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Quiet quitting during COVID-19: the role of psychological empowerment

Mingxiao Lu¹, Abdullah Al Mamun¹ , Xuelin Chen^{1,2}, Qing Yang¹ & Mohammad Masukujjaman¹

Due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, Chinese university lecturers have experienced increased levels of disappointment and powerlessness due to the changing work environment. An increasing number of lecturers exhibit quiet-quitting intention, which affects their work passion, teaching quality, and so on. However, it is little known about how work-related factors, influence quiet-quitting intention of lecturers. Drawing on the social exchange theory, this study proposes a conceptual model that investigates the effects of work overload, perceived career development opportunities, perceived pay-for performance, affective organizational commitment and work conditions on job burnout, employee well-being, and quiet-quitting intention. Using a quantitative cross-sectional approach, 698 responses were obtained from young Chinese university lecturers. We also employed partial least squares structural equation modeling to analyze and forecast the extent of the impact of this study's independent variables. The findings revealed that work overload, perceived pay-for-performance, affective organizational commitment, and work conditions significantly affect job burnout and employee well-being. Additionally, job burnout and employee well-being significantly effect quiet-quitting intention, which are moderated by psychological empowerment. Overall, this study contributes to the understanding of the factors influencing quiet-quitting intention among Chinese university lecturers, providing theoretical and practical implications for addressing the challenges arising from the Covid-19 pandemic.

¹UKM—Graduate School of Business, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 UKM Bangi, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia. ² School of Business, Jishou University, 416000 Jishou City, Hunan, China. ✉email: almamun@ukm.edu.my

Introduction

A sense of pessimism gradually spread worldwide during COVID-19. According to Collins Dictionary, the selected Word of the Year for 2022 is "permacrisis," a term that encapsulates the profound sense of continuously navigating through a series of unprecedented events, leaving individuals contemplative about the potential bleakness and apprehensive about the unknown adversities that may lie ahead. Specifically, in November 2022, words such as quiet quitting were selected as the Collins' list of words of 2022, which revealed the disappointment and powerlessness of people in the current environment. Quiet-quitting intention (QQ) is a new concept that is different from turnover intention, which refers to emotional or physical tiredness and fatigue from a job, thus encouraging the thought of just doing the basic work to fulfill the responsibilities and never exceed that. Indeed, COVID-19 has caused social and economic uncertainty, which has increased the pressure on many people, and made them rethink their lifestyle and the way of work. An increasing number of people are willing to invest more energy into their personal lives rather than follow the idea of transcending themselves at work (Li, 2018; Mohammed et al., 2020).

Psychological and emotional fatigue have been shown to have significant negative consequences, leading to harmful effects on both the physical and psychological well-being of individuals and manifesting as reduced performance quality and diminished productivity (Wu et al., 2022). Consistent with this finding, Wu et al. (2023) have pointed out that additional work tasks from the COVID-19 pandemic may prompt employees to engage in emotional labor as a means to fulfill job demands, which may conflict with their authentic emotions and in turn impact their work quality. When university lecturers adopt a passive approach towards their work, it can have significant repercussions on their teaching quality, performance and organizational effectiveness (Mohammed et al., 2020). Consequently, the concern arises regarding the teaching quality when university teachers exhibit QQ. As university students stand at the threshold of entering the workforce and potentially assuming the role of catalysts for social development, the extent to which they can fulfill this role is intricately tied to the quality of professional education they have received in their respective universities. Therefore, finding ways to reduce university lecturers' QQ is vital.

With the continuous growth of the social economy, higher education has become prevalent in China. Chinese universities have expanded their enrollment to enable more students to receive higher education. Therefore, lecturers at universities in China undertake more teaching and scientific research tasks along with their family responsibilities. For instance, Bao (2020) have highlighted that the outbreak of COVID-19 compelled Peking University, renowned for its academic excellence in China, to implement live online courses. However, the transition to fully online courses necessitates meticulous lesson planning, the development of teaching materials such as audio and video content, as well as the acquisition of essential technological skills. As a consequence, many faculty members in Peking University are grappling with the challenges of limited online teaching experience and insufficient preparation. The added pressure stemming from the shift to online teaching exacerbates the workload burden on university lecturers. This is a strong sign indicating that university lecturers face work overload. Under these circumstances, an increasing number of university lecturers in Chinese universities seem to experience job burnout and experience QQ. There is an urgent need to examine and represent the formation and development of quiet-quitting intentions among Chinese university lecturers. The previous studies have demonstrated that the motivational process of employee well-being has positive relationships with positive organizational

outcomes (e.g., retention intention, affective organizational commitment, and so on) (Schaufeli and Taris, 2014; Agarwal and Gupta, 2018; Chen et al., 2023). Thus, a greater knowledge of reducing university lecturers' job burnout and enhancing their well-being may contribute to the decrease in QQ.

The notion that human resources are the most crucial asset and the foundation of organizations is widely recognized (Qing, et al., 2020). Firms are now concerned about staff turnover (Gan and Yusof, 2020; Chen et al., 2023). Similarly, keeping employees in their jobs and encouraging them to offer full play to their effectiveness and ensure higher performance are equally crucial. Organizations (including universities) tend to promote empowering practices and reinforce the ability of employees to attain organizational objectives with a competitive edge. Previous studies have shown that employees with higher perceptions of psychological empowerment have lower intentions to quit and exhibit better performance (Nissan, 2021). Furthermore, Ambad et al. (2021) indicated that psychological empowerment can improve employees' confidence in the organization and make employees more devoted to their firms. To support this, Nissan (2021) found that when people are psychologically empowered, they feel more satisfied with their work and are motivated to complete daily tasks, which also increases their sense of belonging. Therefore, it is rational to assume that employees with high perceptions of psychological empowerment invest more energy into their daily work and are devoted.

Higher levels of perceived career development opportunity and perceived pay-for performance influence employees' turnover intention (Magni and Manzoni, 2020). Moreover, previous studies have suggested that work overload, affective organizational commitment, and work conditions are closely related to employees' turnover intention (Ouerdian et al., 2021; Ravalier et al., 2021; Anasi, 2020). Overall, prior studies have extensively investigated the influences of these work-related factors on employees' work attitudes and behaviors, including turnover intention and work engagement (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004; Bakker and Demerouti, 2017; Berta et al., 2018). However, limited study has explored whether these factors have some impact on the job burnout, employee well-being and quiet-quitting intention for Chinese university lecturers. Therefore, this study attempts to examine the mechanisms influencing Chinese university lecturers' job burnout, employee well-being and quiet-quitting intention, as well as the moderating role of psychological empowerment, by looking at some key job resources, such as personal career development opportunities.

