions on the hypotheses, we anticipate three positive effects among the examined variables: trust in leader, self-efficacy, and job satisfaction. Thus, aligning with the theoretical arguments and hypothesized relationships, we posit our final hypothesis, suggesting that the impact of trust in leader on job satisfaction is mediated by teacher self-efficacy. Literature indicates that self-efficacy is a vital component of psychological capital, mediating the influence of various variables on employee attitudes and behaviors (Nwanzu & Babalola, 2019), including job satisfaction. Trust, characterized by positive expectations about others (Zeffane & Bani Melhem, 2017), aligns with the principles of Expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964), suggesting that trust in the leader enhances employees' belief in the likelihood of successful performance. This belief, in turn, boosts their expectancy, leading to greater belief in their capability to perform tasks effectively (self-efficacy). This increased self-efficacy, in turn, enhances motivation and performance, ultimately leading to greater job satisfaction.

Based on these insights, this study proposes that trust in leader bolsters employee self-efficacy, subsequently influencing their level of job satisfaction. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H4: Self-efficacy acts as a positive mediator in the relationship between trust in leader and job satisfaction.

Based on the literature discussions presented above, a research model is formulated and illustrated in Figure 1.

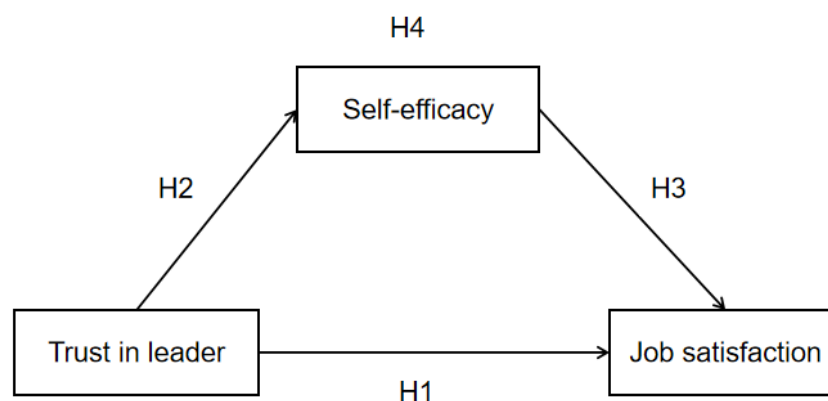


Figure 1: Research Model

Methods

Sample And Procedure

The study employed a quantitative research approach with primary data collected through self-administered questionnaires. The survey targeted teachers in higher vocational colleges in Jiangsu Province, China. Jiangsu Province was chosen due to its significant role in the Yangtze River Economic Belt (Ren & Zhou, 2022) and its advanced vocational education hub (MOE, 2021). To streamline the survey, 5 out of approximately 25 colleges were randomly selected, and 200 questionnaires were distributed to each, totaling around 1000 questionnaires. After obtaining permission from the colleges' human resource departments and ensuring confidentiality, the questionnaires were distributed online via Questionnaire Star. Data collection occurred over one month, yielding 354 responses, of which 339 were used for the final analysis.

Out of the respondents, 153 (45.1%) were male, while 186 (54.9%) were female. In terms of age demographics, the largest proportion fell within the 30–39 years age group (44.8%). As the data were collected from college teachers, most respondents possessed a master's degree (75.2%) and the remaining held a PhD degree (24.8%). Regarding tenure classification, 86 respondents (25.4%) had less than five years of experience, 113 (33.3%) had between 5 and nearly 10 years of experience, 72 (21.2%) had between 10 and nearly 15 years of experience, and 68 (20.1%) had 15 years or more of experience (see Table 1).

Table 2: Demographic Profile

	n	Percentage
Gender		
Male	153	45.1
Female	186	54.9
Age		
20-29	53	15.6
30-39	152	44.8
40-49	90	26.6
50 and above	44	13
Education level		
Master	255	75.2
Doctor	84	24.8
Tenure		
less than 5 years	86	25.4
5-<10 years	113	33.3
10-<15 years	72	21.2
15 years or more	68	20.1

Measures

We employed a five-point Likert scale questionnaire to measure all constructs in this study, with response options ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Trust in leader was measured using a 4-item scale adapted from the instrument modified by Mascall et al. (2008). Self-efficacy was measured using a 6-item scale adapted from the New General SE scale developed by Chen et al. (2001). Job satisfaction was measured using a 6-item scale adapted from the Minnesota satisfaction questionnaire developed by Weiss et al. (1977).

Analyses

We utilized SPSS (version 26.0) and AMOS (version 23.0) to perform a series of analyses including demographic profile analysis, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), correlation analysis, and structural equation modeling (SEM). The main goal of SEM was to evaluate the compatibility of the proposed mediation model with the gathered data. By evaluating the model-data fit, we assessed the consistency between our hypothesized relationships among the study constructs—trust in leader, self-efficacy, and job satisfaction—and the actual data collected.

