

**Exploring Job Satisfaction and
Influential Factors Among Retail Sales
Associates in Shopping Malls in China**

Business Research

BMMB7028

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1. Background

In the 21st century, the rapid technological development in different innovations has not reduced the value of human capital. It is considered to be the most valuable capital of businesses and acts as a driving force of business activity (Machova et al., 2022). Job satisfaction is essential for both individual and organizational performance (Prasetio, Luturlean, and Agathanisa, 2019). This is due to the theoretical link between job satisfaction and job performance (Locke, 1970), emphasizing its importance for organizational success (Ali et al., 2023). Satisfied employees are more dedicated, perform tasks more efficiently, and show care for others and themselves (Dziuba, Ingaldi, and Zhuravskaya, 2020). Conversely, when employees feel uncomfortable at work, are undervalued, and cannot reach their full potential, their focus on tasks diminishes, leading to reduced job satisfaction (Hartika, Fitridiani, and Asbari, 2023). Thus, ensuring job satisfaction is crucial for maintaining high performance levels and achieving organizational objectives.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically changed the operational modes of brick-and-mortar retail in recent years, making the retail sector far more marketing-oriented. Additionally, with technological advancements, tight wage budgets, and extended trading hours, the increase in part-time work has led to retail positions in shopping malls being primarily filled by married women with childcare responsibilities, and most of these

positions are part-time. These women typically assume demanding roles characterized by high stress, low wages, and high turnover rates (Huang, Xing, and Gamble, 2019; Broadbridge, 2005).

Given these changes and challenges, it is essential to explore the factors influencing job satisfaction among retail sales associates in shopping malls. Understanding these factors is critical for developing strategies to enhance job satisfaction, thereby improving employee well-being and organizational performance. This research aims to investigate the factors affecting job satisfaction of retail employees in shopping malls in China, with a focus on the post-pandemic period.

2.National Context

Historically, the majority of studies on employee satisfaction have been based on data gathered from Western countries, with very few focusing on China (Nielsen and Smyth, 2008). However, the factors affecting job satisfaction can vary significantly between different countries and cultural contexts (Spector, 1997). Female employees in China's retail sector report significantly lower job satisfaction levels compared to their male counterparts (Huang and Gamble, 2015), which contrasts with findings from certain Western countries (e.g., Clark, 1997).

In recent years, although the proportion of women in senior leadership positions has increased (Huang et al., 2019), many workplaces, including the retail sector, still have leadership roles predominantly occupied by men. This male-dominated leadership culture influences workplace norms and values (Broadbridge, 2007). Retail jobs in shopping malls are often hierarchically organized, with men occupying higher positions and women filling lower roles (Ognjenovic, 1979). Women in these environments typically earn less and report lower levels of job and career satisfaction compared to their male counterparts (Van Dixhorn, 2013). These gender disparities are compounded by societal expectations for women to balance work and family responsibilities, further impacting their job satisfaction.

Low job satisfaction can reduce the service quality of retail staff, leading to poor customer attitudes and making it difficult for customers to have a positive shopping experience. However, customer satisfaction plays a key role in a successful business strategy (Gomez, McLaughlin, and Wittink, 2004). Therefore, the job satisfaction of retail staff in shopping malls impacts sales. Thus, exploring job satisfaction and influential factors among retail sales associates in shopping malls is crucial. This can reduce managers' concerns about how to promote and incentivize "service with a smile" (Koenker, 2021), thereby promoting sales growth and organizational performance.

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly changed the operational modes of the retail industry. It is essential to analyze how these changes affect employee job satisfaction. In the post-pandemic market environment, the characteristics and working conditions of retail positions may have changed, necessitating a more systematic study based on the current situation. Moreover, previous studies are often comprehensive but rarely focus on gender differences in job satisfaction.

This paper aims to investigate the factors influencing the job satisfaction of retail employees in shopping malls in China. Understanding these factors is essential for developing strategies to enhance job satisfaction, thereby improving employee well-being and organizational performance (Wardiansyah,

Indrawati, and Kurniawati, 2024; Prasetio, Luturlean, and Agathanisa, 2019).