To address these gaps, a conceptual framework was developed based on Social Exchange Theory (SET) and empirically tested. Prior studies have utilized the SET to investigate various organizational relationships, including those between employers and employees, employees and their co-workers, and the relationship between employees and the organization itself (Harden et al., 2018; Rai, 2013; Tsen et al., 2022). For instance, Harden et al. (2018) conducted a study examining the influence of work overload and fairness of rewards on turnover intention and organizational commitment, employing the SET as the theoretical basis for their investigation. Similarly, Azeem et al. (2020) applied the SET to explore the relationship between psychological contract violation, employee dissatisfaction, work disengagement, and turnover intention. However, despite the existing research on SET, no studies have specifically examined the antecedents of QQ from the SET perspective, representing a significant gap in the current literature. By adopting the SET perspective to explore QQ, this study examines the reciprocal exchanges between university lecturers and their institutions, considering factors such as opportunities for growth.

This study used a quantitative approach to test the associations between these constructs. To collect sufficient data, convenience sampling was utilized, resulting in a total of 698 complete responses from lecturers affiliated with Chinese universities. Furthermore, PLS-SEM was chosen as the analytical technique in this study due to its suitability for testing a theoretical framework from a predictive standpoint (Hair et al., 2019). In this way, the research can provide a more targeted and detailed analysis of the specific factors that are most important for predicting QQ among Chinese university lecturers. The findings of this study contribute in the following ways. From a theoretical viewpoint, first, this study provides a better understanding of the relationships of work overload, perceived career development opportunities, perceived pay-for performance, work condition, and affective organizational commitment with the QQ of university lecturers in Chinese universities, allowing holistic framework with direct and new indirect relationships. Second, this study provides valuable insights into QQ and contributes to the limited QQ literature, which has now become a topic of interest for the researchers. From a practical viewpoint, university administrators can benefit from this study by formulating effective management policies to enhance university lecturers' well-being and stimulate their enthusiasm for work.

Literature review

Theoretical foundation. This study was conducted based on the SET, which emphasizes the economic input and output of social behavior, redefines interpersonal communication as a social exchange phenomenon (Liu and Deng, 2011). People are driven by self-interest to engage in interpersonal exchange and communication. Human behavior abides by the axiom "Seeking advantages and avoiding disadvantages," which implies that individuals are inclined to pursue higher benefits and lower costs during interactions, or they are inclined to obtain higher satisfaction and lower dissatisfaction. The SET necessitates efforts to avoid competition in conflicts of interest and achieve win-win or multi-win outcomes through mutual social exchanges. The core idea advocated by the SET is that people who participate in and uphold exchange connections with others expect to get rewards (Blau, 1968; Gouldner, 1960; Homans, 1958). The SET can only be operated by exploring and studying behaviors that receive rewards from others (Blau, 1964). The exchange processes are regarded as transactions, which are bilateral, interactive, and reciprocal in character (Emerson, 1976), and once one of the two parties believe that this transaction has violated its own interests, the exchange will be called off immediately (Blau, 1986). Homans (1958) suggested that the exchange of benefits, or the giving of something of relative value to another, is fundamental to human behavior.

This study examined university lecturers' psychological needs and their impact on quiet-quitting intentions by drawing upon the SET. Once employees' psychological demands are satisfied, they feel more empowered and mentally relaxed; consequently, they act more faithfully and perform better in their jobs to achieve organizational goals. According to Lee and Nie (2017), to achieve mutual goals and missions, organizations assign tasks and empower the authority to employees which helps employees clarify the responsibilities and purpose of their job. Organizations and employees build relationships by exchanging their values and needs based on their own behalf and the principle of seeking expanded advantages. According to the SET, people's perceptions and attitudes towards work and the behaviors they conduct in the workplace would be influenced by various factors; something that they think is advantageous or disadvantageous would violate the balance of the transaction between them and the organizations,

such as work overload, perceived career development opportunities, perceived pay-for performance, affective organizational commitment, work conditions and so on.

Hypotheses development

Job burnout (JB). JB is defined as the state of physical or mental exhaustion produced by individuals under severe work pressure. The notion of job burnout was first proposed by Freudenberger (1974), who believed that JB is a component of emotional fatigue. Maslach et al. (2001) believe that JB is a psychological syndrome caused by reacting to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors in the workplace. He categorized three dimensions of JB: exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy. Generally speaking, JB is an extreme mental and physical state when people do not have the capacity to deal with work pressure successfully, and they experience an emotion dilemma and fatigue that is generated due to long-term work stress. Gillespie et al. (2001) and Kaiser et al. (2021) have pointed out that JB of university lecturers was a response to chronic job stress, which resulted from various factors, including insufficient funding, inadequate resources and support, excessive workload and a lack of promotion, rewards, and recognition. When university teachers invest their efforts into their jobs but did not receive feedback regarding their self-efficacy, the escalating perception of job stress can lead to JB, characterized by physical exhaustion and emotional fatigue (Li, 2018). Given that, it is rational to infer that when lecturers are confronted with heavy job stress, they are more likely to experience symptoms of JB and a subsequent decline in their work passion.

Employees' well-being (EW). EW denotes the overall quality assessment of employees' job experiences and functions (Warr, 1990). In practice, some researchers often compare EW to a single-dimension idea—job satisfaction. These two terms are similar but not equivalent because employees' well-being has a broader conceptual framework and consists of three facets: psychological, physical, and social. Wright and Hobfoll (2004) proposed that psychological well-being is conducive to realizing a win-win output and improving the interests of both employers and employees, which leads to higher productivity in the organization. Aboobaker et al. (2019) have emphasized the significance of deliberating upon the psychological integration of employees towards their work and workplace needs within higher education settings, as this is essential for the attainment of educational objectives. In the current study, we focused on EW as a dimension of psychological well-being related to satisfaction with jobs and life (Chen et al., 2023). Well-being of university lecturers is an ongoing and gratifying experience wherein their needs are met, professional aspirations are realized, potential is fulfilled, and harmonious personal development is achieved (Pei et al., 2022). In other words, the well-being of university lecturers primarily revolves around their professional welfare, which effectively encompasses their positive experiences during professional activities.

