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The Mediating Role of Job Satisfaction: Exploring How Psychological Capital and Emotional Intelligence Influence Work Engagement among Chinese Vocational College Teachers

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Abstract

Purpose: The research delves into the mediating effect of job satisfaction on the associations between psychological capital (PsyCap), emotional intelligence (EI), and work engagement among Chinese vocational college teachers. **Design/methodology/approach:** Grounded in the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model and Social Exchange Theory, we tested a theoretical framework by surveying 509 full-time college teachers in Yunnan Province, China. Data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). **Findings:** Results revealed that: (1) PsyCap (specifically hope) and EI (specifically use of emotion and others' emotion appraisal) positively predict job satisfaction; (2) PsyCap (specifically hope) and EI (specifically use of emotion) positively predict work engagement; (3) job satisfaction positively predicts work engagement; (4) job satisfaction partially mediates the PsyCap- work engagement relationship and the EI- work engagement relationship. **Originality/value:** This study makes three key contributions to existing knowledge. First, it breaks from the traditional approach of treating PsyCap and EI as holistic constructs, instead unpacking their subdimensions to identify that only "hope" (PsyCap) and "use of emotion/others' emotion appraisal" (EI) significantly influence job satisfaction and work engagement—highlighting the need for context-specific analysis of latent constructs. Second, it validates the applicability of the JD-R Model and Social Exchange Theory in China's vocational education context,

extending the theories' utility beyond Western settings and university education. Third, it addresses a research gap by focusing on vocational college teachers (a group understudied despite their importance to China's vocational education strategy), providing the first empirical evidence of how PsyCap, EI, and job satisfaction interact to shape their work engagement.
Keywords: Psychological Capital, Emotional Intelligence, Job Satisfaction, Work Engagement, Vocational College Teachers, PLS-SEM, China

Introduction

Higher education has expanded significantly in China over the past two decades, more than anyplace else in the world (Zeng, 2024). As a result, Chinese higher education has seen significant change over the past few years in a range of aspects, including tuition costs, faculty makeup, funding distribution, pedagogy, and technology (Meng & Sun, 2019). However, Chinese college institutions are facing problems of shortage of number and education background of college teachers (Wang et al., 2021), and lack of research platforms (Ashraf et al., 2022). At the same time, college teachers must undertake both teaching tasks and cope with research assessments (Zhao et al., 2024), but their research output capacity is weak (Wang et al., 2021). In light of this, teachers 'engagement to their work can help to address the challenges currently faced by both institutions and their faculty member. Also, college teachers' engagement becomes especially crucial, since it influences students' and college teachers' performance, the institution's overall standing, as well as families, and even society (Solís García et al., 2021).

Work engagement, described as that satisfying, invigorating psychological state tied to our job, which is marked by enthusiasm, commitment, and complete absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2002), is fast becoming a key factor that influences employees' well-being, institutional effectiveness, and educational outcomes for students (Mérida-López et al., 2023; Solís García et al., 2021). In China, the rapid expansion of higher education—particularly vocational education—has transformed the professional landscape for teachers, introducing unprecedented challenges such as resource scarcity, heavy workloads, and intense performance evaluations (Han et al., 2020; Xu, 2023). A phenomenon among part of Chinese vocational college teachers is "lying flat", a state of work disengagement characterized by reduced effort, lowered career aspirations, and passive coping with job demands (Lu & Liu, 2023). This disengagement not only undermines teachers' professional development but also threatens the quality of vocational education, which plays a pivotal role in China's skilled workforce development strategy (Yin, 2025).

Against this backdrop, identifying antecedents of work engagement and their underlying mechanisms has become a priority for researchers and policymakers. Two key personal resources—psychological capital (PsyCap) and emotional intelligence (EI)—have gained attention for their potential to enhance work engagement. PsyCap, a positive psychological framework that includes hope, resilience, optimism, and self-efficacy (Luthans et al., 2007), has been shown to shield individuals from the adverse effects of job stress and to foster beneficial outcomes in the workplace (Xu, 2023; Tian et al., 2023). Similarly, EI—defined as the capacity to perceive, understand, regulate, and utilize emotions (Mayer & Salovey, 1997)—enables teachers to navigate interpersonal dynamics (e.g., student-teacher

interactions, colleague collaboration) and manage work-related stress, thereby fostering engagement (Yang, 2022; Mérida-López et al., 2023).

However, the link of PsyCap, EI, with work engagement might not direct. Job satisfaction—an individual's personal assessment of their work (Robbins, 1988)—has been proposed as a critical mediator. Personal resources (e.g., PsyCap, EI), rooted in the JD-R Model, enhance job satisfaction by fulfilling psychological needs (e.g., autonomy, competence), which in turn drives work engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Social Exchange Theory further suggests that when educators find their jobs particularly fulfilling, they reciprocate with a higher level of work engagement to "repay" the positive psychological and material benefits derived from their work (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Jiao et al., 2022).

In the face of expanding interest in PsyCap, EI, and workplace commitment, key knowledge voids persist. First, most studies focus on university teachers or K-12 educators, with limited attention to vocational college teachers—a group facing unique challenges (e.g., lower academic resources, weaker research support) that may shape the relationships between these variables (Xiao, 2022). Second, existing research on the mediating role of job satisfaction often treats PsyCap and EI as holistic constructs, neglecting the differential effects of their subdimensions. For example, hope (a dimension of PsyCap) may be more influential for vocational teachers than resilience, given their need for positive expectations amid resource constraints (Yunus, 2020; Batel & Nirit, 2023). Similarly, EI dimensions like others' emotion appraisal may be more critical for teachers than self-emotion regulation, as teaching involves frequent interpersonal interactions (Francis et al., 2022; Alavi & Mortazavi, 2023). Third, most studies are conducted in Western contexts, and the generalizability of findings to Chinese vocational colleges—shaped by collectivist culture and administrative-oriented management—remains untested (Zeng & Xu, 2020). Therefore, this study will address these gaps by: (1) testing the direct effects of PsyCap and EI on job satisfaction; (2) investigating job satisfaction as a mediator between PsyCap/EI and work engagement; and (3) contextualizing findings within China's unique educational and cultural landscape. By bridging JD-R theory and Social Exchange Theory, we aim to provide a nuanced understanding of resource-driven work engagement in high-pressure, collectivist settings.

Research Model and Hypothesis Development

Anchored in JD-R and social-exchange logics, we unpack which facets of PsyCap and EI galvanize satisfaction and engagement among Chinese vocational-college teachers, positioning job satisfaction as the pivotal mediator.

Theoretical Foundations

This study is grounded in two complementary theoretical frameworks: the Job Demands-Resources Model and Social Exchange Theory. Together, they provide a robust foundation for understanding how personal resources—namely PsyCap and EI—influence work engagement both directly and through the mediating mechanism of job satisfaction.

Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model

The JD-R Model holds that every job has two fundamental elements: job demands, such as heavy workload and time pressure, and job resources, such as social support and personal assets like PsyCap and EI (Demerouti et al., 2001). Work engagement is nurtured by job

resources through two key avenues: first, through intrinsic motivation, which fulfills fundamental psychological desires—like the need for autonomy, competence, and connection; second, by mitigating the adverse effects of job-related demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). In this study, PsyCap and EI are conceptualized as personal resources that enhance job satisfaction (a psychological outcome of resource fulfillment), which in turn drives work engagement.

