

Meaningful work as a mediator between job satisfaction and employee engagement: Evidence from private college teachers in China



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ABSTRACT

This study examines the mediating role of meaningful work in the relationship between job satisfaction and employee engagement among private college teachers in Shaanxi Province. A quantitative approach was adopted, and data were collected from 400 full-time faculty members using validated scales for job satisfaction, meaningful work, and employee engagement. The data were analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). The findings reveal that higher job satisfaction significantly enhances teachers' perceptions of meaningful work, which in turn positively influences employee engagement. Meaningful work was found to partially mediate the relationship between job satisfaction and employee engagement. Additional analyses show that engagement varies according to tenure, declining during the first one to two years because of adjustment difficulties and burnout, but increasing over time as teachers develop stronger professional identity and organizational commitment. Teachers with higher educational qualifications place greater importance on meaningful work and career development opportunities. The study highlights the need for private colleges to address both material and psychological needs by promoting meaningful work, professional recognition, and value alignment to sustain long-term teacher engagement and improve teaching quality.

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1. Introduction

Driven by market-oriented reforms and capital investment, private colleges in China have expanded rapidly. However, institutional growth has often exceeded attention to faculty well-being and professional development, leading to weaker organizational belonging, high staff turnover, and reduced competitiveness. Compared with public institutions, private colleges operate in a highly competitive environment, depend mainly on investor funding, and show lower levels of perceived organizational justice (McMahon, 2009). These structural characteristics have contributed to lower job satisfaction among teachers and created challenges for sustainable institutional development. Therefore, understanding how private colleges can

intentionally promote meaningful work is essential for improving faculty engagement and retention (Fatima et al., 2024).

Meaningful work for faculty arises from purpose, autonomy, and growth. Colleges can promote this by linking teaching and research to societal impact, empowering faculty in course design and innovation, recognizing achievements, and supporting professional development through mentorship, sabbaticals, and conferences. Inclusive, collaborative environments that prioritize respect and psychological safety further enhance engagement. Aligning rewards and evaluations with purpose-driven initiatives signals institutional commitment. By actively designing work environments that generate meaning, private colleges can strengthen faculty satisfaction, retention, and performance.

College teachers are highly skilled, motivated, and socially conscious. As China's universities expand, the demand for qualified teachers grows. Many, especially in private schools, are dissatisfied with pay and recognition, highlighting the importance of fair compensation and incentive systems (Chai, 2022). Despite progress, private

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higher education continues to face challenges, including recruiting and retaining highly qualified faculty, imbalanced age structures, and lower social recognition than public universities (Shaoan et al., 2025). Moreover, China's higher education system is shaped by a distinct ideological and policy context, limiting direct international comparisons. Combining content analysis with questionnaire-based investigation provides a more comprehensive understanding.

From a sustainable professional development perspective, teachers are expected to master knowledge and continuously innovate through learning and pedagogical improvement. Effective incentive mechanisms are essential to align intrinsic motivations with institutional goals and societal expectations. Current systems, however, often fail in this alignment, reducing job satisfaction and constraining long-term development (Chen et al., 2025). Such misalignment weakens incentive effectiveness, reduces job satisfaction, and constrains long-term institutional development.

Recognizing that job satisfaction is multidimensional and closely related to employee engagement and meaningful work, this study integrates perspectives from management and sociology (Gazi et al., 2025). Although classical theories were developed in the mid-twentieth century, psychological satisfaction continues to play a central role in contemporary management research. This study applies and extends these theoretical foundations within the context of private higher education in China.

Specifically, the study examines job satisfaction, meaningful work, and employee engagement among teachers in private colleges in Shaanxi Province, selected for its diverse institutions, strong policy support, strategic location, and concentration of educational resources. By analyzing compensation structures, welfare policies, and institutional practices, the study provides empirical evidence to inform effective incentive systems and management strategies.

The central argument is that improving job satisfaction alone is insufficient. Sustainable engagement depends on whether teachers experience their work as meaningful, encompassing purpose, respect, autonomy, and growth opportunities. While salary, workload, and benefits influence satisfaction, long-term engagement requires intentional organizational design that fosters meaningful work. This study addresses the following questions:

- Does job satisfaction increase employee engagement?
- Does job satisfaction influence meaningful work?
- Does meaningful work mediate the relationship between job satisfaction and employee engagement?
- How can private colleges translate these findings into concrete management practices?