Work overload (WO). When the expectation for an employee is too high within the time available or the work demand surpasses the employee's ability, WO occurs (Katz and Kahn, 1978). WO is recognized as a common work demand because it requires employees to work as quickly as possible. The original nature of this term is speed, providing a more agile response and executing a variety of tasks and multiple projects in a limited period of time (Ingusci et al., 2021). WO can be categorized as chronic troubles in the work environment that add up whenever additional stress is applied to an employee. According to Keenan and McBain

(1978), employees' frequent experience of stress and overload in the work atmosphere may lead to undesired outcomes. WO is classified as a pertinent need in the work environment of most people because it involves handling many practical and mental endeavors (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017; Bakker et al., 2003). Long office hours and pushing office schedules lead to low career commitment and disrupt the harmony between work and personal life (Poulou and Dhal, 2020), which may cause emotional fatigue, job burnout, and intention to quit. Workload is a critical source of JB, and it is most clearly linked to the exhausting component of burnout (Maslach and Leiter, 2008). WO results from cognitive problems leading to lower employee satisfaction and well-being (Bliese and Castro, 2000). Qureshi et al. (2012) found similar results in a study of WO in textile industry workers. Hence, we propose the following hypotheses:

H_{1A}: WO is positively related to JB among university lecturers.

H_{1B}: WO has a negative effect on EW among university lecturers.

Perceived career development opportunities (PC). Organizations improve with the development of economy and society, which also leads to changes in the required skills. Therefore, establishing a clear career development structure provides employees with security and stability. PC refers to formal coherent plans that meet the professional needs of the staff and personnel requirements of enterprises (Ayodele et al., 2020). This complex process affects people's life. According to Adekola (2011), PC is the result of communication between the career planner and the organization responsible for managing employees' careers. Based on the principles of the SET, when individuals hold positive psychological expectations that investing high levels of job engagement will lead to increased development opportunities, their relationship with the organization is characterized by a mutual and equitable social exchange (Yin, 2018). Hence, individuals are more likely to exhibit active engagement and work passion. The universities should provide the necessary tools and resources to lecturers to ensure better opportunities for them. Karavardar (2014) found that career development is critical for employees as they are more involved in the work; it is also important for ensuring a low turnover rate among employees. The organizations should frame such policies that may build psychological bonds between the organizations and staff. Once the expectation of career development is noticed and emphasized, and employees' demands are met, they become more attached to their organizations, stay longer, and experience higher well-being. Career development opportunities improve individual performance by encouraging continuous learning and adaptation. Simultaneously, the organization establishes a positive development relationship with employees. Hence, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H_{2A}: PC has a negative effect on the JB among university lecturers.

H_{2B}: PC has a positive effect on the EW among university lecturers.

Perceived pay-for performance (PP). Gerhart and Fang (2015) provided a comprehensive definition of pay-for-performance, characterizing it as a compensation program that aligns remuneration with individual performance based on quantifiable outputs (e.g., sales volume) or evaluative measures of behavior. The relationship between pay growth and performance might not always coincide with the association between employees' perceptions of performance-based pay and their actual performance (Nyberg, 2010) and this misalignment could potentially impact employee attitudes and perceptions. According to the SET, when individuals perceive that investing higher levels of job engagement can lead to better rewards, their relationship with the

organization will exhibit mutual and equitable social exchange (Yin, 2018). Consequently, they are more likely to demonstrate active engagement and generate higher levels of work performance. According to Bucklin et al. (2022), pay-for-performance has the potential to significantly enhance workforce productivity by incentivizing both the actions and outcomes associated with performance. Wenzel et al. (2019) have highlighted that a fair, participatory, and transparent performance pay schemes reduces the controlling perception while simultaneously nurturing the intrinsic motivation of employees. The motivational impact of fair performance appraisal may be diminished when employees perceive deficiencies in the fairness, validity, and reliability of the performance appraisal process (Lee, 2019). Additionally, individuals with a strong perception of pay-for performance exhibit higher levels of job satisfaction and are more likely to proactively assist their co-workers (He et al., 2021). Given that, it is rational to infer that lecturers with a high PP are intrinsically motivated, leading to improved work efficiency. Conversely, when they perceive pay-for-performance as unfair, they may experience emotional fatigue, which in turn reduces work efficiency. Thus, we posit the following hypotheses.

H_{3A}: PP has a negative effect on the JB among university lecturers.

H_{3B}: PP has a positive effect on the EW among university lecturers.

Affective organizational commitment (AC). AC has captured the increasing attention of organizations because competitive advantage stems from a committed workforce (Meyer and Parfyonova, 2010). Organizational commitment denotes "a psychological connection between the staff and their organizations making it less prospective that individuals will voluntarily resign from the firms" (Allen and Meyer, 1996). Referring to the SET, employees who exhibit affective commitment towards their organizations are motivated to actively engage in positive social exchanges with their organization and have a sense of meaningful work (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005; Wang et al., 2020). In other words, individuals carried with high AC are more inclined to perceive their work as meaningful and derive enjoyment from their job. Additionally, Wu et al. (2022) have emphasized that receiving social support from the organization can effectively mitigate individuals' levels of job fatigue and another job resource (e.g., high job control) can play a buffering role in the strain-burnout relationship. Similarly, Gaan et al. (2023) have pointed that resonant leadership, characterized by the ability to balance emotions and foster harmony among employees, emerges as a potential catalyst for promoting purposeful engagement among employees who are working remotely in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Conversely, during the COVID-19, the increasing job demands deepens the conflicts between surface acting and true feelings of individuals, in turn increasing the likelihood of exhaustion and diminished ability to function that occurs during and after a workday (Wu et al., 2023). Given that, it is rational to infer when individuals are afforded a greater abundance of favorable job resources and encounter fewer job demands within their organizations, they are more inclined to develop affective commitment towards their organization and exhibit higher levels of work engagement. Consequently, this enhanced commitment and engagement contribute to a diminished experience of emotional fatigue in relation to their work. Thus, we postulated the following hypotheses.

H_{4A}: AC has a negative effect on the JB among university lecturers.

H_{4B}: AC has a positive effect on the EW among university lecturers.

Work condition (WC). WC represents the sum of the facilities, work environment, amount of work, and hours of work. The Job Demand Resource Model (JD-R) proposed by Demerouti et al. (2001), classifies work conditions into two dimensions: job demands and job resources. Job resources and demands are considered catalysts for work behaviors (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017). When we refer to the mental and emotional labor required for work, we think about its "demands," which may be broken down into four categories: physical, psychological, social, and organizational. Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) proposed that job demands may be considered work environment features, such as a large amount of work and limited time. The expression, "physical, psychological, social, or organizational components of the job" refers to "job resources" that functions to realize work targets, reduce work demands under the physical or psychological costs and motivate individual development (Demerouti et al., 2001). As Elkayam et al. (2020) suggested, employees who are more satisfied with their working conditions generally express a lower sense of burnout. Furthermore, inferior WCs may lead to job dissatisfaction in the nursing industry (Wisniewski et al., 2015). Mudrák et al. (2020) drew a similar conclusion in academics: a higher level of satisfaction is due to high-quality core job resources supporting inner motivation, while some extant work environments may be recognized as suboptimal. Hence, the following propositions are made.

