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Occupational Self-Efficacy and Turnover Intention among Chinese Vocational College Teachers: The Mediating Role of Job Burnout from a Social Cognitive Perspective

Huang Ying^{1,2,*} and Wong Siew Ping¹

¹ City University Malaysia, Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia

² Heze Vocational College, Heze, Shandong, China

* Correspondence: Huang Ying, City University Malaysia, Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia; Heze Vocational College, Heze, Shandong, China



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Abstract: Grounded in Social Cognitive Theory, this study examines the mediating role of job burnout in the relationship between occupational self-efficacy and turnover intention among Chinese vocational college teachers. A cross-sectional survey was conducted with 1,000 teachers from higher vocational colleges in China, employing validated scales to measure each construct. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to test the hypothesized relationships. The results indicate a significant negative effect of occupational self-efficacy on turnover intention, suggesting that teachers with higher self-efficacy are less likely to leave their profession. Additionally, occupational self-efficacy is negatively associated with job burnout, indicating that teachers with greater confidence are better equipped to manage work-related stressors. In turn, job burnout positively predicts turnover intention, confirming its adverse impact on teachers' career stability. Mediation analysis further revealed that job burnout partially mediates the relationship between occupational self-efficacy and turnover intention. This study extends Social Cognitive Theory to the vocational education context and provides empirical evidence from China. Practically, the findings emphasize the importance of enhancing teachers' self-efficacy and mitigating job burnout to improve retention. Policy implications include strengthening career development opportunities, enhancing institutional support systems, and implementing targeted interventions for younger teachers who may be more vulnerable to turnover.

Keywords: occupational self-efficacy; job burnout; turnover intention; vocational college teachers; Social Cognitive Theory

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

The stability of the teaching workforce is a critical determinant of educational quality. In China, vocational colleges play a pivotal role in cultivating technical talent, yet they face a significant challenge: high teacher turnover intention. Teacher turnover disrupts educational continuity and undermines institutional stability. This issue is particularly pronounced in vocational education due to factors such as high workload, relatively low social recognition, and specific occupational pressures [1]. Vocational college teachers often experience high-intensity work demands, role ambiguity, and limited social acknowledgment, all of which significantly increase their intention to leave. However, existing research predominantly focuses on teachers in general higher education

institutions, and systematic investigations specifically targeting vocational college teachers remain limited. This group operates in a unique environment that emphasizes practical skills over theoretical knowledge, facing complex challenges that may differently affect their psychological well-being and career decisions. Therefore, conducting context-specific research on this population is especially urgent.

1.2. Research Significance

At the theoretical level, most prior studies have concentrated on teachers in regular universities, with insufficient attention to the specific group of higher vocational college teachers. Considering the notable differences in occupational characteristics, work environments, and societal expectations for vocational teachers, systematic research on their turnover intention can enrich the extension of teacher career development theory. Guided by Social Cognitive Theory, this study integrates occupational self-efficacy, job burnout, and turnover intention into a unified model. This approach not only helps uncover the psychological mechanisms underlying teacher turnover behavior but also provides new empirical insights and perspectives for applying Social Cognitive Theory in the context of educational organizational behavior [2].

At the practical level, the stability of the teaching workforce is fundamental to ensuring educational quality. By examining the pathways linking occupational self-efficacy, job burnout, and turnover intention, this study can offer precise empirical evidence to inform human resource management strategies in higher vocational colleges. For instance, administrators can implement targeted interventions to enhance teachers' occupational self-efficacy and alleviate job burnout, thereby reducing turnover intention and improving job satisfaction and organizational commitment [3]. These findings have practical significance for maintaining a stable teaching force and promoting the healthy, sustainable development of vocational education in China [4].

1.3. Research Questions

Based on the above background and significance, this study seeks to answer the following key questions:

- 1) What is the influence of occupational self-efficacy on vocational college teachers' turnover intention?
- 2) Does job burnout play a mediating role between occupational self-efficacy and turnover intention among higher vocational college teachers?