Social Exchange Theory

Blau's (1964) Social Exchange Theory underscores the mutual interactions between individuals and their institutions. When teachers perceive their work as satisfying (high job satisfaction), they view this as a "benefit" from the organization and reciprocate with greater work engagement (e.g., more effort in teaching, higher commitment to professional development; Eisenberger et al., 2001; Oubibi et al., 2022). This mutual relationship accounts for how job satisfaction serves as an intermediary between personal assets (PsyCap, EI) and work engagement.

Research Model

Based on the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model and Social Exchange Theory (SET), this study empirically assesses the theoretical framework presented in Figure 1.

As shown in Figure 1, the theoretical framework posits that PsyCap (and its subdimensions), and EI (and their subdimensions) positively affect job satisfaction. In turn, higher job satisfaction promotes work engagement and functions as the mediator connecting PsyCap (and its subdimensions) and EI (and their subdimensions) to work engagement.

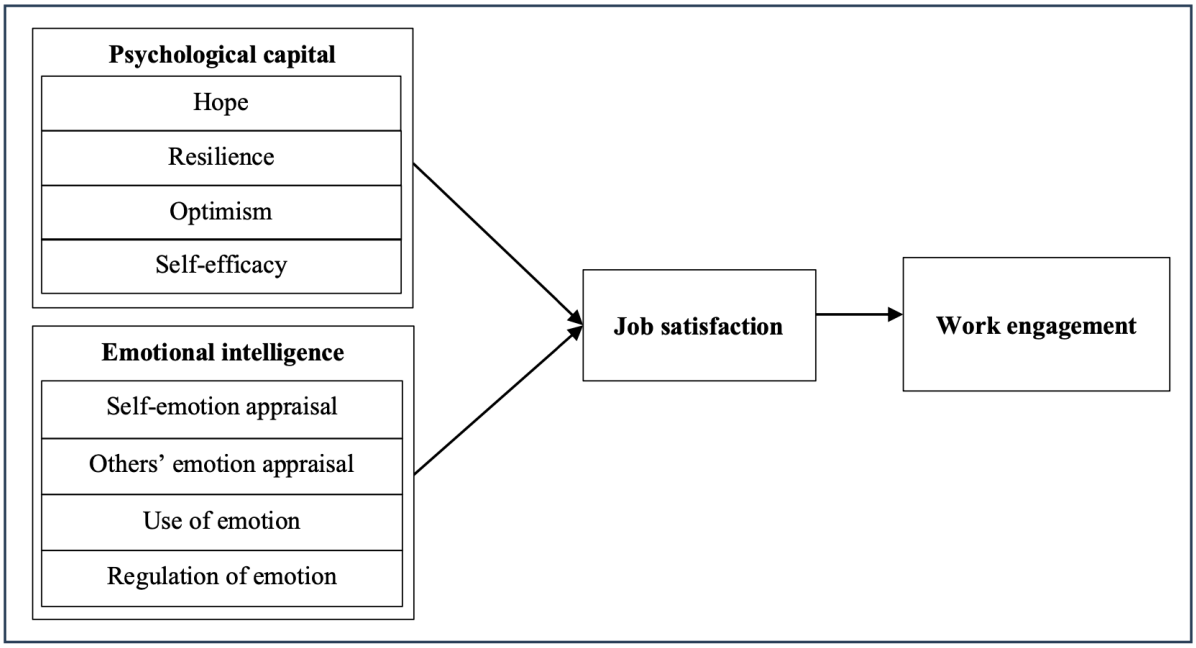

Figure 1. Theoretical Framework

Hypothesis Development

As illustrated in Figure 1, this section deduces a set of testable hypotheses. These hypotheses specify the direct effects of the core constructs—PsyCap and EI, along with their respective

subdimensions—on job satisfaction and work engagement, as well as the proposed mediating role of job satisfaction.

Psychological Capital and Job Satisfaction

PsyCap denotes an individual's positive psychological qualities and serves as a mental resource that fosters positive self-cognition (Luthans et al., 2008). PsyCap's four dimensions—self-efficacy, optimism, resilience, and hope—are widely recognized (Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017; Wirawan et al., 2020). Self-efficacy is employees' belief in their ability to meet challenges, driving effort (Luthans et al., 2007). Hope is the belief in achieving objectives, motivating varied rewards pursuit (Luthans et al., 2007; Tang, 2021). Optimism predicts job performance and well-being (Rand et al., 2020). Resilience aids in quick recovery and effective communication under stress and conflict (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004).

For vocational college teachers, PsyCap helps mitigate the stress of resource scarcity and heavy workloads, thereby improving satisfaction. Empirical studies support this: Xu (2023) found that PsyCap positively predicts job satisfaction among Chinese university teachers, while Aydin Sünbül and Aslan Gördesli's (2021) reported a similar relationship among Turkish university faculty. At the same time, the JD-R model suggests PsyCap positively impacts job satisfaction (Xu, 2023). This psychological state, linked to positive psychology, is characterized by self-efficacy, optimism, hope, and resilience (Luthans et al., 2004). These attributes enable individuals to recover from stress and enhance job satisfaction (Paliga et al., 2022).

Among PsyCap's subdimensions, hope as a PsyCap dimension enhances job satisfaction across various fields, including faculty (Batel & Nirit, 2023; Nazia, 2024), professional colleges (Yunus, 2020), and healthcare (Singh, 2023), as well as in sports science (Nazia, 2024), according to recent studies. Resilience within PsyCap positively correlates with job satisfaction across various fields, enhancing performance and reducing burnout, particularly for special education teachers (Chen, 2020) and academic faculty (Asfahani, 2024). Optimism in PsyCap is linked to higher job satisfaction across sectors (e.g. Nazia, 2024; Caponnetto et al., 2022). Studies show optimism boosts job satisfaction, working conditions, and sense of value, emphasizing its role in employee job satisfaction and work environment well-being (Burke, 2017). Research increasingly links PsyCap's self-efficacy to job satisfaction. For instance, Aydin and Aslan (2021) theorized that self-efficacy predicts teacher job satisfaction via prosocial behaviors.

Drawing from the theoretical and empirical underpinnings, our hypothesis posits:
H1: There is a strong and statistically meaningful link between PsyCap and job satisfaction for college teachers in Chinese vocational education system.
H1a: Hope (a subdimension of PsyCap) positively and significantly influences job satisfaction.
H1b: Resilience (a subdimension of PsyCap) exerts a positive and notable effect on job satisfaction.
H1c: Optimism (a subdimension of PsyCap) exerts a positive and notable effect on job satisfaction.
H1d: Self-efficacy (a subdimension of PsyCap) exerts a positive and notable effect on job satisfaction.

Emotional Intelligence and Job Satisfaction

EI refers to the ability to accurately identify, understand, regulate, and respond to emotions to promote personal development (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). EI research explores varying conceptualizations of its structure. Primarily, EI is viewed as either a multifaceted skill (Bar-On, 1997), encompassing intrapersonal, interpersonal, stress management, adaptability, and well-being components, or as a mental ability (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). This dichotomy influences dimensional structures and measurement tools. Wong and Law (2002), adopting the mental ability perspective within a Chinese context, developed the WLEIS, categorizing EI into self-emotion appraisal, others' emotion appraisal, emotion utilization, and emotion regulation.