H_{5A}: WC has a negative effect on the JB among university lecturers.

H_{5B}: WC has a positive effect on the EW among university lecturers.

Quiet-quitting intention (QQ). QQ is a new term, and it is an adaptation of the idea of turnover intention. It does not mean that employees leave their job, but rather "limit work to contract hours." QQ implies "the idea of not giving any extra effort, but rather performing only what is required of them in their job description." Tett and Meyer (1993) recognize "quit intention" as employees' cautious judgments and emotions. Quit intention has a negative link with firm productivity (AbuAlRub and Al-Zaru, 2008), which is unfavorable for the healthy and sustainable development of organizations. Sun and Wang (2017) expanded the idea of turnover intention. They suggested that employee turnover can be seen as "employees' inattentive behavior in a way that they are within the office but does not pay attention to the work," which is similar to the idea of QQ. Many academics from various fields working in behavioral, longitudinal, and organizational domains have looked into the factors that lead employees to consider leaving their jobs (Haque et al., 2020). Quiet quitting seems to be a renewed commitment to life outside of the workplace. Job dissatisfaction and lack of perceived employee well-being are the reasons for the intention to quit, whereas employee well-being, lower workload, and few career development opportunities lead to the intention to stay and better performance (Ali and Rafie Mohd Arshad, 2018). Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses.

H₆: JB is positively related to QQ among university lecturers.

H₇: EW is negatively related to QQ among university lecturers.

Psychological empowerment (PE). In the last decade, PE has emerged as a major player in various aspects; however, the academia lacks consensus on its definition since the usage of the terminology varies with studies. Over time, the concept shifted from "a process of improving the employee's perception of self-efficacy" to "a condition of intrinsic motivation of the employee" (Thomas and Diener, 1990). The most recognized definition of the present time was proposed by Spreitzer in 1995, who is deeply involved in the field of psychology and is regarded as an expert in

this area. She believes that PE reflects a person's sense of control in the workplace, and she divides PE into four dimensions according to the relationship between the individuals' sense of control and work, which includes meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. Here, meaning is understood as an individual's recognition of the value or significance that they bring to an activity while being engaged in it. Competence refers to the skills required by employees for the successful execution of their jobs. Self-determination implies the leeway given to employees to make decisions and to set priorities within their jobs. Outcomes refer to employees' expectation that the tasks they complete would positively influence the firm's goals (Spreitzer, 1997; Jose and Mampilly, 2014).

PE entrusts employees to determine the operations of their work with greater confidence and self-determination levels, thus ensuring a positive organizational climate. Pecino et al. (2019) confirmed that a positive organizational climate could lead to fewer cases of burnout. Staff are more enthusiastic about staying at the firm and are more dedicated to their work. Suifan et al. (2020) found that PE can lead to a lower quitting intentions among employees. Statistical evidence was provided by Amarneh et al. (2021) who demonstrated that PE moderated the relationship between nurses' job satisfaction and their intention to leave their current positions. Thus, based on the above discussion, we propose that PE acts as a moderator in the connection between employees' JB and QQ. Additionally, the previous researchers have attempted to explore the relationship between PE and other human resource constructs based on the organization's perspective. Ugboro (2006) conducted their study from the vantage point of organizations' total quality management, and they examined the connection between top management leadership, employee empowerment, employee well-being and customer satisfaction. The results revealed significant relationships between these factors. Thus, we assumed that PE has a moderating role in the link between employees' EW and QQ, and we propose the following hypotheses.

H_{M1}: PE may moderate the connection between JB and QQ.

H_{M2}: PE may moderate the connection between EW and QQ.

Research methodology

Data collection and sample design. The population for this research comprised lecturers from universities in China. G*Power 3.1 was used to estimate the sample size with 0.95 power and 0.15 effect size, and eight independent variables. The analyses involved collecting at least 160 efficient samples to realize the requisite power and effect size (Faul et al., 2007). A sample sizes of at least 200 was needed (Leguina, 2015). Convenience sampling is a common form of sampling found in specific population research (Stratton, 2021). Considering that our target group comprises Chinese lecturers, and reaching all lecturers in China is impractical, convenience sampling emerges as the most practical and viable approach. In order to secure an adequate number of responses, this study employed convenience sampling. The questionnaire was distributed through WJX (<https://www.wjx.cn/vm/OtSLkrP.aspx#>), a widely recognized and practical online questionnaire management tool in China. Data collection took place between September 12, 2022 and October, 22, 2022, with a final screened sample of 698 valid samples retained.

Measurement. Overall, the scale in the current study was developed based on established scales from existing literature and the questionnaire was meticulously designed to incorporate straightforward and unbiased wordings, ensuring ease of comprehension for the respondents. The items in the questions were used to measure the constructs and sources listed in supporting

Table 1 Full collinearity test.

	WO	PC	PP	AC	WC	JB	EW	PE	QQ
Variance inflation factors	1.489	1.801	2.024	1.821	2.166	1.776	1.692	1.548	2.719

WO work overload, PC perceived career development opportunities, PP perceived pay-for performance, AC affective organizational commitment, WC work condition, JB job burnout, EW employee well-being, PE psychological empowerment, QQ quiet-quitting intention.

material S1. *Survey Questionnaire*. The final scale was first developed in English and then it was translated into Chinese. To determine the correctness and validity of the questionnaire items and guarantee equivalence of the measures in the English and Chinese versions of the questionnaires, two authorized experts evaluated the final version of the developed scale. A five-point Likert scale was used to measure each question in the questionnaire (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

Common method variance (CMV). First, Harman’s one-factor test was used to examine CMV issues (Podsakoff et al., 2012). The percentage of variance explained by a single factor was less than 50%; thus, no serious problem with CMV was indicated. This study also included a comprehensive collinearity test to ensure that all study constructs were independent. This evaluation method was proposed by Kock (2015). The entire set of study variables was regressed on the variables derived from the research constructs. The variance inflation factor (VIF) was analyzed in the regression analysis. In addition, the VIF scores for each of the variables included in the analysis needed to be less than 3.3 to demonstrate the absence of multicollinearity problem in the data. As presented in Table 1, the results of the full collinearity test showed no multicollinearity issue in the data, as the VIF values for all constructs were between 1.489 and 2.719, which is within the threshold value of 3.3.