This study will build on existing research and incorporate the post-pandemic context, conducting a detailed and systematic analysis of various influencing factors, including gender differences specific to China.

By addressing these gaps, this research will provide valuable insights into the unique factors influencing job satisfaction among retail employees in China. The findings will help managers develop targeted strategies to improve employee satisfaction and performance, ultimately contributing to the success of the retail sector in a post-pandemic world.

3. Literature Review

Job satisfaction, as defined by the Cambridge Dictionary, is “the feeling of pleasure and achievement you experience in your job when you know that your work is worth doing, or the degree to which your work gives you this feeling” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024). Different researchers have various approaches to defining job satisfaction. Some describe it as individuals’ affective orientations towards their work roles or as the fulfillment experienced when engaging in a task compared to their perceived standard of measure (Vroom, 1964; Locke, 1969). Others define it as the combination of psychological, physiological, and environmental factors that lead a person to say, “I am satisfied with my job” (Hoppock, 1935). Additionally, job satisfaction is considered a dynamic concept referring to past, present, and future aspects of work (Thierry and Koopmann-Iwema, 1984; Schmidt, 2010). The most widely cited definition is by Spector, who states that job satisfaction involves how people feel about their job and its various aspects, highlighting that both satisfaction and dissatisfaction can coexist in any work situation (Spector, 1997).

3.1 Determinants of Job Satisfaction

Several primary determinants of job satisfaction, such as training and workload, seem to impact both female and male employees equally. However, disparities are evident in other key factors, including pay, customer interactions, and

working hours (Huang and Gamble, 2015). Previous research has indicated that role ambiguity, the atmosphere of work, organizational policy and strategies, compensation package, career perspectives, and emotional exhaustion significantly impact various aspects of their job satisfaction (Kearney, Coughlan, and Kennedy, 2023; Roelen, Koopmans, and Groothoff, 2008; Sypniewska, 2014; Chung, Rutherford, and Park, 2012; Pandey and Asthana, 2017). Additionally, motivating employees is another crucial factor that, in turn, supports customer satisfaction and loyalty (Machova et al., 2022).

Three primary relationships significantly influence employee satisfaction: the connection with the organization, the rapport with supervisors, and the interaction with colleagues. The employee-organization relationship highlights the significance of employees aligning with the organization's strategy and goals, including support for work-life balance (Allen, Shore, & Griffeth, 2003). The relationship with supervisors is crucial, impacting job satisfaction through factors such as autonomy (Edgar & Geare, 2005; Fila et al., 2014). Likewise, interactions with colleagues play a major role in job satisfaction .

Employee commitment and alignment with organizational goals depend on clear goal definitions (Patterson et al., 2005). Organizational identity encompasses members' perceptions and feelings about their organizations (Hatch & Schultz, 1997). Employee commitment to the organization is vital for

satisfaction, often tied to the organization's mission and strategy (Allen et al., 2003; Bart, Bontis, & Taggar, 2001).

3.2 Role Conflict and Work-Family Conflict

Role conflict and work-family conflict are also significant factors affecting job satisfaction. Some studies suggest that these conflicts primarily affect promotion satisfaction, while family-work conflict does not significantly influence any aspects of job satisfaction (Chung, Rutherford, and Park, 2012). Conversely, another study found that employees experiencing less work-family conflict tend to report higher job satisfaction (Bruck, Allen, and Spector, 2002). Organizational responses to work-family conflicts impact employee attitudes toward their jobs. Leadership style significantly influences organizational commitment and job satisfaction (Rowold, Borgmann, & Bormann, 2014). Supervisor support and encouragement are crucial in shaping employee attitudes toward their jobs (Griffin, Patterson, & West, 2001). Autonomy in job roles enhances performance and satisfaction (Spector, 1986; Griffin et al., 2001; Chang & Cheng, 2014).