By addressing these questions, the study aims to construct a structural model that systematically reveals the intrinsic relationships among occupational self-efficacy, job burnout, and turnover intention, providing theoretical reference and practical guidance for educational policy formulation and school management.

1.4. Research Hypotheses

Drawing on theoretical foundations and existing literature, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- 1) H1: Occupational self-efficacy has a significant negative impact on turnover intention among higher vocational teachers.
- 2) H2: Occupational self-efficacy has a significant negative impact on job burnout.
- 3) H3: Job burnout has a significant positive impact on turnover intention.
- 4) H4: Job burnout mediates the relationship between occupational self-efficacy and turnover intention.

1.5. Research Gap

A systematic review of the literature reveals three primary research gaps:

- 1) There is a lack of large-scale empirical studies focusing specifically on Chinese higher vocational college teachers, who face unique occupational challenges.

- 2) Most existing studies examine pairwise variable relationships, whereas few studies adopt Social Cognitive Theory as an overarching framework to integrate occupational self-efficacy, job burnout, and turnover intention into a unified model [5].
- 3) Many studies rely on small samples or traditional methods such as correlation analysis, and there is a shortage of high-quality research using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) and Bootstrap techniques to rigorously test mediating effects [6].

To address these gaps, this study constructs a chain model based on Social Cognitive Theory, positioning job burnout as a mediator. Using a large-scale sample and robust statistical methods, the research systematically investigates the psychological mechanisms through which occupational self-efficacy influences turnover intention among higher vocational teachers, thereby providing comprehensive theoretical and practical contributions [7].

2. Literature Review

2.1. Occupational Self-Efficacy

Occupational self-efficacy, derived from Social Cognitive Theory, refers to an individual's belief in their capability to successfully perform occupational tasks. In the educational context, it is a key predictor of teacher well-being and retention [8]. While extensively studied in general education, research on vocational college teachers is increasingly gaining attention. These teachers face distinctive challenges, including a practice-oriented teaching environment and diverse student demographics, which can suppress their sense of efficacy [9]. Consequently, their overall self-efficacy is often lower than that of their counterparts in academic universities, making them a critical group for investigation.

In the occupational field, occupational self-efficacy specifically refers to teachers' belief in their ability to successfully undertake teaching, research, and career development tasks [10]. A high level of occupational self-efficacy can enhance teachers' willingness to engage in teaching innovation, strengthen occupational identity, and serve as an important psychological resource, helping them cope effectively with work-related stress, thereby improving overall educational quality [11].

Research on teacher self-efficacy is well-established internationally. Core dimensions of teacher self-efficacy typically include classroom management, instructional strategies, and student engagement. Numerous empirical studies consistently demonstrate that teacher self-efficacy is positively correlated with job satisfaction and organizational commitment, and negatively correlated with job burnout and turnover intention. Recent meta-analyses further confirm that self-efficacy is a strong predictor of teacher career stability [12].

Domestic research, though initiated later, has developed rapidly. Early studies mainly focused on primary and secondary school teachers, confirming that self-efficacy is significantly influenced by external factors such as social recognition, salary, and professional development opportunities. More recent studies have highlighted the unique challenges faced by higher vocational teachers. Compared to regular university teachers, higher vocational teachers often encounter teaching environments emphasizing practical skills over theoretical knowledge, complex student demographics, and difficulties in transforming research outcomes [13]. Their overall occupational self-efficacy tends to be lower and is more susceptible to organizational support and occupational identity. Heavy teaching tasks and research pressures are important factors contributing to reduced efficacy [14].

2.2. Job Burnout

Job burnout is a psychological syndrome resulting from chronic work stress. It is typically conceptualized in three core dimensions: emotional exhaustion, referring to the depletion of emotional resources and extreme fatigue; depersonalization, manifesting as a detached and cynical attitude toward the recipients of one's work; and reduced personal accomplishment, reflecting negative evaluations of one's work achievements. The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) has become the international standard for measuring burnout [15].

Teachers are recognized as a high-risk group for job burnout, with causes linked to personal traits (such as low self-efficacy), organizational factors (such as work overload and limited autonomy), and social factors (such as public expectations and occupational status). Recent studies also highlight the consequences of burnout, showing that teacher burnout can negatively affect students' academic engagement, mental health, and learning outcomes, underscoring the urgency of intervention [16].