EI enables teachers to manage emotions—both their own and others'—which enhances job satisfaction by improving interpersonal relationships and reducing stress (Chen & Xie, 2025). Specifically, high EI workers can swiftly manage negative emotions, enhancing job satisfaction (Pekkan & Bicer, 2022). Puertas Molero et al. (2019) argued that EI is a personal job resource according to the JD-R model, and there is a strong correlation between personal job resources and several aspects of psychological well-being, so they suggest that EI may be a predictor of job satisfaction. For vocational college teachers, who interact closely with students (e.g., guiding practical training) and colleagues (e.g., collaborating on curriculum design), EI is particularly valuable.

Among EI's subdimensions, others' emotion appraisal and use of emotion are most relevant. Others' emotion appraisal helps teachers understand students' learning needs and colleagues' collaboration preferences, fostering a harmonious work environment (Francis et al., 2022). Use of emotion enables teachers to motivate themselves (e.g., using positive emotions to cope with teaching stress) and students (e.g., using enthusiasm to engage learners), thereby enhancing satisfaction (Alavi & Mortazavi, 2023; Syarif et al., 2024). In contrast, self-emotion appraisal (understanding one's own emotions) and regulation of emotion (controlling one's emotions) may have weaker effects, as vocational teachers' satisfaction is more strongly tied to external interactions than internal emotional management (Gugulothu et al., 2024; Herdiman & Tirtoprojo, 2024).

Drawing from the theoretical and empirical underpinnings, our hypothesis posits:
H2: There is a strong and statistically meaningful link between EI and job satisfaction for college teachers in Chinese vocational education system.
H2a: Self-emotion appraisal (a subdimension of EI) exerts a positive and notable effect on job satisfaction.
H2b: Others' emotion appraisal (a subdimension of EI) exerts a positive and notable effect on job satisfaction.
H2c: Use of emotion (a subdimension of EI) exerts a positive and notable effect on job satisfaction.
H2d: Regulation of emotion (a subdimension of EI) exerts a positive and notable effect on job satisfaction.

Psychological Capital and Work Engagement

Work engagement represents a holistic and affirmative emotional and cognitive condition associated with work. It embodies a robust sense of identity combined with heightened

energy, sustaining concentration while also displaying traits of both determination and adaptability (Schaufeli, 2002).

Both empirical data and theoretical frameworks indicate a significant positive link between psychological capital and work engagement (e.g. Singh & Dhoopar, 2023; Zhang et al., 2023) Employees with high PsyCap tend to feel more vigor, dedication, and absorption, as their positive psychological resources buffer stress, foster motivation, and promote proactive behaviors, such as work engagement (Saleem et al., 2022). Furthermore, PsyCap can serve as a psychological reservoir that energizes employees, enabling them to navigate work challenges effectively (Iqbal et al., 2024). By cultivating PsyCap, organizations can expect higher work engagement among employees, which in turn boosts performance and decreases turnover (Tetteh et al., 2022). Additionally, Social Exchange Theory supplements this logic: high PsyCap levels in teachers tend to enhance their perception of their job as significant (e.g., hope for career growth, optimism about student success) and thus develop higher work engagement (Su & Abd Rani, 2025). In return for this positive psychological experience, they reciprocate with greater work engagement (e.g., more vigor in teaching, deeper absorption in tasks)—aligning with the theory's "mutual benefit" principle (Mvana, 2025).

The subdimensions of PsyCap are integral to fostering work engagement. Each component contributes uniquely to an employee's capacity to remain energized and committed to their work. For instance, hope and optimism facilitate goal setting and perseverance, while efficacy and resilience bolster confidence and adaptability, all of which underpin sustained engagement (Nasreen et al., 2024). Also, employees displaying robust self-efficacy tend to tackle tasks confidently, persevere during difficulties, and sustain interest, thereby bolstering energy and commitment (Bandura, 2023). While resilience empowers workers to recover from challenges, mitigating burnout and fostering continued engagement amid difficult situations (Gabriel & Aguinis, 2022).

Drawing from the theoretical and empirical underpinnings, our hypothesis posits:
H3: PsyCap exerts a positive, statistically significant effect on work engagement in Chinese vocational college teachers.
H3a: Hope (a subdimension of PsyCap) enhances and strengthens work engagement.
H3b: Resilience (a subdimension of PsyCap) enhances and strengthens work engagement.
H3c: Optimism (a subdimension of PsyCap) enhances and strengthens work engagement.
H4d: Self-efficacy (a subdimension of PsyCap) enhances and strengthens work engagement.

Emotional Intelligence and Work Engagement
Research indicates a strong link between emotional intelligence and a person's enthusiasm for their job. Those who possess a high level of emotional intelligence are generally known for their abundant energy, unwavering commitment, and deep focus on their professional duties. This relationship can be attributed to several underlying mechanisms. Emotionally intelligent employees are adept at managing stress and emotional challenges, which fosters resilience and sustained energy levels—core aspects of vigor (Khan et al., 2017). Their capacity to understand and regulate emotions also facilitates positive interactions with colleagues, enhancing social support and workplace harmony, which in turn bolsters dedication (Zhang, 2024). Moreover, EI empowers people to derive purpose and contentment from their duties, fostering greater engagement and involvement in professional endeavors

(Extremera et al., 2018). At the same time, emotional intelligence plays a crucial role in shaping effective coping mechanisms and adaptive behaviors, thereby lowering the chances of experiencing burnout and withdrawal (Vetbuje & Olaleye, 2022). The JD-R framework considers emotional intelligence to be a personal resource at work that helps alleviate job demands, along with the subsequent psychological and physical stresses (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). In the long run, this can lead to more positive attitudes toward work, like higher levels of work engagement.

Sub dimensions of EI reveal that those with a strong self-emotion assessment excel at stress management and task concentration, which in turn enhances their work engagement (Lang & Saurage-Altenloh, 2023). Others' emotion appraisal refers to the capacity to recognize and comprehend other people's feelings. This skill is particularly important in a work setting, as it enables employees to build stronger relationships with their colleagues and supervisors (Wen et al., 2020). While Employees skilled at managing their emotions tend to remain motivated and engaged in their work (Lang & Saurage-Altenloh, 2023). Finally, employee's adept at managing their feelings excel at handling job-related stress and sustaining emotional equilibrium, thereby enhancing their overall work engagement (Hung et al., 2022).

Drawing from the theoretical and empirical underpinnings, our hypothesis posits:
H4: EI exerts a positive, statistically significant effect on work engagement in Chinese vocational college teachers.
H4a: Self-emotion appraisal (a subdimension of EI) enhances and strengthens work engagement.
H4b: Others' emotion appraisal (a subdimension of EI) enhances and strengthens work engagement.
H4c: Use of emotion (a subdimension of EI) enhances and strengthens work engagement.
H4d: Regulation of emotion (a subdimension of EI) enhances and strengthens work engagement.

Job Satisfaction and Work Engagement
Robbins' (1988) definition of job satisfaction is widely accepted and will guide this study. It views job satisfaction as employee's subjective perception of their employment. While work engagement represents a holistic and affirmative emotional and cognitive condition associated with work. It embodies a robust sense of identity combined with heightened energy, sustaining concentration while also displaying traits of both determination and adaptability (Schaufeli et al., 2002).