3.3 Teamwork and Collaboration

Teamwork involves interdependent groups working together towards a common goal (Parker & Wall, 1998). Collaboration within teams and prioritization of group outcomes over individual ones enhance teamwork

benefits (Ilgen, Hollenbeck, Johnson, & Jundt, 2005). Job enrichment associated with teamwork contributes to job satisfaction (Griffin et al., 2001). Initiatives promoting autonomy also contribute to higher satisfaction levels.

3.4 Emotional Contagion Theory

Despite different studies presenting varying results on the factors affecting retail employees' job satisfaction, they can all be collectively understood through the emotional contagion theory. This theory suggests that the emotions and feelings of retail employees can influence customers' emotional states (Netemeyer, Maxham III, and Lichtenstein, 2010), highlighting the critical importance of job satisfaction in retail environments.

3.5 Gender Disparities in Job Satisfaction

In the context of China, female employees in the retail sector report significantly lower job satisfaction levels compared to their male counterparts (Huang and Gamble, 2015). This contrasts with findings from certain Western countries, such as those reported by Clark (1997). These disparities are compounded by societal expectations for women to balance work and family responsibilities, further impacting their job satisfaction. Women typically earn less and report lower levels of job and career satisfaction compared to their male counterparts (Van Dixhorn, 2013).

3.6 Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly changed the operational modes of the retail industry. It is essential to analyze how these changes affect employee job satisfaction. In the post-pandemic market environment, the characteristics and working conditions of retail positions may have changed, necessitating a more systematic study based on the current situation.

4. Research Aims and Objectives and Research Question

4.1 Research Aim

The primary aim of this research is to explore how employee job satisfaction has changed in the post-pandemic retail landscape in China and identify the factors influencing job satisfaction among retail sales associates in shopping malls. By understanding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the retail environment in China, this study aims to provide actionable insights that can help retail managers enhance employee satisfaction and organizational performance.

4.2 Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are multifaceted. Firstly, the research aims to analyze key determinants of job satisfaction, such as training, workload, compensation, customer interactions, and working hours, and how these factors have evolved in the post-pandemic retail environment. Secondly, the study seeks to explore gender disparities in job satisfaction, focusing on how societal expectations and gender roles contribute to differences between female and male employees in the retail sector. Thirdly, it will assess the impact of organizational relationships on job satisfaction, specifically examining the connections employees have with their organization, supervisors, and colleagues. This includes evaluating how alignment with organizational goals and strategies, as well as support for work-life balance,

affect job satisfaction. Fourthly, the research will investigate the effects of work-family and family-work conflicts on job satisfaction, considering how organizational responses to these conflicts influence employee attitudes and satisfaction. Additionally, the role of teamwork and collaboration will be explored, particularly how job enrichment and autonomy within teams contribute to job satisfaction. Lastly, the study will delve into the emotional contagion theory in retail environments, examining how the emotions and feelings of retail employees affect customer satisfaction and loyalty. By addressing these objectives, the research aims to offer comprehensive insights that can guide retail managers in developing strategies to boost employee satisfaction and performance.

4.3 Research Questions

(1) How has the COVID-19 pandemic changed the retail landscape in China, and what are the subsequent impacts on employee job satisfaction among retail sales associates in shopping malls?

(2) What are the key determinants of job satisfaction, such as training, workload, compensation, customer interactions, and working hours, among retail employees in shopping malls in China, and how have these factors evolved in the post-pandemic environment?

(3) How do gender disparities manifest in job satisfaction among retail employees in shopping malls in China, and what roles do societal expectations and gender roles play in these differences?

(4) How do organizational relationships, including connection with the organization, rapport with supervisors, and interaction with colleagues, impact job satisfaction among retail employees in shopping malls in China?

(5) How do work-family and family-work conflicts affect job satisfaction among retail employees in shopping malls in China, and how do organizational responses to these conflicts influence employee attitudes and satisfaction?

(6) How do teamwork and collaboration within retail teams in shopping malls in China contribute to job satisfaction, particularly in terms of job enrichment and autonomy?

(7) According to the emotional contagion theory, how do the emotions and feelings of retail employees in shopping malls in China influence customer satisfaction and loyalty?