2. Theoretical background and framework

2.1. The concept and evolution of job satisfaction

Job satisfaction is a central construct in organizational behavior, human resource management, and occupational psychology, as it is closely linked to employee engagement, performance, organizational commitment, turnover, and psychological well-being (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017). Among college teachers, job satisfaction reflects a subjective psychological state encompassing emotional responses, evaluations, and perceptions of work.

Early definitions emphasized individuals' emotional states and general attitudes toward work. Dunnette (1976) described job satisfaction as a positive emotional state arising from the comparison of work experiences with expectations. Similarly, Robbins (1997) framed it as a positive work attitude, while Price (2001) emphasized personal evaluation as a key component. Initially, research focused on immediate emotional responses and overall attitudes (Locke, 1969). Later studies incorporated organizational dimensions, including job content, work environment, leadership styles, coworker relationships, and policies.

Contemporary perspectives conceptualize job satisfaction as a dynamic, multidimensional construct influenced by job content, organizational structure, work environment, individual expectations, and social relationships. Empirical evidence highlights the roles of workload, managerial support, work environment, and professional development in shaping satisfaction (Lu et al., 2012). The Job Demands–Resources model further emphasizes that resources such as autonomy, support, and development opportunities drive satisfaction (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017).

In higher education, teachers' job satisfaction is shaped by professional characteristics, personality traits, intrinsic needs, and effective incentive mechanisms (Shim et al., 2022; Syaifuddin et al., 2024). Social Exchange Theory (SET) provides a framework to understand satisfaction and engagement, suggesting that recognition, fairness, and mutual benefit enhance teachers' motivation, while imbalances undermine it (Blau, 1964; Ahmad et al., 2023; Gazi et al., 2025). Meaningful work acts as an intrinsic reward, particularly when teachers perceive their contributions as beneficial to students (Rosso et al., 2010).

In China, private universities operate under distinct social and institutional conditions shaped by socialist governance and market regulations (Mok and Han, 2017). Teachers' job satisfaction is influenced by external factors such as salary, leadership, resources, and work-life balance, and internal factors like professional identity, self-efficacy, and social recognition (Pan et al., 2015; Yu et al., 2025).

2.2. Integrative model and hypotheses development

2.2.1. The job satisfaction and meaningful work

Meaningful work refers to individuals' understanding of the value and purpose of their work and the extent to which it satisfies material and psychological needs. It embodies self-realization, personal values, and social contribution. Employees seek both economic rewards and psychological fulfillment, particularly in education, where work impacts student development and institutional missions (Jo and Shin, 2025; Balyer and Özcan, 2020). Meaningful work is associated with autonomy, competence, connection, and alignment with broader goals (Martela and Pessi, 2018). Intrinsic motivation, recognition, and growth opportunities enhance purpose and professional development. Individuals actively construct meaning by connecting daily tasks to higher goals, and greater-good motivation emphasizes altruism, which enhances well-being and career satisfaction (Michaelson, 2021).

In collectivist cultures like China, the pursuit of meaning emphasizes effort, self-improvement, and process orientation (Ding et al., 2024). For private college teachers, heavy workloads, performance pressures, and work-family conflicts can reduce perceived work meaningfulness and job satisfaction (Wei et al., 2025). Social support, self-efficacy, and emotion regulation positively influence work-family balance and well-being (Fu and Li, 2025; Zhou and Jiang, 2026).

Drawing on the Complex Person Hypothesis, this study recognizes that individual needs and motivations are dynamic and context-dependent, requiring flexible management strategies. Human resource practices—such as professional development, supportive feedback, fair compensation, and work-family policies—can enhance meaningful work, improving job satisfaction, engagement, and organizational performance (Griep et al., 2025; Engay and Israel, 2025; Sifuna Mayende et al., 2026).