Recent studies have shed new light on the dynamic relationship between work engagement and job satisfaction (González-Gancedo et al., 2019; Xu et al., 2023). Traditionally defined as a positive emotional response to work. (Fasbender et al., 2019), job satisfaction was initially considered an outcome of work engagement (Hall, 1997), though this relationship remains debated (Kim et al., 2021; Saks & Gruman, 2014). Grounded in the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), job satisfaction is also increasingly recognized as an antecedent to work engagement (Rayton & Yalabik, 2014). The JD-R model also suggests that supportive environments foster job satisfaction, thus boosting work engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), a view supported by recent findings (Shabane et al., 2022). Conversely, dissatisfaction can lead to disengagement (Ye et al., 2018). Social Exchange Theory supports

this, positing that experience positive emotions (e.g., pride, satisfaction) that motivate them to invest more energy and effort in their work (González-Gancedo et al., 2019; Xu et al., 2023). Consequently, it is hypothesized that job satisfaction is positively associated with work engagement. Empirical research supports this: Kim et al. (2021) showed job satisfaction predicts higher levels of work engagement among Korean teachers, and Shabane et al. (2022) found a similar pattern in African educational institutions.

Drawing from the theoretical and empirical underpinnings, our hypothesis posits:
H5: Job satisfaction positively and significantly influences work engagement among Chinese vocational college teachers.

Mediating Role of Job Satisfaction
Wirawan et al.'s (2020) research within an Indonesian state-owned enterprise uniquely identified job satisfaction as a mediator between psychological capital (PsyCap) and work engagement. Prior studies have linked PsyCap positively with job satisfaction (Luthans et al., 2007; Sünbül & Gördesli, 2021; Han et al., 2022) and shown PsyCap as a predictor of work engagement (Luthans et al., 2006; Singh et al., 2023; Xu, 2023). Despite Wirawan et al.'s (2020) claim that job satisfaction seemingly acted as a partial mediator in the PsyCap- work engagement connection, their study only examined PsyCap in its entirety. They did not delve into how the individual components of PsyCap relate to work engagement through the mediation of job satisfaction. However, empirical evidence demonstrates a favorable correlation between hope (Yunus, 2020; Batel & Nirit, 2023; Nazia, 2024), resilience (Natalia & Julius, 2024), optimism (Nazia, 2024), self-efficacy and work engagement (Endah et al., 2024), and job satisfaction.

Butakor et al. (2020) uniquely linked EI, job satisfaction, and work engagement, but assessed overall EI, not its specific dimensions. While research suggests self-emotion appraisal (Gugulothu et al., 2024), assessment of others' emotions (Li, 2024), use of emotion (Alavi & Mortazavi, 2023; Syarif et al., 2024), regulation of emotion (Herdiman., 2024) positively relates to job satisfaction. Therefore, this study expect job satisfaction will mediate the relationship between EI and work engagement among Chinese college teachers.

Grounded in the JD-R Model and Social Exchange Theory, job satisfaction is proposed to act as a mediator between PsyCap, EI, and work engagement. In particular, PsyCap and EI supply personal resources that help individuals meet job demands and satisfy psychological needs, which in turn boosts job satisfaction. When teachers feel highly satisfied with their jobs, they are more likely to repay that investment by showing increased work engagement.

Drawing from the theoretical and empirical underpinnings, our hypothesis posits:
H6: Job satisfaction serves as a mediator in the connection between PsyCap and vocational college teachers' engagement in their work.
H6a: Job satisfaction serves as a mediator in the connection between hope (a subdimension of PsyCap) and vocational college teachers' engagement in their work.
H6b: Job satisfaction serves as a mediator in the connection between resilience (a subdimension of PsyCap) and vocational college teachers' engagement in their work.
H6c: Job satisfaction serves as a mediator in the connection between optimism (a subdimension of PsyCap) and vocational college teachers' engagement in their work.

H6d: Job satisfaction serves as a mediator in the connection between self-efficacy (a subdimension of PsyCap) and vocational college teachers' engagement in their work.
H7: Job satisfaction serves as a mediator in the connection between EI and vocational college teachers' engagement in their work.
H7a: Job satisfaction serves as a mediator in the connection between self-emotion appraisal (a subdimension of EI) and vocational college teachers' engagement in their work.
H7b: Job satisfaction serves as a mediator in the connection between others' emotion appraisal (a subdimension of EI) and vocational college teachers' engagement in their work.
H7c: Job satisfaction serves as a mediator in the connection between use of emotion (a subdimension of EI) and vocational college teachers' engagement in their work.
H7d: Job satisfaction serves as a mediator in the connection between regulation of emotion (a subdimension of EI) and vocational college teachers' engagement in their work.

Methods

To empirically test the hypothesized model and the proposed relationships, this study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional research design. The following sections detail the methodological approach, encompassing the participant selection criteria, data collection procedures, measurement instruments, and analytical strategies utilized to ensure a rigorous examination of the research questions.

Participants and Procedures

This research employed a cross-sectional quantitative methodology, well-suited for investigating variable correlations at a single temporal juncture (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). Purposive sampling was used, as a complete list of vocational college teachers in Yunnan was unavailable. To gather the data, a survey instrument was employed, since it offers a practical way to reach a broad participant pool and facilitates the assessment of underlying psychological attributes—such as PsyCap and EI—through established measurement tools (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

The target population was full-time teachers at public vocational colleges in Yunnan Province, China. Yunnan was selected because it is a less developed region with significant gaps in educational resources, making it representative of the challenges faced by vocational colleges in western China (Zeng et al., 2022). Using G*Power 3.1, we calculated the minimum sample size required for PLS-SEM: with an alpha level of 0.05, power of 0.95, medium effect size (f^2=0.15), and 4 predictors (PsyCap, EI, job satisfaction, control variables), the minimum sample size was 129. To account for potential invalid responses, we used Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table, which recommends a sample size of 375 for a population of 14,000 (the data are sourced from the total sum of the number of college teachers published on the official websites of all 44 college institutions in Yunnan province). We distributed 600 questionnaires to ensure an adequate sample.

We contacted 44 public vocational colleges in Yunnan, and 13 agreed to participate. Questionnaires were distributed via "Wenjuanxing" (a popular Chinese survey platform) between May and July 2024. Participants were briefed on the study's aims, privacy safeguards, and their right to participate voluntarily.

After excluding incomplete or invalid responses (e.g., those with straight-line answers or unrealistic response times), 509 valid questionnaires were retained for analysis. Among the effective participants, 67.8% are female, and 32.2% are male. In terms of age, those aged 21-30 account for 20.6%, 31-40 account for 46.4%, 41-50 account for 22.4%, 51-60 account for 7.7%, and those over 60 account for 2.9%. Regarding education, 35.2% of the participants hold a bachelor's degree, 63.9% hold a master's degree, and 1% hold a doctorate.

Measures

All the scales were derived from established, reliable tools and then translated into Chinese through a back-translation process (Brislin, 1980). Each item utilized a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ("Strongly Disagree") to 5 ("Strongly Agree").

In the study, PsyCap was gauged with the 12-item CPC-12 scale crafted by Lorenz and colleagues (2016). This comprehensive tool breaks down into four key areas: hope, resilience, optimism, and self-efficacy, each represented by three questions. For the EI, the Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS), as introduced by Wong and Law (2002), was applied. It's structured with four sections: self-emotion appraisal, others' emotion appraisal, use of emotion, and regulation of emotion, with four items each. To measure job satisfaction, the 20-item Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ), developed by Weiss et al. (1967), was utilized. This questionnaire evaluates general contentment with various job aspects, including duties, compensation, and management, with two items scored in reverse. Finally, work engagement was evaluated through the 16-item Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES), as created by Schaufeli et al. (2006). It's segmented into three components: vigor, dedication, and absorption, with six, five, and five items respectively, with one item scored in reverse.