5. Paradigm and Methodology

5.1 Interpretivist Paradigm

The interpretivist paradigm focuses on understanding individuals' experiences and the meanings they attach to their social contexts. This paradigm is essential for studying the complexities of job satisfaction, as it emphasizes the subjective nature of human behavior and the influence of social and cultural factors. According to Alharahsheh and Pius (2020), the interpretivist approach allows researchers to explore the nuanced and contextual factors that impact job satisfaction. By utilizing this paradigm, the study can capture the rich, detailed experiences of retail employees, providing insights into how they perceive their work environment and what influences their job satisfaction (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020).

5.2 Abductive Methodology

In this study, abductive coding will be used to analyze qualitative data collected from retail employees, allowing the researchers to identify patterns and generate new theoretical insights about job satisfaction. This approach is flexible and adaptive, making it ideal for exploring the dynamic and evolving nature of job satisfaction in the post-pandemic retail environment (Vila-Henninger et al., 2024).

5.3 Qualitative Method

Given the interpretivist paradigm and abductive methodology, this research will employ a qualitative approach to explore job satisfaction and its influencing factors among retail sales associates in shopping malls in China. This method is particularly suited for gaining in-depth understanding of subjective experiences and contextual factors that impact job satisfaction.

5.3.1 In-Depth Interviews

This research will conduct semi-structured in-depth interviews with retail employees to delve into their personal experiences, perceptions, and feelings about job satisfaction. By asking open-ended questions, the aim is to uncover subtle factors that influence their satisfaction. This approach allows for the collection of comprehensive data that reflects the complexity and subjectivity of job satisfaction (Alejandro and Zhao, 2024). For example, the interviews will explore employees' daily interactions with supervisors and colleagues, their workload, and their views on compensation and career prospects.

5.3.2 Participant Observation

Additionally, the study will involve participant observation, immersing in the retail environment to observe employees' behavior in their natural work settings. This method provides contextual insights that complement interview data, helping to understand the daily interactions and organizational culture impacting job satisfaction. Through this immersive approach, the study aims to

capture subtle dynamics and social interactions that might not be evident through interviews alone (Alejandro and Zhao, 2024). For instance, observations will focus on how employees interact with customers, manage stress during peak hours, and implement organizational policies in practice.

By combining in-depth interviews and participant observation, the research aims to gather a rich and detailed understanding of the factors influencing job satisfaction among retail employees. This dual approach ensures that the findings are grounded in the actual lived contexts and personal experiences of the employees, making them highly relevant and actionable for improving employee well-being and organizational performance. This qualitative approach is crucial for addressing the research questions on how the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the retail landscape and its subsequent impacts on employee job satisfaction, as well as identifying the key determinants of job satisfaction in the post-pandemic environment. Through this comprehensive method, the study aims to provide valuable insights that guide retail managers in developing effective strategies to enhance employee satisfaction and performance.

6. Advantages and Disadvantages of Methods

The integrated use of the interpretivist paradigm, abductive methodology, and qualitative approach in this study offers several significant advantages. Firstly, this combination allows for a deep understanding of employees' subjective experiences and the factors influencing their job satisfaction, providing nuanced and context-specific insights that quantitative methods may overlook (Alejandro and Zhao, 2024). Secondly, it enables the capture of rich, detailed data through in-depth interviews and participant observations, reflecting the complexity and subjectivity of job satisfaction. This approach also offers flexibility and adaptability, making it suitable for exploring complex and evolving phenomena such as job satisfaction in a post-pandemic environment (Vila-Henninger et al., 2024). Additionally, understanding the organizational culture, social interactions, and daily routines of employees leads to more relevant and actionable findings.

However, these methods also have certain disadvantages. The interpretivist and qualitative approaches can introduce subjectivity, as the findings may be influenced by the researcher's interpretation, potentially leading to bias. Ensuring the reliability and validity of qualitative data can be challenging, requiring rigorous methodological practices and often multiple researchers to cross-validate findings. Moreover, the in-depth focus on specific contexts and relatively small sample sizes can limit the generalizability of the results to all

retail employees in different settings. Lastly, collecting and analyzing qualitative data is time-consuming and resource-intensive, demanding significant effort and time.