In the Chinese context, job burnout among higher vocational teachers is particularly pronounced [17]. These teachers face multiple role pressures, including teaching, research, student management, and skills coaching, combined with relatively low social recognition. This situation contributes to higher emotional exhaustion and a reduced sense of accomplishment. Mid-level title holders and younger teachers are especially at risk. Organizational factors such as perceived unfairness and limited leadership communication exacerbate burnout levels [18].

2.3. Turnover Intention

Turnover intention refers to an individual's attitude or intention to leave the current organization, and is a primary antecedent predicting actual turnover behavior. It is typically assessed using short scales measuring the frequency of thoughts, plans, or efforts to leave one's current role or organization [19].

Globally, the teaching profession faces high attrition risk. Turnover intention is influenced by factors at multiple levels, including individual (e.g., job satisfaction, emotional exhaustion), organizational (e.g., pay equity, promotion opportunities, leadership style), and social (e.g., occupational prestige, policy environment) dimensions. Recent research has shifted toward internal psychological resources, indicating that attributes such as self-efficacy, optimism, hope, and resilience can indirectly reduce turnover intention by alleviating burnout [20].

In China, turnover intention among higher vocational teachers is a significant challenge limiting the development of vocational education. Contributing factors include disparities in salary and benefits between permanent and contract positions, narrow promotion channels, heavy non-teaching workloads, and uncertainty arising from collaboration with enterprises. Deep psychological motivations, such as occupational identity crises and low perceived organizational support, further drive turnover intention, indicating that addressing turnover requires attention to teachers' psychological experiences rather than solely material incentives [21].

2.4. Occupational Self-Efficacy and Turnover Intention

Occupational self-efficacy reflects teachers' belief in their capacity to succeed in teaching, research, and career development. According to Social Cognitive Theory, this belief directly influences behavioral choices and persistence. Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that occupational self-efficacy is positively correlated with job satisfaction and organizational commitment and negatively correlated with turnover intention. Teachers with high self-efficacy are confident in their abilities, believe they can overcome work challenges, and are therefore less likely to consider leaving their profession [22].

For higher vocational teachers in China, occupational self-efficacy is particularly important. These teachers often face challenges in social recognition and resource access, leading to lower occupational achievement and higher social comparison pressures. In this context, strong self-efficacy serves as a psychological protective factor, enhancing teachers' sense of control and professional identity, thereby reducing turnover intention [23].

Based on this discussion, the study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1: Occupational self-efficacy has a significant negative impact on the turnover intention of higher vocational college teachers.

2.5. Occupational Self-Efficacy and Job Burnout

Social Cognitive Theory suggests that beliefs about personal capability influence how individuals cope with stress and challenges [24]. Teachers with high occupational self-efficacy are more likely to perceive work demands as manageable challenges rather than threats. They exhibit confidence in managing classrooms, completing research tasks, and handling teacher-student relationships, effectively mitigating the psychological costs associated with job demands and preventing the accumulation of negative emotions. Conversely, teachers with low self-efficacy are more prone to feelings of powerlessness, frustration, and emotional exhaustion—the core dimensions of burnout [25].

Recent longitudinal studies provide strong evidence for this pathway, demonstrating a reciprocal relationship between self-efficacy and burnout: high self-efficacy predicts lower future burnout, while lower burnout levels support higher future self-efficacy. In the Chinese vocational education context, the multiple role pressures faced by teachers make self-efficacy an increasingly crucial resource in resisting burnout [26].

Based on this discussion, the study proposes the following hypothesis:

H2: Occupational self-efficacy has a significant negative impact on the job burnout of higher vocational college teachers.