2.2.2. The job satisfaction and employee engagement

Employee engagement reflects employees' psychological and behavioral state at work, manifested in emotional attachment, cognitive involvement, and proactive behaviors (Presbitero et al., 2025). High engagement enhances performance, commitment, and discretionary effort, with positive organizational treatment reinforcing reciprocal engagement (Alferaih, 2021; Jo and Shin, 2025).

In education, teacher engagement reflects dedication to student learning, institutional development, and personal growth (Rahman et al., 2025). It is voluntary, proactive, and intrinsically motivated, and institutions play a critical role in creating supportive environments to foster

engagement (Khatri et al., 2024). Engaged teachers contribute creatively, protect institutional interests, and enhance organizational reputation.

Empirical evidence indicates that job satisfaction is a key antecedent of engagement. Satisfied employees demonstrate stronger initiative and involvement in organizational goals (Park and Gursoy, 2012). In China, teacher engagement encompasses professional responsibility and commitment, influenced by job characteristics, compensation, training, and support, with clear links to job satisfaction (Li et al., 2025).

However, research on employee engagement outside corporate settings remains limited. Empirical studies focusing on Chinese private college teachers are still scarce, and there is a lack of measurement scales specifically designed for private higher education institutions. Studying teachers in private colleges can provide a better understanding of how organizational identity and the workplace environment influence employee engagement. In addition, a supportive and motivating organizational culture can strengthen affective, continuance, and normative commitment, thereby promoting sustainable engagement, innovation, and productivity.

In conclusion, each dimension of employee engagement uniquely contributes to job satisfaction and organizational outcomes, underscoring the importance of engagement-focused management practices in higher education.

Based on the desk review and the results of previous studies that supported the relationship between job satisfaction, meaningful work, and employee engagement, we proposed the model in Fig. 1.

The hypothesis was elaborated on the previous research on the relationship between job satisfaction, meaningful work, and employee engagement of the organization.

H1: Job satisfaction positively affects meaningful work.

H2: Job satisfaction positively affects employee engagement.

H3: Meaningful work positively affects employee engagement.

H4: Meaningful work mediates the relationship between job satisfaction and employee engagement.

The variables that have been dealt with in this study are as follows:

- Independent variable: job satisfaction
- Dependent variable: employee engagement
- Mediating variable: meaningful work

3. Methodology

3.1. Research sample

In selecting the research sample for the questionnaire survey, the confidence level was set at

95%, and the confidence interval was also set at 95%. Based on the sample size estimation guidelines proposed by [Cohen et al. \(2005\)](#), the required sample size was calculated to be 400 faculty members. Accordingly, this study targeted 400 teachers employed at private colleges in Shaanxi Province. The sample was drawn from ten private colleges located in Xi'an, the capital city of Shaanxi Province. These institutions were selected because they are well-established private colleges with comprehensive disciplinary structures and relatively large faculty populations, ensuring adequate representation. The sample was evenly distributed across the ten institutions, with approximately 40 teachers selected from each college. Participants were drawn from faculties in management and humanities, and the diversity of academic backgrounds supports the representativeness of the sample with respect to the target population of private college teachers.

3.2. Research data collection

Data collection was conducted between July 5 and August 12, 2024. The survey was administered electronically using the "Wenjuanxing" online survey platform. A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed to faculty members across the ten selected private colleges. All 400 questionnaires were returned, and after screening for completeness and validity, all responses met the criteria for inclusion in the final analysis, resulting in a valid response rate of 100%. The collected data were analyzed using four standardized and validated questionnaires developed by previous researchers. The use of an online survey platform facilitated efficient data collection while ensuring respondent anonymity and data accuracy.

3.3. Questionnaire selection

Job Satisfaction of Teachers: To measure teachers' job satisfaction, this study adopts the questionnaire developed by [Lester \(1987\)](#). This instrument was selected due to its systematic structure and comprehensive coverage of job satisfaction among teachers. The scale comprises nine classical dimensions representing key factors influencing teachers' job satisfaction, thereby capturing a broad range of teachers' perceptions, attitudes, and evaluative judgments regarding their

work. Its extensive application in prior research further supports its reliability and validity in educational settings.