7. Effective Methods/tools for Data Collection

7.1 Sample Size and Selection

This study will target a total of 100 retail sales associates from five major shopping malls across different regions in China. Each mall will contribute 20 participants, ensuring a diverse and representative sample. Both male and female sales associates will be included to explore potential gender differences in job satisfaction. Participants will be selected to ensure a balance between full-time and part-time employees, as well as varying lengths of service.

7.2 In-Depth Interviews

This research will conduct semi-structured interviews with each of the 100 participants. These interviews will involve open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed responses about personal experiences, daily interactions with supervisors and colleagues, workload, compensation, and career prospects. Each interview will be recorded and transcribed for thorough analysis, with responses being categorized and analyzed by gender to identify any significant differences. The analysis will be conducted using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, to manage, code, and identify themes within the data (Graue, 2015).

7.3 Participant Observation

Additionally, this research will involve participant observation within the shopping malls. The researcher will immerse themselves in the retail environment to observe the sales associates' behavior and interactions during their shifts. Observations will focus on employee-customer interactions, stress management during peak hours, and the practical implementation of organizational policies. Detailed field notes will be taken to capture these observations, which will then be analyzed to provide contextual insights that complement the interview data.

8. Resource implications and needs

Conducting this qualitative research will require significant time and resources. The interviews and observations will necessitate extensive time on-site. Each of the 100 interviews is expected to last about an hour, with additional time required for transcription and analysis. Using NVivo for qualitative data analysis will facilitate the coding and thematic analysis of the data but will also involve training and licensing costs. Travel and accommodation costs will arise from the need to access five shopping malls in different regions of China. Additionally, compensating participants for their time and participation will be crucial to ensure high response rates and data quality.

Overall, while the qualitative approach and the use of NVivo provide deep and detailed insights into job satisfaction among retail sales associates, it is essential to plan and allocate sufficient resources to successfully complete this research project. This comprehensive approach ensures that the findings are grounded in the actual lived contexts and personal experiences of the employees, making them highly relevant and actionable for improving employee well-being and organizational performance.

9. Time Plan for the Research Process

Proposal (2 weeks):

Prepare the research proposal, define objectives, develop the research plan, and obtain ethical approvals.

Literature Review (2 weeks):

Conduct a comprehensive review of existing literature on job satisfaction, retail environments, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on retail employees.

Research Design (1 week):

Develop interview questions, observation protocols, and finalize sample selection criteria.

Data Collection (6 weeks):

Conduct 100 semi-structured in-depth interviews and participant observations across five shopping malls. Each interview will be transcribed and prepared for analysis.

Data Analysis (4 weeks):

Analyze qualitative data using NVivo, focusing on coding, thematic analysis, and identifying patterns. Consider gender differences in job satisfaction.

Thesis Write-Up (3 weeks):

Compile research findings, discuss implications, and make recommendations.

Prepare sections on methodology, findings, discussion, and conclusions.

Review and Finalization (1 week):

Revise and polish the document, incorporating feedback from supervisor.

10. Ethical considerations

Firstly, this study will obtain informed consent from all participants, providing them with detailed explanations of the study's purpose, methods, potential risks, and benefits. Participants will be informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any adverse consequences. Confidentiality and anonymity will be strictly maintained, and data will be securely stored with digital data protected by passwords and encryption, accessible only to me. The principle of non-maleficence will be adhered to, minimizing any potential harm or discomfort to participants, ensuring respectful interview questions, and non-intrusive observation processes. This study will also follow the principle of beneficence, aiming to improve participants' work environments and overall well-being by providing insights into job satisfaction. Participation will be entirely voluntary, with no coercion or undue influence, and participants can refuse to answer any uncomfortable questions and withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. The research process will remain transparent, with participants being regularly informed of the study's progress and results, and summaries provided for review and feedback. Finally, during interviews and observations, cultural sensitivity will be maintained, respecting the social and cultural backgrounds of participants.

By adhering to these ethical considerations, this study will ensure the integrity of the research and uphold the dignity and rights of all participants throughout

the research process.

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