Data analysis methods. This study used Smart-PLS software and structural equation modeling to test the validity of the assumptions and the model. The variance-based PLS-SEM method for testing hypotheses has been proven and used in many studies (Hair et al., 2017). This method is distinguished by its adaptability to the allocation of data, which makes it better suited for sampling smaller sizes (Kock, 2015) than the covariance-based version of the SEM. Before examining the structural model, checking construct reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity is important (Henseler, 2017). Internal consistency was evaluated using Cronbach’s Alpha, Dijkstra-rho, Henseler’s composite reliability, and average variance extracted (AVE) (Hair et al., 2017). The Fornell-Larcker criterion and heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) were used to evaluate the robustness of the measurement with respect to discriminant validity. Factor loadings and cross-loadings were also considered. Beta (coefficients), confidence interval (CI), and *p*-values were applied to the path coefficients to test the hypotheses.

Findings

Demographic characteristics. Table 2 presents the demographic characteristics of the respondents who participated in this study. The participants are academic professionals affiliated with Chinese universities. The majority of them were employed in public universities (65.5%), and the rest 34.5% were employed in private universities. Among the respondents, 48% were male and 52% were female. A small fraction of the respondents aged 21 to 25 years (4.4%), most aged 26 to 35 years (44.3%), followed by those aged 36–45 years (38%) and those over 50 years (13.3%). The sample included professors (3.3%), associate professors (12.8%), lecturers or senior lecturers (63.5%), and teaching assistants

(20.5%). In terms of work experience, the majority (51.6%) had less than 10 years, while only 6.7% worked more than 20 years. Regarding education background, the majority (64%) of the respondents had a master’s degree, and 36% had doctoral degree. Most respondents (51.6%) had a monthly income between CNY 5000 and CNY 8000 and only 3% earned more than CNY 14,000 per month.

Validity and reliability. The results in Table 3 show that CA, CR, and Dijkstra-rho Henseler’s values were higher than the standard value of 0.7. This shows that the questionnaire’s internal consistency is reliable (Hair et al., 2021). However, there are two types of validity: discriminant and convergent. AVE and factor loadings showed convergent validity in this study. Table 3 shows that the AVE for all latent variables was greater than 0.5, indicating satisfactory convergent validity (Hair et al., 2017). Multicollinearity was assessed using VIF for each variable. Thus, all VIFs were found to be less than 3.3. (Henseler et al., 2015). As all VIF values were less than 3.3, there was no evidence of multicollinearity.

The findings revealed that the square root of AVE for a variable should be larger than the correlations to obtain a discriminant validity according to the Fornell-Larcker approach (supporting material S2). For each construct’s discriminant validity, the HTMT ratio score needs be less than 0.900 (Henseler et al., 2015). The obtained HTMT ratio values (Fig. 1) were in agreement with the set limits. All constructs in this study showed the required discriminant validity.

Path analysis. The suitability of the structural model was determined using the coefficient of determination (r^2) and the effect size (f^2). A higher r^2 value suggests that the model is capable of explaining the data. The adjusted r^2 value (Fig. 2 and Table 4) for the five independent constructs (i.e., WO, PC, PP, AC, and WC) on JB explicates 31.9% of the variance in JB. The adjusted r^2 value for EW was 32.9%, signifying that 32.9% of the variation in EW can be explained by WO, PC, PP, AC, and WC. The adjusted r^2 value for QQ was 53.8%, indicating that 53.8% of the variation in QQ could be explained by JB and EW. This signifies that the model is a suitable fit for this study.

According to Cohen (2013), the f^2 value of 0.35 is considered as large, the f^2 value of 0.15 is considered medium, and the f^2 value of 0.02 is considered small. As presented in Table 5, PC was found to have small effects on JB, as well as small effects on EW. Whereas, WO and WC not only exhibited large effects on JB but also on EW. PE was also found to have a large effect on QQ.

The results of the study (Table 4 and Fig. 2) show that WO ($\beta = 0.254$, $t = 6.847$, $p = 0.000$), PP ($\beta = -0.136$, $t = 3.038$, $p = 0.001$), AC ($\beta = -0.264$, $t = 5.906$, $p = 0.000$), and WC ($\beta = -0.071$, $t = 1.672$, $p = 0.001$) significantly and positively influence JB, while PC ($\beta = -0.026$, $t = 0.595$, $p = 0.276$), which was insignificant, does not do so. Likewise, WO ($\beta = -0.026$, $t = 7.031$, $p = 0.000$), PC, PP ($\beta = 0.088$, $t = 1.969$, $p = 0.024$), AC ($\beta = 0.034$, $t = 0.706$, $p = 0.240 > 0.05$) and WC ($\beta = 0.280$, $t = 6.062$, $p = 0.000$) are significantly connected to EW, except PC that becomes insignificant on the same. Finally, the constructs JB ($\beta = .0394$, $t = 12.321$, $p = 0.000$) and EW ($\beta = -0.333$,

Table 2 Respondent's demographic details.

	Frequency	Percentage		Frequency	Percentage
<i>Gender</i>					
Male	334	47.9	<i>Education</i>		
Female	364	52.1	Bachelor's degree or equivalent	0	0
Total	698	100.0	Master's degree	447	64.0
			Doctoral degree	251	36.0
			Total	698	100.0
<i>Age group</i>					
18–25 years	31	4.4	<i>Marital status</i>		
26–35 years	309	44.3	Single	119	17.0
36–45 years	265	38.0	Married	542	77.7
Above 45 years	93	13.3	Divorced	36	5.2
Total	698	100.0	Widowed	1	0.1
			Total	698	100.0
<i>Academic position</i>					
Teaching assistant	143	20.5	<i>University types</i>		
Lecturer/senior lecturer	443	63.5	Public University	457	65.5
Associate professor	89	12.8	Private University	241	34.5
Professor	23	3.3	Total	698	100.0
Total	698	100.0			
<i>Tenure years</i>					
≤5 years	169	24.2	<i>Annual bonus</i>		
>5 to ≤10 years	360	51.6	≤CNY20,000	324	46.4
>10 to ≤20 years	122	17.5	CNY20001–CNY30,000	258	37.0
Above 20 years	47	6.7	CNY30001–CNY50,000	89	12.8
Total	698	100.0	More than CNY50,000	27	3.9
			Total	698	100.0
<i>Average monthly revenue</i>					
Less than CNY 5000	47	6.7			
CNY5000–CNY8000	356	51.0			
CNY8001–CNY11,000	217	31.1			
CNY11001–CNY14,000	57	8.2			
More than CNY14,000	21	3.0			
Total	698	100.0			

1 USD = 6.35 CNY.

Table 3 Reliability and validity.