Control Variables

Based on prior research (Qiu, 2020; Tang, 2021), we controlled for demographic variables that may influence work engagement: age (years), gender (1 = male, 2 = female), educational background (1 = Bachelor's, 2 = Master's, 3 = PhD), and work experience (years). These variables were incorporated into the model to control for potential confounding.

Data Analysis

Data analysis employed SPSS 27.0 for initial data checks and SmartPLS 3.3.5 for PLS-SEM. SPSS was used for missing values (imputed with EM) and outlier handling. SmartPLS was applied to evaluate both measurement and structural models, testing mediating effects with bootstrapping and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals.

Results

This study utilized a two-phase strategy to analyze the measurement model, following the methodology established by Fassott et al. (2016). A systematic two-step process for using PLS-SEM in data analysis was proposed by Hair et al. (2014). The initial step entails examining the measurement model to determine the reliability and validity of the constructs involved. This is succeeded by an assessment of the structural model, which analyzes the path coefficients, the coefficient of determination, and the predictive relevance of each exogenous construct on the endogenous ones (Hair et al., 2014).

Measurement Model Assessment

To provide a foundation for the subsequent analyses, the key aim of evaluating the measurement model is to confirm the constructs' validity and reliability (Hair et al., 2012). Throughout the process, the researchers conducted evaluations on the metrics linked to the theoretical constructs, analyzing their dependability, convergent, and discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2014).

Alpha Cronbach (α) and Composite Reliability (CR) were utilized for internal consistency assessment. As shown in Table 1, all Cronbach's Alpha scores were above 0.70, and all CR scores surpassed 0.80—indicating high internal consistency (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994; Hair et al., 2017). The evaluation of convergent validity relied on factor loadings, as well as the Average Variance Extracted (AVE). As per Hair et al. (2014), all factor loadings surpassed the threshold of 0.60. Additionally, the AVE values, according to Fornell and Larcker (1981), all hovered above 0.50, which means that each construct accounted for over 50% of the variance in its respective indicators. However, some items belonging to work engagement have a factor loading below 0.7. Hair et al. (2014) asserted that indicators exhibiting external loadings within the range of 0.4 to 0.7 should be retained unless their removal results in an increase in the AVE and overall reliability beyond the recommended threshold. Therefore, they have been retained in the model as the construct had reliability.

Table 1
Result of Measurement Model

Constructs	Subdimensions	Items	Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE
PsyCap	Hope	3	0.841–0.886	0.831	0.899	0.747
	Resilience	3	0.801–0.891	0.791	0.877	0.704
	Optimism	3	0.849–0.892	0.842	0.904	0.759
	Self-efficacy	3	0.847–0.885	0.838	0.902	0.753
EI	Self-emotion Appraisal	4	0.808–0.845	0.838	0.891	0.671
	Others' Emotion Appraisal	4	0.794–0.846	0.850	0.899	0.690
	Use of Emotion	4	0.822–0.849	0.857	0.903	0.699
	Regulation of Emotion	4	0.807–0.884	0.886	0.921	0.745
Job Satisfaction	\	20	0.707–0.846	0.961	0.964	0.576
Work Engagement	\	16	0.678–0.768	0.946	0.952	0.555

In the assessment of discriminant validity, the study employed a multi-faceted analytical approach, encompassing three critical criteria to ensure the distinctiveness of constructs within the framework. The first criterion, cross-loadings, involved a comparison of the factor loadings of each indicator against its corresponding construct with those against other constructs within the model. A significant finding revealed that the loading of each indicator on its respective construct was consistently higher than its corresponding loadings on alternative constructs. This result underscores the strong association between indicators and their designated constructs, thereby supporting the discriminant validity of the study's constructs. The second benchmark, known as the Fornell-Larcker Criterion, centers on the

Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each construct. According to this standard, the square root of a construct's AVE must surpass its correlations with any other constructs within the model. The analysis confirmed that all constructs' AVEs surpassed their corresponding inter-construct correlations, thereby adhering to the tenets of discriminant validity as outlined by Fornell and Larcker (1981). The third criterion employed was the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) Ratio, a measure proposed by Henseler et al. (2015) for assessing discriminant validity in models with latent variables. This ratio compares the variance explained by heterotrait (between-construct) with that explained by monotrait (within-construct) correlations. In the current study, the HTMT values were meticulously computed for each construct, and the results, as displayed in Table 2, showed that every HTMT value fell beneath the crucial cutoff of 0.90, indicating that the constructs didn't have an overly strong connection to each other. This, in turn, confirmed the model's discriminant validity.

Table 2
HTMT Criterion for Discriminant Validity

	EI	JS	PC	WE
EI				
JS	0.519			
PC	0.398	0.502		
WE	0.494	0.608	0.494	

[Note: In this table, EI represents emotional intelligence, JS represents job satisfaction, PC represents psychological capital, WE represent work engagement.]

Structural Model Assessment

Before testing hypotheses, we assessed multicollinearity using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF). The VIF is a metric employed to quantify the extent of collinearity among the observations of independent variables. VIF indicates the proportion of an index's variability that could be accounted for by other indices of comparable nature (Urbach & Ahlemann, 2010). All VIF values ranged from 1.021 to 1.632 (Table 3), which is well below the threshold of 3.3 (Diamantopoulos & Siguaw, 2006)—indicating no multicollinearity issues.

Table 3
Inner VIF Values

	EI	JS	PC	WE
EI		1.283		1.347
JS				1.632
PC		1.180		1.256
WE				

[Note: In this table, EI represents emotional intelligence, JS represents job satisfaction, PC represents psychological capital, WE represent work engagement.]

Direct Effects

Our analysis, as highlighted in Table 4, delves into how PsyCap and EI play a crucial role in influencing job satisfaction, which then impacts work engagement. The research shows that PsyCap—a complex blend of optimism, resilience, self-belief, and hope—positively affects both job satisfaction and the extent to which individuals are engaged with their work. This validates the hypotheses H1 and H3 (with $\beta = 0.198$, t-value = 4.886, $p < 0.05$ for H1 and $\beta =$

0.195, t-value = 3.887, p <0.05 for H3), suggesting a clear link between these variables. Specifically, among the components of PsyCap, it is the "hope" subdimension that emerges as the sole contributor to this significant influence, as hypothesized in H1a (β = 0.169, t-value = 3.449, p <0.05) and H3a (β = 0.139, t-value = 2.763, p <0.05). Conversely, resilience, optimism, and self-efficacy—the remaining three subdimensions—do not show a meaningful influence on job satisfaction and work engagement, thereby refuting the hypotheses H1b to H1d and H3b to H3d.

Similarly, EI—a multifaceted capacity to perceive, comprehend, and regulate emotions—has been shown to enhance job satisfaction and work engagement. The data analysis of this study confirms the validity of hypothesis H2 (β = 0.198, t-value = 4.500, p <0.05) and H4 (β = 0.199, t-value = 3.834, p <0.05). More specifically, the subdimensions of EI related to "others' emotion appraisal" (H2b: β = 0.103, t-value = 2.020, p <0.05) and "use of emotion" (H2c: β = 0.126, t-value = 2.333, p <0.05) were identified as significant factors in the relationship between EI and job satisfaction, while "use of emotion" could predict work engagement (H4c: β = 0.172, t-value = 2.773, p <0.05). However, other subdimensions did not exhibit a significant influence on job satisfaction and work engagement, thereby not supporting H2a, H2d, H4a, H4b, and H4d.