Results

Primary Analysis

Before hypothesis testing, we assessed the data for missing values, outliers, and normality. Data collection was conducted via an online platform with mandatory responses to mitigate missing data. Outliers were identified utilizing the Mahalanobis distance test at $p < 0.001$ (Kline, 2011), resulting in 339 responses being retained for subsequent analyses. Additionally, we evaluated data normality based on skewness and kurtosis values (within ± 1 and ± 3 , respectively), confirming normal distribution (Byrne, 2010). Furthermore, to detect common method variance, Harman's single-factor test was employed, revealing that a single factor contributed only 39% of the variance, below the 50% threshold.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was performed to assess model fit, convergent validity, and discriminant validity of the instruments. Model fit was assessed using criteria including Goodness of Fit Index ($GFI \geq 0.90$), Comparative Fit Index ($CFI \geq 0.90$), Normed Chi-square ($\chi^2/df \leq 3.0$), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation ($RMSEA \leq 0.08$), and Standardized Root Mean Residual ($SRMR \leq 0.08$), with factor loadings exceeding 0.50 (Islam et al., 2022). All items exhibited factor loadings well above the threshold (ranging from 0.736 to 0.797)(see Table 2), and the model was fit: $\chi^2/df = 1.101$, $GFI = 0.962$, $CFI = 0.996$, $RMSEA = 0.017$, $SRMR = 0.028$.

Convergent validity was further examined by considering factor loadings and average variance extracted (AVE) (Kline, 2011). All items displayed factor loadings surpassing 0.70, and the AVE of all variables exceeded 0.50, meeting recommended thresholds (Kline, 2011). Moreover, Cronbach's α values for all items exceeded 0.70, showing satisfactory reliability (Nunally & Bernstein, 1978) (see Table 2).

Table 3: Factor Loadings, Convergent Validity And Reliability

No.	Variable	Items	1	2	3	AVE	Cronbach's α
1	Trust	TR1	0.74			0.609	0.861
		TR2	0.797				
		TR3	0.788				
		TR4	0.794				
2	Self-efficacy	SE1		0.741		0.571	0.889
		SE2		0.736			
		SE3		0.77			
		SE4		0.763			
		SE5		0.769			
		SE6		0.755			
3	Job Satisfaction	JS1			0.781	0.599	0.899
		JS2			0.794		
		JS3			0.776		
		JS4			0.779		
		JS5			0.75		
		JS6			0.763		

Notes: Loadings stands for standardized regression weights. All loadings are significant at 0.001 level. AVE stands for average variance extracted.

Discriminant validity analysis involved comparing the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) with inter-variable correlations. It was observed that the square root of AVE exceeded the respective correlations, confirming effective discrimination among all variables (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Means, standard deviations (SD), and correlations, including the square root of AVE on the diagonals, are presented (See Table 3).

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics, Correlation Matrix And Discriminant Validity

No.	Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1	Trust	3.382	0.973	0.780		
2	Self-efficacy	3.304	0.908	0.409***	0.756	
3	Job Satisfaction	3.323	0.933	0.445***	0.396***	0.774

Notes: The values on the diagonal represent the square root of AVE. To confirm discriminant validity, these diagonal values should exceed the correlations between the constructs. *** $p < 0.001$

Structural Model For Hypotheses Testing

The structural model was examined using 5,000 bootstraps at a 95% confidence level, examining both direct and indirect paths. The values of the direct paths presented in Table 4 indicated that trust in leader positively influenced teacher job satisfaction ($\beta = 0.34$, $p < 0.001$, C.R. = 5.165) and self-efficacy ($\beta = 0.409$, $p < 0.001$, C.R. = 6.3), confirming H1 and H2 of

the study. Likewise, self-efficacy demonstrated a positive influence on teacher job satisfaction ($\beta = 0.257$, $p < 0.001$, C.R. = 4.073), thus confirming the H3 of the study.

Table 5: Hypotheses 1,2,3 Test

Hypotheses	B	S.E.	C.R.	β	p
Trust in leader → Job satisfaction	0.352	0.068	5.165	0.34	***
Trust in leader → Self-efficacy	0.407	0.065	6.3	0.409	***
Self-efficacy → Job satisfaction	0.267	0.066	4.073	0.257	***

Notes: B stands for regression weights. S.E. stands for standard error, C.R. stands for Critical ratio of regression weight. β stands for the standardized regression weights. *** $p < 0.001$

Subsequently, the study examined the indirect path for the mediating analysis. As depicted in Table 5, the standardized direct effect of trust in the leader on job satisfaction proved significant ($\beta = 0.34$, $p < 0.001$), with a confidence interval ranging from 0.213 to 0.445. Furthermore, the standardized indirect effect of trust in the leader on job satisfaction through self-efficacy was both positive and significant ($\beta = 0.105$, $p < 0.001$), with non-zero bounds between the lower and upper bounds (lower bounds = 0.057, upper bounds = 0.166), thereby affirming H4 of the study. Additionally, according to Hair et al. (2010), the significance of the structural path between the direct and indirect relationships implies partial mediation. Thus, self-efficacy was identified as partially mediating the relationship between trust in leader and job satisfaction.