Meaningful Work: Meaningful work is measured using the Work as Meaning Inventory (WAMI) developed by [Steger et al. \(2012\)](#). This scale was chosen because it provides a multidimensional assessment of meaningful work, encompassing positive meaning, meaning-making through work, and contribution to the greater good. These dimensions comprehensively reflect the psychological experience of work meaning. Given the limited availability of validated instruments for measuring meaningful work in the Chinese context, the WAMI is considered both theoretically robust and suitable for contemporary empirical research.

Employee Engagement: Employee engagement is assessed using the Employee Engagement Scale developed by [Shuck et al. \(2017\)](#). This scale conceptualizes engagement as a multidimensional construct, including emotional, cognitive, and behavioral engagement, which are widely recognized dimensions in the management and organizational behavior literature. The scale has demonstrated strong psychometric properties and has been extensively applied in empirical studies.

All measurement instruments employed in this study have been previously tested and validated. Respondents evaluated each item using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"), ensuring consistency and reliability in data collection.

3.4. Data processing and analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS 24.0 and SmartPLS 4.0.9.9, both widely used statistical software packages in social science research. Descriptive statistical analyses were first performed to summarize respondents' demographic characteristics and to examine the distributional properties of the study's independent, mediating, and dependent variables. All variables were first evaluated for common method bias, reliability, discriminant validity, and correlation analyses to ensure the robustness of the analysis. Subsequently, the relationships among the variables were analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM), and the proposed hypotheses were tested.

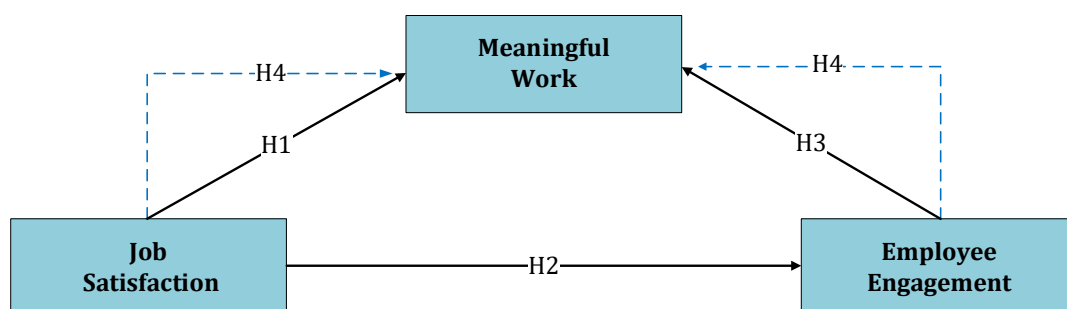


Fig. 1: Structural equation modeling (SEM)

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Participants' demographics

The questionnaire included a section designed to collect respondents' background information in order to better understand their social and demographic characteristics.

From the collected 400 questionnaires, the sample for this study includes 207 (51.8%) male respondents and 193 (48.2%) female respondents. The largest age group was 41–45 years (105 respondents, 26.2%), followed by those aged 31–35 years (76 respondents, 19%), 25–30 years (71 respondents, 17.8%), 36–40 years (65 respondents, 16.2%), 46 years and above (56 respondents, 14%), and under 25 years (27 respondents, 6.8%). Regarding marital status, the majority of respondents were married (266 respondents, 66.5%), followed by single (114 respondents, 28.5%) and divorced respondents (20 respondents, 5%). In terms of educational background, most respondents held a bachelor's degree (253 respondents, 63.2%), followed by master's degrees (100 respondents, 25%), PhDs (31 respondents, 7.8%), and post-PhD qualifications (16 respondents, 4%). [Table 1](#) summarizes the demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Table 1: Background information on the respondents

Type	Indicator	Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	207	51.8%
	Female	193	48.2%
Age	< 25	27	6.8%
	25-30	71	17.8%
	31-35	76	19%
	36-40	65	16.2%
	41-45	105	26.2%
	> 46	56	14%
Marital status	Married	266	66.5%
	Single	114	28.5%
	Divorced	20	5%
Education	Bachelor	253	63.2%
	Master	100	25%
	PhD	31	7.8%
	Post-PhD	16	4%

4.2. Measurement model

4.2.1. KMO and Bartlett's test for sampling adequacy

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure evaluates both the adequacy of the sample size and the strength of relationships among variables. KMO

values between 0.5 and 0.6 are considered weak, 0.7 to 0.8 acceptable, and above 0.9 very good. The overall sample adequacy was assessed, and the results of the KMO and Bartlett's tests are presented in [Table 2](#).