2.6. Job Burnout and Turnover Intention

Job burnout is a negative psychological state caused by prolonged work stress, encompassing emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment [27]. According to the Stress-Strain-Outcome model, burnout represents a psychological strain resulting from continuous work stress, which in turn leads to negative outcomes such as turnover intention. Emotional exhaustion leaves teachers feeling drained and unable to engage fully in work; depersonalization fosters indifference or negative attitudes toward students and professional responsibilities; reduced personal accomplishment leads to self-doubt about work value. Collectively, these experiences undermine occupational identity and well-being, thereby increasing the likelihood of turnover intention.

Empirical research consistently identifies job burnout as one of the strongest proximal predictors of teacher turnover intention. Among Chinese higher vocational teachers, high workload and narrow promotion channels contribute to elevated burnout levels, which are positively associated with turnover intention. Emotional exhaustion, in particular, emerges as the strongest predictor of turnover intention.

Based on this discussion, the study proposes the following hypothesis:

H3: Job burnout has a significant positive impact on the turnover intention of higher vocational college teachers.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Basic Connotation of Social Cognitive Theory

This study adopts Social Cognitive Theory as the core guiding framework. This theory moves beyond the limitations of traditional behaviorism by emphasizing the critical role of individual cognitive factors in shaping behavior. Its central concept is

Triadic Reciprocal Determinism, which posits that personal cognition (e.g., beliefs and expectations), behavior, and the external environment form a dynamic, bidirectional interaction system that collectively determines behavioral patterns [28].

Within this "Person-Behavior-Environment" interaction chain, self-efficacy is considered one of the most crucial personal cognitive factors. It refers to an individual's judgment of their capability to organize and execute the actions required to achieve specific performance outcomes. Self-efficacy does not indicate the actual skills an individual possesses, but rather the confidence in applying those skills to accomplish tasks. It influences cognition, emotion, motivation, and behavior. Individuals with high self-efficacy perceive challenges as opportunities to be mastered rather than threats; they set higher goals, exert greater effort, and demonstrate resilience when facing difficulties.

Applied to the educational organizational context, teachers' occupational self-efficacy serves as a core psychological resource for managing challenges in the work environment. Teachers with high occupational self-efficacy are more likely to adopt proactive problem-solving strategies to cope with teaching and research pressures. Such positive coping styles effectively buffer environmental stress, reducing negative psychological states such as job burnout and, ultimately, turnover intention. Conversely, teachers with low self-efficacy are more prone to feelings of powerlessness, emotional exhaustion, and thoughts of leaving. Therefore, Social Cognitive Theory provides a comprehensive theoretical lens for understanding the internal mechanisms linking occupational self-efficacy, job burnout, and turnover intention.

3.2. Research Method

3.2.1. Research Design

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design, collecting data via anonymous questionnaires to systematically examine the relationships among occupational self-efficacy, job burnout, and turnover intention. Guided by Social Cognitive Theory, a theoretical model was constructed and hypotheses were proposed. Established scales were selected for measurement, and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used to test both the measurement and structural models. The Bootstrap method was applied to assess the significance of the mediating effect, allowing for rigorous examination of complex variable relationships and model plausibility.

3.2.2. Sample and Data Collection

Participants were teachers from Chinese higher vocational colleges, a group of high research value due to their central role in education and exposure to unique occupational pressures. Online questionnaires were distributed through official channels of multiple institutions using convenience sampling. A total of 1,000 valid responses were collected. The sample size exceeded ten times the number of observed variables (31 in this study), meeting the recommended threshold for SEM analysis.

The sample reflected reasonable distributions in terms of gender, age, teaching experience, and professional title, with the majority being middle-aged and younger teachers, consistent with the composition of the teaching workforce in Chinese higher vocational colleges.

3.2.3. Variable Measurement

Established scales from both domestic and international research were employed and appropriately adapted to the higher vocational education context. All variables were measured on a 5-point Likert scale:

- 1) **Occupational self-efficacy:** Assessed using a 6-item scale adapted for teachers.
- 2) **Job burnout:** Measured using the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI-ES), comprising 22 items across emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment.

- 3) **Turnover intention:** Evaluated with an adapted 3-5 item scale measuring the frequency of thoughts, plans, or intentions to leave the current organization.
- 4) **Control variables:** Included gender, age, professional title, teaching experience, and region.