The research reveals considerable empirical evidence substantiating the hypothesis H5 concerning the correlation between job satisfaction and work engagement. A positive link was found between job satisfaction and work engagement, indicating that higher job satisfaction associates with greater work engagement. This implies that higher satisfaction with one's job serve as a catalyst for increased engagement and dedication to one's work, confirming the mediating role of job satisfaction in the relationship between job satisfaction and work engagement. In summary, this research highlights the critical role of PsyCap and EI in shaping job satisfaction. This, in turn, has a ripple effect that boosts work engagement, providing organizations with precious pointers to improve employee morale and overall wellness.

Table 4
Results of Direct Effects

Hypothesis	Relationship	β	p-value	Std. Error	t-value	Decision
H1	PsyCap → JS	0.198	<0.001	0.044	4.886	Supported
H1a	Hope → JS	0.169	0.001	0.049	3.449	Supported
H1b	Resilience → JS	0.040	0.416	0.049	0.816	Not Supported
H1c	Optimism → JS	0.017	0.646	0.036	0.472	Not Supported
H1d	Self-efficacy → JS	0.023	0.595	0.044	0.523	Not Supported
H2	EI → JS	0.198	<0.001	0.044	4.500	Supported
H2a	Self-emotion Appraisal → JS	0.070	0.167	0.051	1.373	Not Supported
H2b	Others' Emotion Appraisal → JS	0.103	0.043	0.051	2.020	Supported
H2c	Use of Emotion → JS	0.126	0.019	0.054	2.333	Supported

H2d	Regulation of Emotion → JS	-0.082	0.059	0.043	-1.907	Not Supported
H3	PsyCap →WE	0.195	<0.001	0.050	3.887	Supported
H3a	Hope →WE	0.139	0.006	0.050	2.763	Supported
H3b	Resilience →WE	0.052	0.272	0.047	1.098	Not Supported
H3c	Optimism →WE	0.014	0.739	0.043	0.333	Not Supported
H3d	Self-efficacy →WE	0.020	0.653	0.045	0.449	Not Supported
H4	EI → WE	0.199	<0.001	0.052	3.834	Supported
H4a	Self-emotion Appraisal → WE	0.065	0.207	0.052	1.261	Not Supported
H4b	Others' Emotion Appraisal → WE	0.071	0.168	0.051	1.377	Not Supported
H4c	Use of Emotion → WE	0.172	0.006	0.062	2.773	Supported
H4d	Regulation of Emotion → WE	-0.079	0.128	0.052	1.521	Not Supported
H5	JS → WE	0.291	<0.001	0.056	5.196	Supported

[Note: In this table, EI represents emotional intelligence, JS represents job satisfaction, PC represents psychological capital, WE represent work engagement.]

Mediating Effects

Mediating effects were tested using bootstrapping (5,000 resamples). Results are presented in Table 5. The empirical analysis yielded several key findings pertaining to the mediating effects of variables within the psychological and emotional landscape. The analysis found that job satisfaction strongly mediates the relationship between PsyCap and work engagement. This evidence lends support to the hypothesis (H6: $\beta = 0.044$, t-value = 2.643, $p < 0.05$) positing that job satisfaction acts as a partial mediator of the relationship between PsyCap and work engagement. This conclusion is further bolstered by the fact that among the various subdimensions of PsyCap, only the hope dimension significantly influenced work engagement indirectly via job satisfaction (H6a: $\beta = 0.063$, t-value = 4.077, $p < 0.05$). In contrast, resilience, optimism, and self-efficacy—other crucial components of PsyCap—failed to demonstrate such mediating effects (H6b–H6d not supported). This selective influence of hope suggests that fostering a sense of hope within the workplace may have particularly profound implications for employee well-being.

In a parallel vein, the study also investigated the mediating effects of job satisfaction on the link between EI and work engagement. Results indicated that job satisfaction serves as a partial mediator between EI and work engagement, supporting the proposed model (H7: $\beta = 0.058$, t-value = 3.412, $p < 0.05$). Interestingly, the "use of emotion" aspect of emotional intelligence stood out as the sole element exerting a meaningful indirect influence on work engagement via job satisfaction (H7c: $\beta = 0.032$, t-value = 2.000, $p < 0.05$). This suggests that staff who are adept at utilizing their emotions in a constructive manner within their work context may experience heightened levels of well-being. Conversely, several components of emotional intelligence, like others' emotion appraisal, self-emotion appraisal, and the regulation of emotion did not show a comparable mediating effect on work engagement (H7a, H7b, H7d not supported). This differential impact on the mediating role of job satisfaction

indicates that while emotional intelligence is an important construct, its influence on well-being may be more nuanced and context-dependent than previously thought.

Table 5
Results of Mediating Effects

Hypothesis	Relationship	β	Std. Error	t-value	p-value	95% CI (LLCI, ULCI)	Decision
H6	PsyCap → JS → WE	0.063	0.015	4.077	<0.001	(0.032, 0.100)	Supported
H6a	Hope → JS → WE	0.044	0.029	2.643	0.008	(0.015, 0.079)	Supported
H6b	Resilience → JS → WE	0.010	0.013	0.769	0.430	(-0.015, 0.037)	Not Supported
H6c	Optimism → JS → WE	0.004	0.010	0.400	0.658	(-0.014, 0.025)	Not Supported
H6d	Self-efficacy → JS → WE	0.006	0.012	0.500	0.603	(-0.016, 0.030)	Not Supported
H7	EI → JS → WE	0.058	0.017	3.412	<0.001	(0.028, 0.091)	Supported
H7a	Self-emotion Appraisal → JS → WE	0.018	0.014	1.286	0.198	(-0.007, 0.048)	Not Supported
H7b	Others' Emotion Appraisal → JS → WE	0.027	0.014	1.929	0.064	(0.001, 0.057)	Not Supported
H7c	Use of Emotion → JS → WE	0.032	0.016	2.000	0.049	(0.005, 0.069)	Supported
H7d	Regulation of Emotion → JS → WE	-0.021	0.013	-1.615	0.096	(-0.049, 0.001)	Not Supported

[Note: In this table, EI represents emotional intelligence, JS represents job satisfaction, PC represents psychological capital, WE represent work engagement.]

Additional Model Fit Indices

We use R^2 and Q^2 indicators to evaluate the explanatory and predictive power of the model. According to Hair et al. (2011), R^2 values > 0.26 indicate "substantial" explanatory power, confirming the model's robustness. R^2 shows in table 6 that the model can explain 38.7% of the variance in job satisfaction, and exogenous variables (such as PsyCap, EI, etc.) contribute an additional 34.3%, meeting the "substantial" explanatory power standard. The Q^2 values (job satisfaction = 0.324 and work engagement = 0.242) showing in table 7 are all above zero, confirming that the model conforms to the predictive correlation (Stone, 1974; Geisser, 1974). The combination of R^2 and Q^2 demonstrates that our model is effective in research.

Table 6
R^2 Values in the Model

Endogenous Variables	R^2 values
Job Satisfaction	0.387
Work Engagement	0.343

Table 7
Q^2 values in the model

Endogenous Variables	Q^2 values
Work Engagement	0.242
Job Satisfaction	0.324

Discussion

The empirical results demonstrate that psychological capital and emotional intelligence influence work engagement through the mediating mechanism of job satisfaction, with this process being driven by specific subdimensions. Specifically, only "hope" (from psychological capital) and "use of emotion" (from emotional intelligence) were found to both directly affect work engagement and indirectly influence it through enhancing job satisfaction. While "others' emotion appraisal" directly improved job satisfaction, it did not exhibit a significant indirect effect on work engagement. The following discussion synthesizes and contextualizes these findings, interpreting their meaning, and elaborating on their theoretical and practical implications.