Variables	No. of items	Mean	Standard deviation	Cronbach's Alpha	Dijkstra-Hensle's rho	Composite reliability	Average variance extracted	Variance inflation factors
WO	5	3.687	0.900	0.892	0.904	0.920	0.698	1.145
PC	5	2.424	0.949	0.912	0.917	0.934	0.740	1.761
PP	5	2.374	0.960	0.909	0.913	0.932	0.733	1.867
AC	5	2.563	1.010	0.897	0.899	0.924	0.709	1.761
WC	5	2.373	1.010	0.914	0.914	0.936	0.744	1.878
JB	5	3.838	0.908	0.904	0.906	0.929	0.723	1.427
EW	5	2.585	0.994	0.879	0.879	0.912	0.674	1.415
PE	5	2.130	0.919	0.887	0.924	0.914	0.682	1.154
QQ	5	3.993	0.860	0.885	0.887	0.916	0.685	-

WO work overload, PC perceived career development opportunities, PP perceived pay-for performance, AC affective organizational commitment, WC work condition, JB job burnout, EW employee well-being, PE psychological empowerment, QQ quiet-quitting intention.

$t = 11.185$, $p = 0.000$) were found to be statistically significant for QQ. The moderating effect (Table 6 and Figs. 3 and 4) of PE on the link between JB and QQ was significant ($\beta = 0.078$, $p = 0.009$). Additionally, as the statistical results revealed, the moderating effect of PE on the connection between EW and QQ was significant ($\beta = -0.059$, $p = 0.037$). Therefore, all hypotheses are confirmed except for H_{2A} and H_{2B} , which are rejected based on the 1% significance level.

Importance performance matrix analysis (IPMA). To further examine the outcomes, we conducted a post-hoc importance performance matrix analysis (IPMA) using WO, PC, PP, AC, WC,

JB, and EW as variables, and QQ as the target construct. As shown in Fig. 5, JB is the most important factor in determining QQ, as reflected by its relatively high importance and performance values. Significantly, EW commands second-highest importance but low-performance values. The most effective managerial steps can be determined by focusing on low-performing but important constructs (Ringle and Sarstedt, 2016). In other words, the performance of aspects related to EW should be prioritized because of their high importance and low performance.

Multi-group analysis. Measurement invariance was established before using PLS-MGA to verify the validity of the effects. The

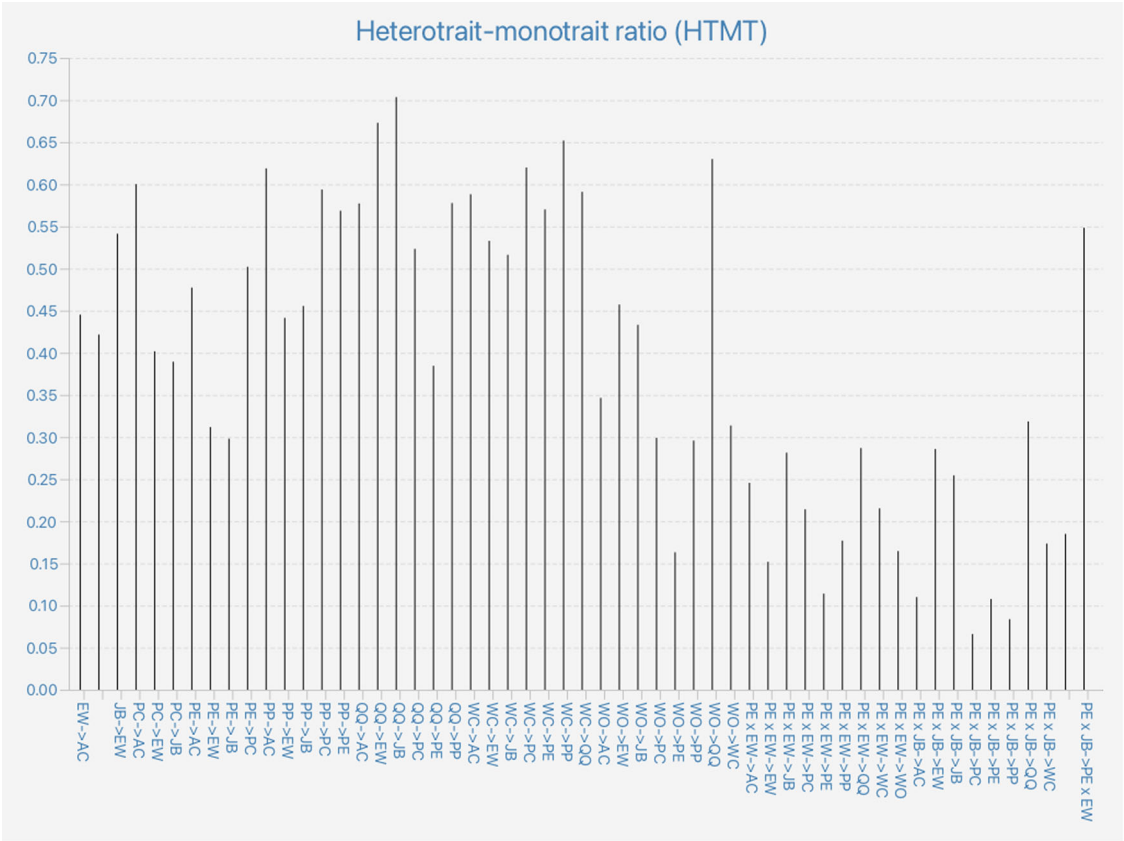


Fig. 1 Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT).