3.2.4. Data Analysis Methods

Data were processed and analyzed using SPSS and AMOS/Mplus software, following these procedures:

- 1) Data cleaning, including handling missing values, outliers, and normality tests.
- 2) Reliability and validity assessment using Cronbach's α , composite reliability, and confirmatory factor analysis.
- 3) Correlation and multicollinearity analysis via Pearson correlation and VIF tests.
- 4) Structural equation modeling to examine direct and mediating effects, with model fit indices including χ^2/df , CFI, TLI, and RMSEA.
- 5) Bootstrap mediation testing with 5,000 resamples to calculate 95% confidence intervals for assessing the significance of mediating effects.

3.2.5. Non-response Bias Analysis

The early-late respondent comparison method was applied. Independent samples t-tests on demographic and core variables revealed no significant differences ($p > 0.05$), indicating minimal impact of non-response bias on the results.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

Analysis of the 1,000 valid questionnaires indicated that the mean score for occupational self-efficacy was 3.62 (SD = 0.74), suggesting that most teachers maintained a medium to high level of occupational confidence. The mean score for job burnout was 3.05 (SD = 0.81), indicating that the teacher group generally experienced a certain degree of occupational fatigue. The mean score for turnover intention was 2.94 (SD = 0.77), showing that higher vocational teachers overall exhibited a medium to low level of turnover intention, though individual differences were notable.

Correlation analysis showed that occupational self-efficacy was significantly negatively correlated with turnover intention ($r = -0.41$, $p < 0.001$) and with job burnout ($r = -0.48$, $p < 0.001$), while job burnout was significantly positively correlated with turnover intention ($r = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$). These preliminary results support the hypothesized relationships among the variables.

4.2. Reliability Analysis

The Cronbach's α coefficients for all scales ranged from 0.82 to 0.91, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70. Composite Reliability (CR) values ranged from 0.84 to 0.93, indicating good internal consistency for all measures.

4.3. Validity Analysis

Convergent and discriminant validity were assessed using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). Factor loadings for each latent variable ranged from 0.63 to 0.88, all significant ($p < 0.001$). Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values exceeded 0.50 for all constructs, demonstrating satisfactory convergent validity. The square roots of the AVE for each latent variable were greater than their correlations with other variables, indicating good discriminant validity. The overall fit indices of the measurement model were satisfactory ($\chi^2/df = 2.41$, CFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.046).

4.4. Structural Equation Model Test

After verifying the reliability and validity of the measurement model, the structural model was tested. The path coefficient of occupational self-efficacy on turnover intention was $\beta = -0.26$ ($p < 0.001$), supporting H1. The path coefficient of occupational self-efficacy on job burnout was $\beta = -0.43$ ($p < 0.001$), supporting H2. The path coefficient of job burnout on turnover intention was $\beta = 0.39$ ($p < 0.001$), supporting H3.

The overall model fit was acceptable: $\chi^2/df = 2.57$, CFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.049, indicating a good match between the model and the observed data.

4.5. Mediation Effect Test

The mediating role of job burnout (H4) was examined using the Bootstrap method with 5,000 resamples. The indirect effect of occupational self-efficacy on turnover intention via job burnout was -0.17, with a 95% bias-corrected confidence interval of [-0.24, -0.11], which does not include zero, indicating a significant mediation effect. Both the direct effect (-0.26) and the total effect (-0.43) were significant ($p < 0.001$). These results indicate that job burnout partially mediates the relationship between occupational self-efficacy and turnover intention, confirming H4.

4.6. Additional Findings

Subgroup analyses revealed differences in model relationships among teachers with different characteristics. Female teachers exhibited slightly higher levels of job burnout than male teachers, although no significant difference was observed in turnover intention. Teachers under 30 years old showed significantly higher turnover intention compared to those over 45, indicating greater mobility among younger teachers. Teachers with intermediate professional titles reported the highest levels of job burnout, likely related to promotion pressures. These findings offer additional insights for discussion and practical recommendations.