Interpretation of Key Findings

The empirical analysis yielded several key findings pertaining to the interrelationships among psychological capital, emotional intelligence, job satisfaction, and work engagement. To structure the discussion, the interpretation is organized around the core components of the research model: first, the direct effects that delineate the primary drivers of job satisfaction and work engagement; and second, the mediating mechanisms that explain the underlying processes.

Direct Effects: What Drives Job Satisfaction and Work Engagement?

The study found that both PsyCap and EI positively predict job satisfaction and work engagement among Chinese vocational college teachers, but only specific subdimensions matter—highlighting the need to unpack these constructs rather than treating them as holistic variables.

The aggregate Psychological Capital construct exerted a statistically significant and positive main effect on both job satisfaction and work engagement. This macro-level finding is consistent with most of the empirical research results (e.g. Luthans et al., 2007; Daswati et al., 2022; Han et al., 2023). However, at the sub-dimensional level, only “hope” dimension significantly influences job satisfaction and work engagement. This aligns with the context of vocational colleges in Yunnan: teachers face resource scarcity (e.g., low research support, high student-teacher ratios; Xiao, 2022) and limited career advancement paths. Hope—defined as the belief in setting and achieving goals (Luthans et al., 2006)—provides a sense of purpose amid these constraints. For example, a teacher who hopes to improve practical teaching quality may feel more satisfied when they make progress toward that goal, even with limited resources.

Conversely, the non-significant effects of resilience, optimism, and self-efficacy warrant a contextualized explanation. Our findings suggest that in environments with pervasive and systemic barriers, the utility of certain psychological resources may be attenuated. Contrary to prior Western-centric research, resilience, optimism, and self-efficacy did not significantly

predict job satisfaction or work engagement among Chinese vocational college teachers. Specifically, this aligns with recent context-sensitive findings: resilience only buffers satisfaction under extreme job demands (Albalá-Genol et al., 2023); optimism requires high organizational support to manifest benefits (Juned et al., 2023); and self-efficacy fails to translate into satisfaction without autonomy (Bargsted et al., 2019). In resource-scarce, hierarchically rigid vocational settings, these traits may be overridden by structural constraints, rendering hope—a goal-directed, future-oriented resource—the only actionable driver of satisfaction and engagement.

Likewise, Emotional Intelligence as a composite construct displayed robust main effects on job satisfaction and work engagement. This finding is consistent with mainstream research across different cultural backgrounds (e.g., Pekkan & Bicer, 2022; George et al., 2022). Hence, the overall EI resource portfolio continues to function as a cross-culturally reliable predictor of positive work outcomes. However, specific dimensions becoming more salient under resource-constrained conditions. In this study, use of emotion and others' emotion appraisal dimensions drive job satisfaction, while only "use of emotion" predicts work engagement. Vocational teaching is highly interpersonal: teachers must interact with students (e.g., guiding practical training), colleagues (e.g., collaborating on curriculum design), and industry partners (e.g., aligning teaching with workplace needs; Yang, 2022). Others' emotion appraisal helps teachers understand students' learning struggles or colleagues' collaboration needs, fostering harmonious relationships and reducing conflict—both of which boost satisfaction (Francis et al., 2022). Use of emotion enables teachers to leverage positive emotions (e.g., enthusiasm) to motivate students and cope with teaching stress, further enhancing satisfaction (Li & Zhang, 2024).

Self-emotion appraisal and regulation of emotion—both intrapersonal facets of emotional intelligence—failed to predict job satisfaction or work engagement, echoing recent empirical evidence that interpersonal EI skills are more salient in educational professions (McNulty & Politis, 2023). Over-regulation of emotions may even backfire, leading to emotional dissonance in emotionally labor-intensive teaching roles (Pinkawa & Dörfel, 2024). Similarly, others' emotion appraisal, while boosting satisfaction, did not translate into engagement, supporting the view that recognizing emotions is insufficient acting on them (i.e., use of emotion) is what drives behavioral outcomes (Pizzo et al., 2024). Thus, in high-pressure, collectivist educational contexts, only emotionally actionable skills yield measurable returns. Meanwhile, job satisfaction strongly predicts work engagement, consistent with the JD-R Model and SET. When vocational teachers are satisfied with their jobs (e.g., feeling their work is meaningful, receiving recognition), they reciprocate with greater engagement—such as updating curriculum to match industry needs or investing extra time in student guidance (González-Gancedo et al., 2019; Xu et al., 2023). This finding underscores job satisfaction as a critical "bridge" connecting personal resources to work engagement.

Mediating Effects: The Central Role of Job Satisfaction

In this study, job satisfaction serves as a mediator in the relationships connecting PsyCap, EI, and work engagement. However, this mediating role is not uniform across all facets of these constructs; rather, it is driven primarily by subdimensions.

Consistent with the JD-R premise of a "resources - satisfaction - engagement" pathway, job satisfaction partially mediated both macro-level relationships (PsyCap - engagement; EI - engagement), corroborating Wirawan et al.'s (2020) finding that job satisfaction mediates the effect of PsyCap on engagement. However, disaggregation revealed a differentiated pattern that underscores the value of context-specific rather than omnibus mediation testing. In the results of this study, job satisfaction partially mediates the PsyCap- work engagement link, with “hope” as the key driver. Hope enhances job satisfaction by providing a sense of direction (e.g., striving to improve teaching quality), which in turn motivates teachers to engage more deeply in their work (Shepardson, 2025; Hu et al., 2024). For example, a teacher who hopes to develop a new practical course may feel satisfied when the course is approved, then spend more time preparing materials and guiding students—boosting work engagement.

In contrast, the lack of mediating effects for resilience, optimism, and self-efficacy suggests that these resources, while valuable, may not primarily operate by enhancing satisfaction in the face of chronic systemic constraints. Highly resilient college teachers may simply not be brought down by difficulties, but this not defeated state does not directly equate to a high level of satisfaction. It is more about preventing a decline in satisfaction rather than actively creating a strong sense of job satisfaction (Meeusen et al., 2024). Against the backdrop of the transformation currently facing Chinese vocational education and the potential career development bottlenecks for college teachers, a generalized optimism that is detached from real-world challenges may be ineffective in improving work satisfaction based on realistic assessments. It is only when optimism is built upon tangible hope (goals and pathways) that it can be effective (Braine & Wray, 2018). In the highly structured, resource-limited, and strongly administration-oriented environment of college institutions, college teachers' personal 'I believe I can do it' confidence can be strongly constrained by institutional factors (such as policy limitations, resource scarcity, and administrative intervention; Winter et al., 2022). When teachers feel that although they are capable, they have nowhere to apply their abilities, high self-efficacy is difficult to transform into a positive evaluation of their work (i.e., job satisfaction) and work engagement.

At the same time, job satisfaction partially mediates the EI- work engagement link, with “use of emotion” as the critical subdimension. The confirmed mediating role of job satisfaction in the relationship between EI and work engagement substantiates a core tenet of our integrated theoretical model. This mediation pathway is further corroborated by recent empirical evidence. An empirical study by Butakor et al. (2021) demonstrated that employees' emotional intelligence fostered sustained work engagement primarily by boosting their job satisfaction over time, highlighting satisfaction as the psychological conduit through which emotional competencies translate into engaged behavior. Meanwhile, use of emotion improves job satisfaction by helping teachers translate emotional awareness into actionable outcomes (e.g., using enthusiasm to engage students, using empathy to resolve conflicts), which then drives work engagement (Butakor et al., 2020; Li, 2024). For instance, a teacher who uses positive emotions to motivate struggling students may feel more satisfied with their teaching, then become more engaged in curriculum innovation (Wang et al., 2023).