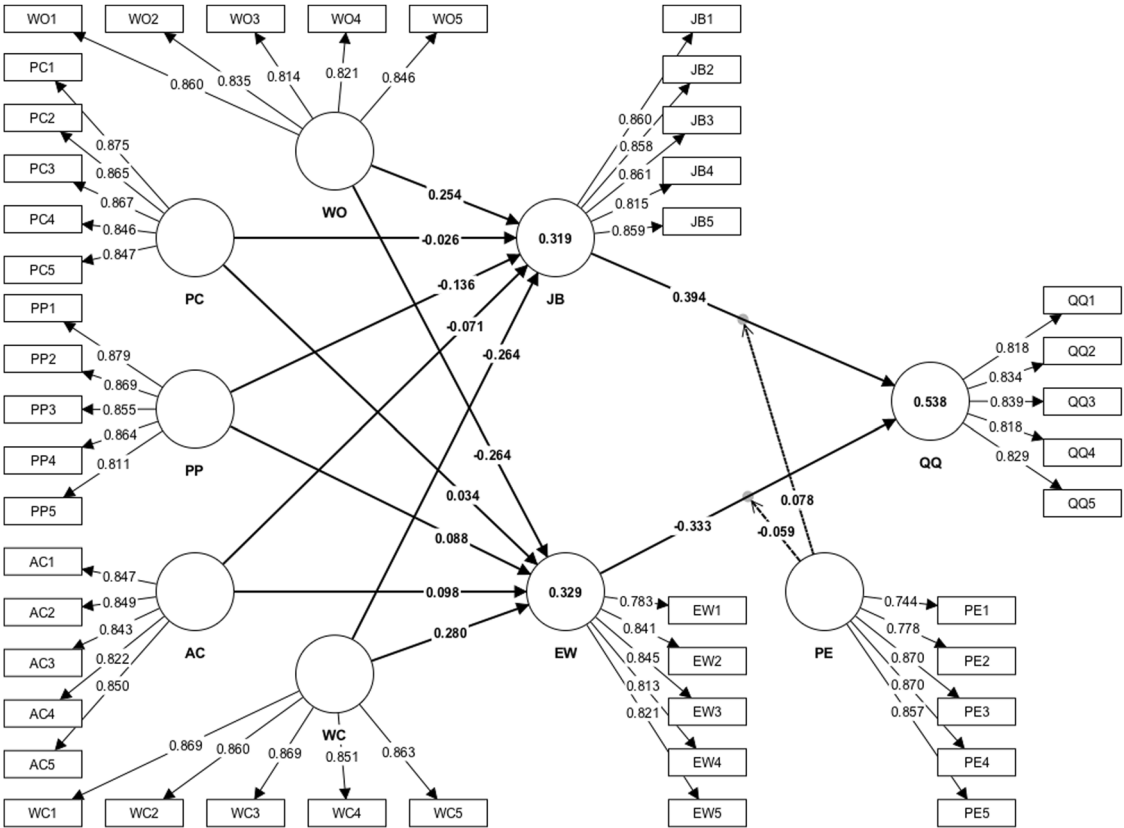


Fig. 2 Measurement model.

Table 4 Path coefficients.

Hypothesis		Beta	CI min	CI max	t-value	p-value	r ²	Decision
H _{1A}	WO → JB	0.254	0.194	0.316	6.847	0.000	0.319	Supported
H _{2A}	PC → JB	−0.026	−0.100	0.046	0.595	0.276		Rejected
H _{3A}	PP → JB	−0.136	−0.214	−0.064	3.038	0.001		Supported
H _{4A}	AC → JB	−0.071	−0.140	−0.001	1.672	0.047		Supported
H _{5A}	WC → JB	−0.264	−0.337	−0.190	5.906	0.000		Supported
H _{1B}	WO → EW	−0.264	−0.327	−0.203	7.031	0.000	0.329	Supported
H _{2B}	PC → EW	0.034	−0.044	0.114	0.706	0.240		Rejected
H _{3B}	PP → EW	0.088	0.013	0.161	1.969	0.024		Supported
H _{4B}	AC → EW	0.098	0.020	0.177	2.075	0.019		Supported
H _{5B}	WC → EW	0.280	0.203	0.355	6.062	0.000		Supported
H ₆	JB → QQ	0.394	0.338	0.444	12.321	0.000	0.538	Supported
H ₇	EW → QQ	−0.333	−0.383	−0.284	11.185	0.000		Supported

WO work overload, PC perceived career development opportunities, PP perceived pay-for performance, AC affective organizational commitment, WC work condition, JB job burnout, EW employee well-being, QQ quiet-quitting intention.

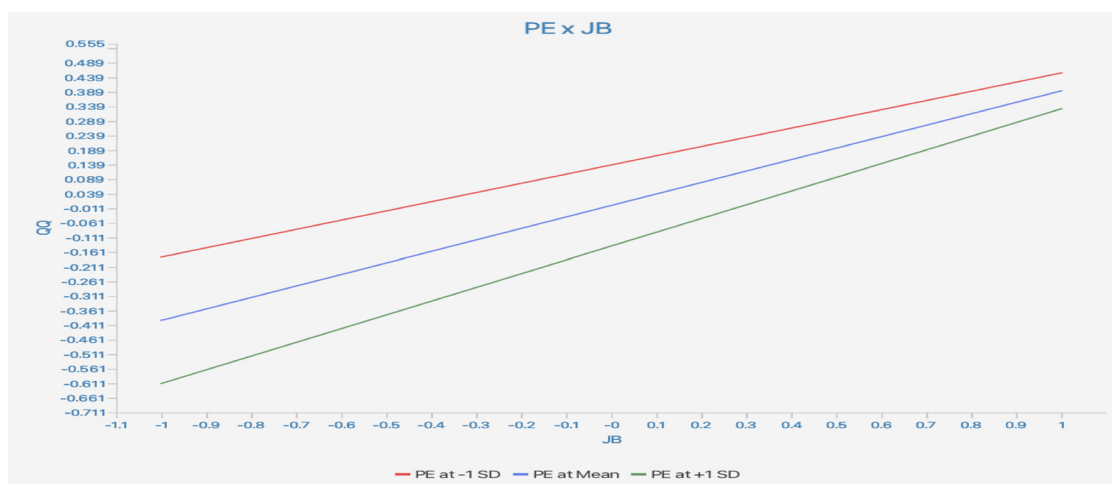
Table 5 Effect size.

	Job burnout	Employee well-being	Quiet-quitting intention
Work overload	0.083	0.091	
Perceived career development opportunities	0.001	0.001	
Perceived pay-for performance	0.015	0.006	
Affective organizational commitment	0.004	0.008	
Work condition	0.054	0.062	
Job burnout			0.235
Employee well-being			0.170
Psychological empowerment			0.036

Table 6 Moderating effect.

Hypothesis		Beta	CI min	CI max	t-value	p-value	Decision
	PE → QQ	−0.139	−0.183	−0.098	5.330	0.000	Supported
H _{M1}	PE*JB → QQ	0.078	0.023	0.131	2.375	0.009	Supported
H _{M2}	PE*EW → QQ	−0.059	−0.115	−0.004	1.789	0.037	Supported

PE psychological empowerment, QQ quiet-quitting intention, EW employee well-being.