Table 2: Result of KMO and Bartlett's test

Test	Statistic	Value
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy		0.968
Bartlett's test of sphericity	Approx. chi-square	22185.648
	df	4095
	Sig.	0.000

The KMO value of 0.968 indicates excellent sampling adequacy, while Bartlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 22,185.648$, $df = 4095$, $p < 0.001$), confirming that the data were suitable for factor analysis.

4.2.2. Common method bias

The use of self-report scales may introduce common method bias (CMB) into the data collection process. To assess the presence of CMB, a full collinearity assessment method was employed. When the variance inflation factor (VIF) for each construct stays below the suggested cutoff of 3.3, the data are deemed free from common method bias. The inner model's VIF values, as shown in [Table 3](#), the VIF values ranged from 1.000 to 1.433, which are well below the recommended threshold of 3.3, indicating that common method bias is unlikely to be a concern in this study.

Table 3: Findings of collinearity statistics (inner VIF values)

Relationship	VIF
Teachers' job satisfaction → meaningful work	1.000
Teachers' job satisfaction → employee engagement	1.283
Meaningful work → employee engagement	1.433

4.2.3. Reliability analysis of variables

The measurement model was evaluated in terms of reliability and convergent validity using indicator loadings, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE). Cronbach's alpha and CR values exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating satisfactory internal consistency, while AVE values above 0.50 confirmed adequate convergent validity ([Chin, 2010](#)). [Table 4](#) summarizes the results of the validity and reliability analyses.

Table 4: Findings from the reliability analysis of the variable

Variables	Items	Factor loadings	$\alpha (> 0.7)$	CR (> 0.7)	AVE (> 0.5)
Teachers' job satisfaction (TJS)	9	0.833–0.859	0.898	0.924	0.710
Meaningful work (MW)	10	0.739–0.816	0.800	0.878	0.685
Employee engagement (EE)	15	0.783–0.894	0.831	0.882	0.603

4.2.4. Descriptive and correlation analysis

This study employed descriptive statistics to summarize the data's characteristics. The mean

values, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients for each of the variables being studied are shown in [Table 5](#). The mean scores of the constructs range from 3.15 to 3.44. Additionally, the

correlation matrix in Table 5 reveals that Teachers' Job Satisfaction has a moderate and significant positive association with meaningful work ($r = 0.466, p < 0.001$) and employee engagement ($r = 0.528, p < 0.001$). Furthermore, meaningful work shows a strong and significant positive association with employee engagement ($r = 0.618, p < .001$).

Table 5: Findings of descriptive statistics and correlation analysis

Constructs	Mean	SD	TJS	MW	EE
TJS	3.151	0.733	1.000		
MW	3.338	0.813	0.466	1.000	
EE	3.448	0.822	0.528	0.618	1.000

4.2.5. Discriminate validity of measurement variables

The Fornell-Larcker criterion (Fornell and Larcker, 1981) and the heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) (Henseler et al., 2015) were used in this study to assess discriminant validity.

A threshold of 0.85 was applied to assess the HTMT (Heterotrait-Monotrait) ratios, a measure of discriminant validity. As shown in Table 6, all HTMT values were below 0.85, indicating that the constructs are sufficiently distinct. HTMT values are calculated by comparing correlations between different constructs with the average correlations within the same construct. Values below 0.85 are generally interpreted as evidence of good discriminant validity. The results demonstrate that the dimensions measure distinct concepts, supporting the accuracy and reliability of the study.

Table 6: Findings of the HTMT matrix

Constructs	TJS	MW	EE
TJS			
MW	0.511		
EE	0.740	0.733	

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion, which requires the square root of the AVE for each construct to exceed its correlations with other constructs. As shown in Table 7, this condition was met for all constructs, confirming adequate discriminant validity (Henseler et al., 2015).