The non-significant mediating roles of self-emotion appraisal, others' emotion appraisal, and regulation of emotion are highly informative. Self-emotion appraisal and others' emotion appraisal represent the capacity to accurately identify and comprehend emotions both one's

own and those of others (Singh et al., 2022). Whilst they are a prerequisite for effective emotional management, they do not, in themselves, directly engender positive work outcomes (Kim et al., 2025). Such awareness may remain purely cognitive, and without subsequent application or regulation, it may even exacerbate psychological strain without directly improving job satisfaction. Regulation of emotion refers to the ability to regulate one's own and others' emotions (Singh et al., 2022). In the college teaching profession, this often involves a significant amount of emotional labor, especially when it is necessary to patiently teach students or interact with colleagues and leaders (Hang & Chen, 2021). Frequent and strategic emotional regulation (particularly surface acting) requires the consumption of psychological resources and may lead to emotional exhaustion (Pinkawa & Dörfel, 2024). Therefore, high level of regulation of emotion can be a double-edged sword: it helps to maintain classroom order and interpersonal harmony (preventing dissatisfaction), but the regulation process itself may be a burden rather than a direct source of satisfaction. Therefore, its effect may not manifest via the satisfaction pathway.

Theoretical Contributions

This study advances existing knowledge in unpacking latent constructs to reveal context-specific effects. Most prior research treats PsyCap and EI as holistic variables (e.g. George et al., 2023; Fu et al., 2021), but this study shows only “hope” (PsyCap) and “use of emotion” (EI) drive job satisfaction and work engagement among Chinese vocational college teachers. This highlights the importance of contextualizing constructs—what matters for university teachers or Western samples may not apply to vocational teachers in resource-scarce regions. For example, hope is more critical than resilience because vocational teachers need goal-directed motivation to overcome systemic barriers, not just cope with setbacks.

This study also validating the JD-R Model and Social Exchange Theory in non-Western vocational education. The research underscores the fact that having personal strengths, like a positive PsyCap and EI, can really boost one's engagement at work, which ties in with the JD-R Model's theory that these resources lead to increased engagement by influencing psychological well-being (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). It also supports Social Exchange Theory: when teachers gain satisfaction from personal resources, they reciprocate with greater work engagement (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). This extends the theories’ applicability beyond Western contexts and university education to Chinese vocational colleges.

Finally, this study filling the gap on vocational college teachers. Vocational education is critical to China’s skilled workforce strategy, yet research on its teachers is scarce. This study provides the first empirical evidence of how PsyCap, EI, and job satisfaction interact to influence work engagement among this group, addressing a key research gap (Xiao, 2022; Wang et al., 2021).

Practical Implications

The findings offer targeted recommendations for individual college teachers, policymakers, and vocational colleges to enhance job satisfaction and work engagement. In other words, individuals and institutions need to work together to improve college teachers’ work engagement and break the phenomenon of “Lying Flat”.

At the individual level, the study provides an invaluable resource for college teachers to achieve a profound understanding of their own engagement with their professional duties.

By doing so, they are empowered to actively seek out and participate in tailored training initiatives, articulating their specific needs and aspirations. This process is instrumental in fostering an enhanced sense of job satisfaction and work engagement (Sawitri, 2024), as evidenced by the enhanced psychological and emotional engagement with their roles.

At institutional level, the study recommends a targeted redistribution of resources to support college teachers in enhancing their PsyCap and EI. In practical terms, colleges could assist their college teachers in fostering hope through psychological capital training (Ma, 2023). For instance, they might introduce “hope-centered” initiatives like goal-setting workshops where teachers outline clear, attainable targets (such as “boosting student pass rates in practical exams by 10%”). Offering consistent feedback and modest incentives—like recognition or opportunities for professional growth—can help sustain motivation and satisfaction as teachers work toward these objectives (Shi & Sin, 2024). At the same time, develop EI curricula that center around transforming emotional insights into proactive measures (Trish, 2023). Imagine a scenario where educators learn to harness joyful emotions to drive students' engagement, such as recognizing and acknowledging their small achievements during hands-on practice. Finally, institutions need to strengthen institutional support to elevate job satisfaction and work engagement (Kasim et al., 2025). Tackle systemic obstacles that sap hope and hinder the use of emotion in teaching. For instance, allocate resources to help with goal attainment (such as funding for hands-on course development and lighter teaching loads to pursue innovation projects) and trim administrative red tape that eats into time for meaningful interpersonal connections (for example, streamlining procedures for curriculum updates). Acknowledge and reward educators who leverage hope and emotion to boost outcomes. Consider launching an “Excellence in Practical Teaching” award that honors teachers who set ambitious student-centered goals and meet them, or an “Emotional Intelligence in Teaching” prize to recognize those who harness emotion to boost student engagement.

Limitations and Future Research

This study, while making notable contributions, isn't without its shortcomings. One key limitation is the scope of the sample, which is confined to just public vocational colleges in Yunnan Province. Out of the 44 vocational institutions, only 13 allowed the research to proceed, which casts doubt on the findings' applicability to private colleges or those in regions like eastern China, where resources are more abundant. To bolster the model's validity, future research should cast a wider net over a more varied selection of institutions. Another issue is the reliance on self-reported data, which can introduce methodological bias, like teachers potentially inflating their work engagement to seem more involved. To mitigate this, subsequent studies might incorporate multi-faceted data sources, like student evaluations of teacher engagement and administrative records of teaching innovations, to bolster the credibility of the results.

Conclusion

This study set out to unpack how and why psychological capital (PsyCap) and emotional intelligence (EI) translate into work engagement among Chinese vocational-college teachers. Integrating the Job-Demands–Resources model with Social Exchange Theory, we tested a multi-dimensional mediation framework in a resource-constrained, high-display-rule educational context.

Two key conclusions emerge. First, not all "positive" resources are equally effective: only hope (PsyCap) and use of emotion (EI) exerted significant direct effects on both job satisfaction and engagement, whereas resilience, optimism, self-efficacy, self-emotion appraisal and emotion regulation failed to reach significance. Second, job satisfaction functioned as a partial yet selective mediator: it transmitted the influence of aggregate PsyCap and EI to engagement, yet the indirect paths were again driven exclusively by hope and use of emotion. Crucially, the findings should not be misconstrued as evidence that vocational college teachers lack basic psychological competencies. The central implication is that administrators must create an enabling environment that recognizes, rewards, and amplifies the specific resources—hope and emotional utilization—that have proven effective in the current context, while simultaneously working to broaden the operative range that nullify the potential of other valuable resources like resilience and self-efficacy.

Practically, the results recommend precision-based interventions—hope-centered goal-setting workshops and emotion-utilization micro-training—rather than generic PsyCap or EI packages. Institutionally, dismantling systemic barriers (curriculum rigidity, scant research support) should enlarge the bandwidth through which other facets can become salient. Theoretically, the study extends JD-R and SET to Chinese vocational education and demonstrates that disaggregated, context-sensitive modelling is indispensable for explaining when and why personal resources generate behavioral returns.

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