Table 6: Hypotheses 4-Mediation Test

Trust in leader → Self-efficacy → Job satisfaction	β	p	Lower Bounds	Upper Bounds
Direct effect	0.34	***	0.213	0.445
Indirect effect	0.105	***	0.057	0.166

Notes: β is the standardized regression weights. *** $p < 0.001$

Discussion

This study investigated the direct and indirect impacts of trust in leader on teacher job satisfaction. Initially, it explored the direct correlation between trust in leader and teacher job satisfaction, revealing a positive association. The result was in line with the prior research findings about trust and job satisfaction (e.g. Horoub & Zargar, 2022; Zhao et al., 2022; Pathardikar et al., 2023a; Pathardikar et al., 2023b). Employees across various organizational settings experienced heightened feelings of safety, positivity, and reduced insecurity when they perceived their leaders and peers as trustworthy (Li et al., 2018; Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). Therefore, trust in leadership emerges as indispensable for cultivating a favorable work environment, where individuals feel supported, valued, and empowered in their respective roles. Consequently, this fosters greater job satisfaction among teachers.

Concerning the second hypothesis in this study, a notable correlation between trust in leader and self-efficacy was identified. Teachers who trust their leaders tend to exhibit higher levels of self-efficacy, likely due to a sense of psychological safety that enables them to navigate challenges effectively and engage more creatively in their tasks (Horoub & Zargar, 2022).

Regarding the third hypothesis of this study, it was confirmed that self-efficacy correlated positively with job satisfaction. Extensive literature has underscored the substantial contribution of self-efficacy to overall job satisfaction. One rationale for this association is that teachers with heightened self-efficacy levels demonstrate improved capabilities in managing stress and navigating challenges (Jentsch et al., 2023; Smetackova et al., 2019). Moreover, these individuals exhibit higher levels of task engagement (Liu et al., 2023), thereby fostering increased job satisfaction.

The final hypothesis, suggesting that self-efficacy acts as a positive mediator in the relationship between trust in leaders and job satisfaction was supported. It's crucial to recognize the importance of self-efficacy across the literature, as it is a vital psychological asset, mediating the impact of various factors on employee attitudes and behaviors (Nwanzu & Babalola, 2019). Consequently, the current findings imply that leaders should foster a trustworthy environment, supporting, valuing, and empowering teachers to enhance their self-efficacy. This, in turn, leads to increased job involvement and satisfaction among teachers.

Research Implications

This research holds three key theoretical implications. Firstly, it expands the current literature on job satisfaction by investigating how two psychological factors—trust in leaders and self-efficacy—affect job satisfaction. This enriches our understanding of how these factors influence workplace satisfaction. Secondly, the findings demonstrated that self-efficacy played a significant mediating role in the relationship between trust in leader and teacher job satisfaction. Though prior studies have established a positive relationship between trust and job satisfaction, limited research has examined the role of self-efficacy in this dynamic. Lastly, the study underscores the importance of trust in leaders, predicting teachers' self-efficacy and job satisfaction. This reinforces the relevance of Expectancy theory in educational contexts.

The results provide practical insights for educational institutions and leaders to improve teacher job satisfaction by fostering trust, promoting self-efficacy, and aligning motivational factors with Expectancy theory principles. Prioritizing building trusting leadership involves emphasizing transparent communication, support, and recognition of teachers' efforts. Leaders should continuously enhance their effectiveness through training programs and feedback channels. By attending to the feelings and attitudes of the teachers and enhancing dyadic relationships, leaders can foster a positive work environment that promotes teacher job satisfaction. Additionally, investing in professional development and promoting collaboration among teachers further enhances self-efficacy and boosts job satisfaction.

Limitations And Recommendations

Before concluding this study, it's crucial to consider several notable limitations. Firstly, the data were solely collected from teachers in higher vocational colleges, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to teachers in different educational settings like universities. For a more thorough understanding, it is recommended to conduct similar studies in diverse educational contexts. Additionally, the use of self-report measures may cause common method bias, potentially inflating the relationships observed among the variables. Furthermore, the study's cross-sectional survey design prevented the accurate establishment of causal relationships among the study variables. Future researchers are encouraged to undertake longitudinal and experimental studies to confirm the findings. Moreover, while this study focused on the mediating role of teacher self-efficacy, other potential mediators such as organizational climate, basic psychological needs, or work engagement were not explored. Future research endeavors could investigate these mediating mechanisms to gain a deeper understanding of how trust in leader influences job satisfaction.

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the direct impact of trust in leadership on teacher job satisfaction in higher vocational colleges in China and to analyze how self-efficacy mediated this relationship. Through a thorough analysis of the proposed model, the study confirmed that trust in leadership was directly linked to job satisfaction, with self-efficacy acting as a mediator in the relationship between trust in leaders and job satisfaction among teachers. The findings highlighted that trust in leaders indeed played a central role in cultivating a positive school environment. These results suggested the significance of fostering trust in leadership and enhancing teacher self-efficacy as effective strategies for promoting job satisfaction among educators. Therefore, this study contributes significantly to both theory and practice in school management, offering valuable insights for further research and improvement. Future studies should explore additional implications and provide insights for policymakers to enhance the educational system.

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