Table 7: Findings of Fornell-Larcker criteria

Constructs	TJS	MW	EE
TJS	0.842		
MW	0.435	0.802	
EE	0.517	0.584	0.813

4.2.6. Assessment of structural model

To test the hypotheses, we used the structural equation modeling (SEM) method. We examined the correlations between the independent and dependent variables during the analysis. The coefficient of determination (R^2), which indicates the percentage of variance in the dependent variables explained by the independent variables, is used to evaluate the model's explanatory power (Chin,

2010). The structural model was evaluated using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). As reported in Table 8, the coefficient of determination (R^2) indicates that teachers' job satisfaction explains 38.4% of the variance in meaningful work ($R^2 = 0.384$), while teachers' job satisfaction and meaningful work jointly explain 45.7% of the variance in employee engagement ($R^2 = 0.457$). In addition, all path coefficients exceed 0.10, meeting the recommended cutoff value and indicating adequate explanatory power of the model.

According to the findings presented in Table 8, the f^2 effect sizes indicated a small effect of teachers' job satisfaction on meaningful work ($f^2 = 0.020$), a medium effect of teachers' job satisfaction on employee engagement ($f^2 = 0.150$), and a large effect of meaningful work on employee engagement ($f^2 = 0.350$).

It assesses the model's capacity to forecast missing data points. According to the established threshold, a Q^2 value greater than 0 indicates adequate predictive relevance and confirms the absence of blindfolding issues (Geisser, 1974). Table 8 presents the Q^2 values, confirming that all path models demonstrate predictive relevance for their respective endogenous constructs. Specifically, the model demonstrated adequate predictive relevance, with Q^2 values of 0.294 for Meaningful Work and 0.350 for Employee Engagement, both exceeding zero.

Table 8: Findings of assessment of structural model

Path	R^2	f^2	Q^2
TJS → MW	0.384	0.020	0.294
TJS → EE	0.457	0.150	0.350
MW → EE		0.350	

4.3. Hypothesis testing

4.3.1. Direct relationships

To assess the reliability of the research data and the research model, R-Square was calculated, which measures the predictive power of the structural model in PLS analysis. The predictive power of each independent variable was tested by eliminating the dependent variable one by one in a repeated process. The results of the analysis supported all the hypotheses, and all the regression weights were positive and significant ($p < 0.05$). The results of the study are shown in Table 9.

As shown in Table 9, Hypotheses 1-3 were confirmed. The analysis revealed that teachers' job satisfaction exerted a positive and moderate effect on meaningful work ($\beta = 0.435, p < 0.001$), supporting Hypothesis 1. These results suggest that higher levels of job satisfaction are associated with an enhanced sense of meaningful work among employees. Moreover, job satisfaction also demonstrated a positive and moderate impact on employee engagement ($\beta = 0.517, p < 0.001$), supporting Hypothesis 2. This indicates that increases in job satisfaction are likely to promote

greater employee engagement. Additionally, meaningful work was to have positive and significant effects on employee engagement ($\beta = 0.584, p < 0.001$). These findings highlight that employees who perceive their work as meaningful tend to exhibit higher levels of engagement. Therefore, Hypothesis 3

is supported. In summary, employees who find personal significance in their work, who actively construct meaning through their roles, and who are motivated by contributing to the greater good are more likely to be deeply cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally engaged in their work.

Table 9: Research findings in PLS-SEM

Hypothesis	Path	β	SE	t-values	p-values	Hypothesis results
H1	TJS → MW	0.435	0.059	10.833	0.000	Accepted
H2	TJS → EE	0.517	0.067	7.720	0.000	Accepted
H3	MW → EE	0.584	0.039	13.995	0.000	Accepted

β : Standardize beta; SE: Standard error

4.3.2. Mediation effects

One of the main objectives of this study was to examine whether meaningful work (MW) mediates the relationship between teachers' job satisfaction (TJS) and employee engagement (EE). During the PLS analysis, the bootstrap procedure was carried out to statistically evaluate the importance of indirect impacts (Chin, 2010). The results of the indirect effect are presented in Table 10, which confirms that the mediation hypothesis is supported. As shown in Table 10, the results indicate that meaningful work partially mediates the relationship between teachers' job satisfaction and employee engagement, as both the direct and indirect effects remained statistically significant. This suggests that job satisfaction influences employee engagement both directly and indirectly through meaningful work. As the effects of the relevant independent variables were positive and statistically significant at $p < 0.001$, all four hypotheses were supported.