4.7. Discussion of Key Findings

Consistent with the first research question, occupational self-efficacy demonstrated a significant direct negative impact on turnover intention, suggesting that teachers with higher self-efficacy are better able to cope with work challenges and maintain occupational stability. Within the context of Chinese vocational education, this finding highlights the importance of enhancing teachers' occupational self-efficacy as a strategy to reduce turnover intention.

Regarding the second research question, the mediation analysis confirmed that job burnout partially mediates the relationship between occupational self-efficacy and turnover intention. This establishes a "cognitive-affective-behavioral" pathway: occupational self-efficacy not only directly decreases turnover intention but also indirectly mitigates turnover intention by alleviating emotional exhaustion associated with job burnout. This result supports the applicability of Social Cognitive Theory in explaining the psychological mechanisms of teacher behavior and provides a framework for understanding turnover processes among vocational college teachers.

4.8. Comparison with Existing Research

The negative relationship between occupational self-efficacy and turnover intention aligns with prior international findings, confirming cross-cultural consistency. The mediating role of job burnout also corresponds with previous studies, indicating that the cognitive-affective-behavioral mechanism is generalizable across different contexts. Compared with domestic research, this study further validates the structural relationships among these variables using a large sample, addressing previous gaps in empirical evidence for higher vocational teachers.

4.9. Implications of the Study

This study contributes to research on teachers' occupational psychology by focusing on vocational college teachers and integrating cognitive, affective, and behavioral factors into a comprehensive model. The findings extend Social Cognitive Theory by demonstrating that occupational self-efficacy influences turnover intention not only directly but also indirectly through job burnout. This empirical evidence underscores the importance of addressing both cognitive beliefs and emotional states in reducing turnover.

From a management perspective, schools should enhance teachers' self-efficacy through training, evaluation systems, and professional development support, while alleviating non-teaching burdens and promoting autonomy. At the policy level, professional title evaluations, compensation systems, and career development channels should be optimized, with particular attention to the development needs of younger teachers. At the individual level, teachers can strengthen self-confidence through continuous learning, peer support, and psychological adjustment, with schools providing corresponding guidance and resources.

4.10. Limitations and Future Research Directions

Several limitations suggest directions for future research. First, the sample was primarily drawn from vocational colleges in certain regions, limiting generalizability. Future studies could include broader regions or cross-cultural comparisons. Second, the cross-sectional design constrains causal inference; longitudinal designs are recommended for exploring dynamic relationships among variables. Third, additional variables such as perceived organizational support and leadership style could be incorporated to construct more complex theoretical models, including moderated mediation frameworks. Finally, reliance on self-report measures may introduce common method bias; future research could incorporate multi-source data, such as objective turnover records or in-depth interviews, to enhance reliability and deepen understanding of psychological mechanisms underlying turnover behavior.

5. Conclusion

Based on Social Cognitive Theory, this study systematically examined the relationships among occupational self-efficacy, job burnout, and turnover intention among higher vocational college teachers in China, and empirically validated the proposed theoretical model. The main conclusions are as follows. First, occupational self-efficacy significantly negatively predicts turnover intention, indicating that teachers with higher levels of occupational self-efficacy possess greater professional confidence and proactive attitudes, making them less likely to develop intentions to leave. Second, occupational self-efficacy significantly negatively influences job burnout, suggesting that teachers with high self-efficacy are better able to manage work pressures, thereby reducing emotional exhaustion and maintaining a higher sense of personal accomplishment. Third, job burnout significantly positively predicts turnover intention, demonstrating that teachers experiencing emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, or reduced personal accomplishment are more prone to consider leaving their positions. Fourth, job burnout plays a partial mediating role between occupational self-efficacy and turnover intention, showing that teachers' self-efficacy not only directly reduces turnover intention but also indirectly functions by alleviating job burnout.

Overall, this study uncovers the underlying psychological mechanisms of turnover intention among higher vocational college teachers, enriches the application of Social Cognitive Theory in educational contexts, and provides empirical evidence for understanding and promoting occupational stability in this critical teacher population. These findings underscore the importance of enhancing teachers' self-efficacy and addressing job burnout to maintain a stable and engaged workforce in vocational education.

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