4.4. Discussion

This study examined the relationships among job satisfaction, meaningful work, and employee engagement among teachers in private colleges in Shaanxi Province, China, with particular emphasis on the mediating role of meaningful work. The findings confirm that job satisfaction functions as a foundational antecedent of both meaningful work and employee engagement. More importantly, meaningful work operates as a central explanatory mechanism through which job satisfaction translates into sustained engagement. All hypotheses were

supported, providing robust empirical validation for the proposed structural model.

Consistent with Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), the positive association between job satisfaction and employee engagement suggests that when teachers perceive fairness, adequate rewards, and supportive institutional conditions, they reciprocate with heightened levels of engagement and commitment. In private higher education contexts characterized by market pressures and performance demands, such reciprocal dynamics are particularly salient. However, this study extends Social Exchange Theory by demonstrating that reciprocal engagement is not driven solely by transactional satisfaction. Rather, favorable organizational conditions also shape teachers' perceptions of meaning, purpose, and social contribution. In this sense, job satisfaction enhances engagement both directly and indirectly by strengthening meaningful work (Gazi et al., 2025).

The significant effect of job satisfaction on meaningful work underscores that meaningfulness is not purely intrinsic but is co-constructed through organizational practices and relational experiences. Supportive management, fair evaluation systems, and respectful professional environments enable teachers to interpret their work as valuable and socially significant. This finding advances prior literature by positioning meaningful work as an emergent property of institutional context rather than solely an individual disposition. Meaningful work thus represents a psychologically embedded yet structurally influenced resource that connects organizational systems to individual engagement outcomes (Rosso et al., 2010).

Table 10: Findings of mediation analysis

Hypothesis	Path	Indirect effects	SE	t-values	p-values	2.5% LL	97.5% UL	Hypothesis results
H4	TJS → MW → EE	0.178	0.029	6.897	0.000	0.148	0.261	Accepted

Furthermore, the strong relationship between meaningful work and employee engagement highlights the centrality of value-based and identity-related processes in sustaining teachers' emotional, cognitive, and behavioral investment. Teachers who perceive their work as meaningful report stronger professional identity, enhanced self-efficacy, and deeper organizational belonging, which collectively reinforce engagement (Kahn, 1990; Steger et al., 2012). The mediating role identified in this study

suggests that job satisfaction alone may produce compliance or short-term motivation, whereas meaningful work transforms satisfaction into enduring, self-sustaining engagement. In other words, meaning amplifies and stabilizes the motivational impact of satisfaction.

Career-stage analyses provide additional nuance. Engagement appears to decline during the initial one to two years of employment, likely due to role ambiguity, workload intensity, and early-career

adjustment pressures. As teachers gain experience, develop institutional familiarity, and achieve greater professional stability, engagement levels tend to recover and increase (Qing and Hongyu, 2025). Educational background further differentiates these dynamics. Teachers with higher academic qualifications demonstrate stronger expectations for meaningful and intellectually stimulating work, suggesting that advanced qualifications heighten sensitivity to value alignment, autonomy, and developmental opportunities. These findings emphasize that engagement strategies must be differentiated across career stages and academic profiles (Michaelson, 2021).

These findings are particularly salient within the context of Chinese private higher education. Compared with public universities, private colleges often operate under stronger market pressures, performance demands, and resource constraints, which may undermine teachers' job satisfaction and professional identity. The results suggest that improving material conditions alone is insufficient to sustain engagement. Instead, private colleges must also address teachers' psychological needs by fostering meaningful teaching and research experiences, strengthening professional recognition, and aligning individual values with institutional missions (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017).

From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the importance of fair and transparent management practices, supportive leadership, peer collaboration, and clear career development pathways. Structured onboarding and targeted support are especially critical for early-career faculty, while opportunities for professional growth and recognition are essential for sustaining engagement among experienced teachers (Engay and Israel, 2025). Across all career stages, cultivating a supportive work environment and providing resources to manage work-related stress can significantly enhance job satisfaction, meaningful work, and employee engagement.

5. Conclusions

This study examined the relationships among teachers' job satisfaction, meaningful work, and employee engagement in private colleges in Shaanxi Province, China, with particular focus on the mediating role of meaningful work. The findings indicate that job satisfaction positively influences both meaningful work and employee engagement, while meaningful work partially mediates the relationship between job satisfaction and engagement. These results suggest that job satisfaction enhances engagement not only directly but also indirectly by fostering teachers' perceptions of work meaning.

The study contributes to the literature by integrating meaningful work into the job satisfaction and engagement framework within the relatively underexplored context of Chinese private higher education. Drawing on Social Exchange Theory, the

research highlights the role of reciprocal relationships and psychological rewards in shaping teachers' work attitudes and behaviors. The findings emphasize that, beyond financial incentives, value-driven and meaning-oriented experiences are critical for sustaining teacher engagement.

From a practical perspective, the results suggest that private colleges should implement holistic faculty management strategies that promote both job satisfaction and meaningful work. Key approaches include fair and transparent compensation, supportive leadership, professional development opportunities, recognition of academic contributions, and work-life balance policies, each of which reinforces teachers' sense of purpose and engagement.

Importantly, this study demonstrates that meaningful work is not merely an outcome but can be intentionally cultivated. Leadership practices, recognition systems, autonomy support, and structured career development pathways all contribute to creating meaningful work experiences. Private colleges that move beyond transactional incentives and invest in purpose-driven management are better positioned to retain committed and engaged faculty, thereby supporting sustainable faculty development and organizational effectiveness.

This study has several limitations. First, its scope is restricted to private colleges in Shaanxi Province, China, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, although employee engagement is a multidimensional construct, this research focused only on the three dimensions proposed by Kahn (1990) to maintain a manageable framework. Additionally, job satisfaction among private college teachers is influenced by numerous interrelated factors, with supervision identified as particularly critical. Future research should adopt a broader framework to examine hierarchical relationships among institutional, organizational, and individual factors to guide more effective management strategies. To enhance teacher job satisfaction, institutions should adopt multifaceted approaches. Refining supervision mechanisms to ensure transparency, fairness, and professionalism can significantly improve satisfaction, as can creating multiple channels for faculty feedback. Fostering positive colleague relationships through team-building activities, optimizing work environments, implementing fair evaluation and promotion systems, and providing mental health support can further enhance well-being. Administrators' humanistic care and attention to faculty development also strengthen teachers' sense of belonging. Theoretically, this study contributes by examining the relationships among job satisfaction, employee engagement, and meaningful work, moving beyond prior research that often analyzed factors in isolation. It employs a comprehensive set of nine job satisfaction dimensions and a distinct engagement scale, offering a nuanced understanding and addressing limitations in cross-cultural

applicability. Moreover, by integrating concepts from organizational behavior, psychology, and education, the study provides an interdisciplinary framework that illuminates the interplay between satisfaction, engagement, and work meaning.

Future research should expand the scope to other regions and institutional types, explore additional mediating or moderating variables, and consider longitudinal designs to capture dynamic changes in teacher engagement and satisfaction. Overall, this study advances both theoretical understanding and practical guidance for improving faculty satisfaction and engagement in private higher education.

List of abbreviations

AVE	Average variance extracted
β	Standardized beta coefficient
CMB	Common method bias
CR	Composite reliability
df	Degrees of freedom
EE	Employee engagement
HTMT	Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio
KMO	Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin
MW	Meaningful work
PLS-SEM	Partial least squares structural equation modeling
Q^2	Predictive relevance statistic
R^2	Coefficient of determination
SE	Standard error
SEM	Structural equation modeling
SET	Social exchange theory
Sig.	Significance
SPSS	Statistical package for the social sciences
TJS	Teachers' job satisfaction
VIF	Variance inflation factor
WAMI	Work as meaning inventory

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Compliance with ethical standards

Ethical considerations

This research considers private college teachers' privacy. In the application, it is necessary to strictly abide by ethical standards to ensure that the rights and interests of the respondents are not harmed. When designing and implementing survey questionnaires, researchers should pay special attention to ethical issues such as privacy protection, voluntary participation, and data protection to enhance the legitimacy and morality of survey research.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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