**Fig. 3** Moderating effect of psychological empowerment.

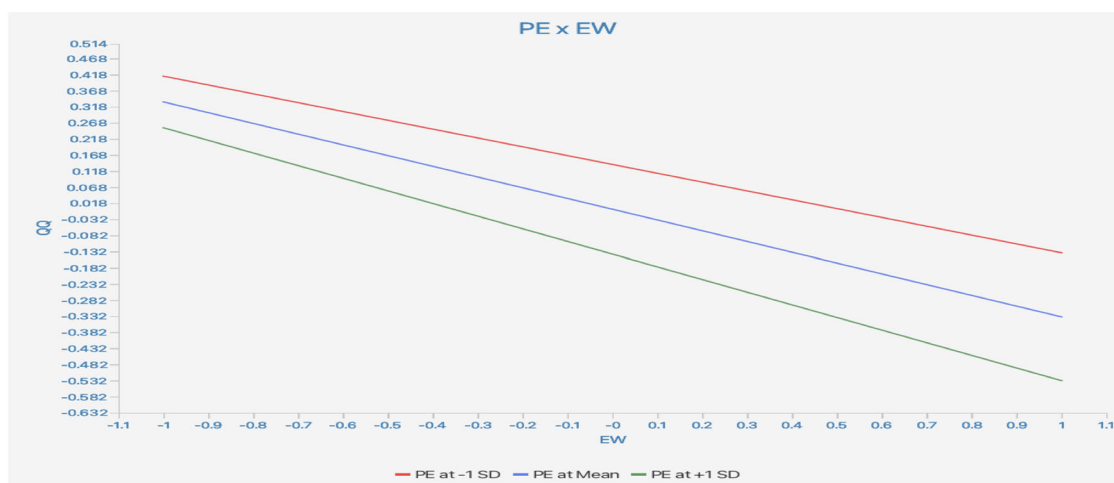


Fig. 4 Moderating effect of employee well-being.

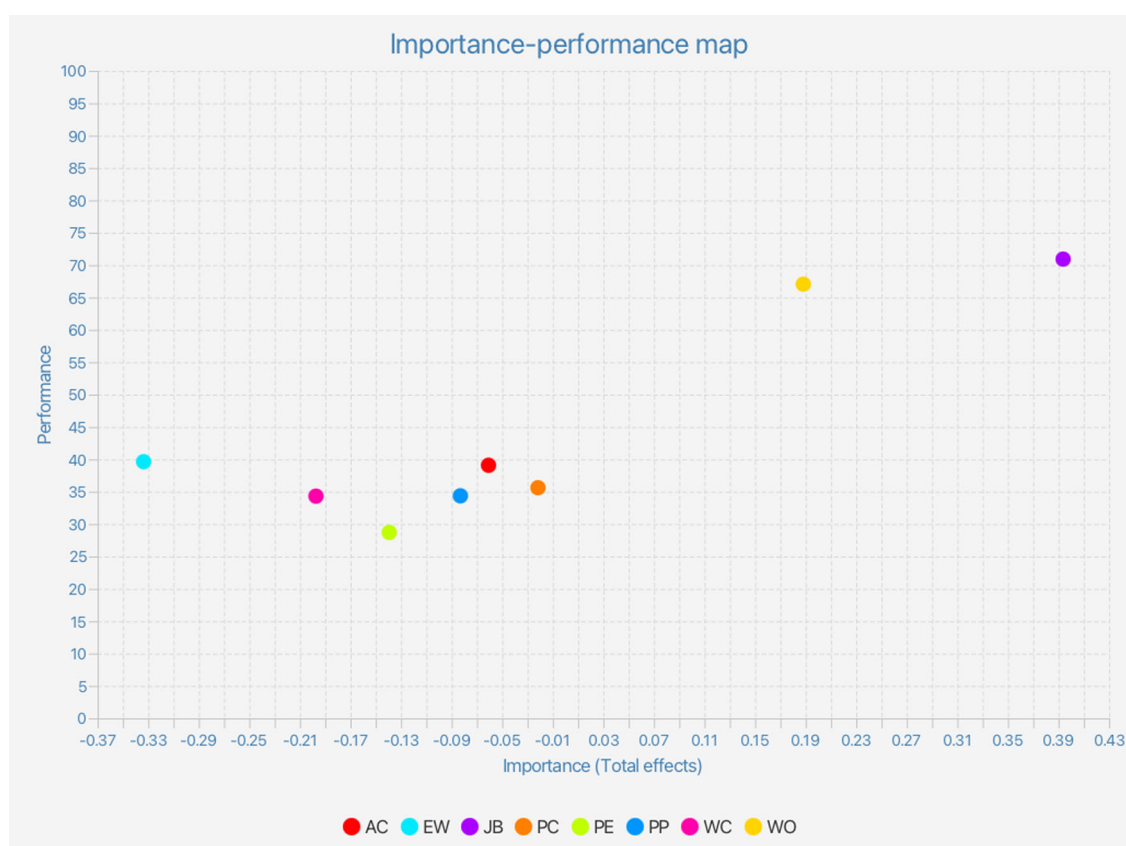


Fig. 5 IMPA findings.

Measurement Invariance of Composite Models (MICOM) approach was used to determine the degree of homogeneity between the two groups. Here, 69 out of 75 MICOM permutation p -values were revealed to be higher than 0.05, confirming the measurement invariances among the analyzed groups. Consequently, the study examined the path coefficient values from PLS-MGA analysis (see Table 7).

As Table 7 indicates, there were no statistical differences between male and female university lecturers, except for the effect of JB on QQ. In terms of age, the outcome of the two groups based on the sample (18 to 35 years; 36 years and above) revealed that the effect (PC to JB) on the respondents aged 18 to 35 years

was much higher than that on the respondents aged 36 years and above. In addition, the findings suggest that the effect (PC to EW) on the respondents aged 18 to 35 years was much higher than that on the respondents aged 36 years and above. In regards to education, the variance of education did not affect the variance within the study's paths. Furthermore, in terms of tenure year, the results of the two groups (5 years or less; more than 5 years) suggested that the effects (PC to JB; EW to QQ) on respondents having a work experience of 5 years or less were much higher than the respondents with a work experience of more than five years. Finally, given the analysis of two groups based on average monthly income (equal to or less than CNY 8000; above CNY

Table 7 Multi-group analysis.

Associations	Gender Male = 334 Female = 364		Age 18 to 35 years = 340 36 years and above = 358		Education Master's degree = 447 Doctorate degree = 251	
	Difference		Difference		Difference	
	Beta	p-value	Beta	p-value	Beta	p-value
WO → JB	0.018	0.401	0.032	0.329	0.119	0.095
PC → JB	0.060	0.250	−0.165	0.031	−0.012	0.449
PP → JB	0.123	0.087	−0.009	0.464	−0.120	0.102
AC → JB	−0.031	0.358	−0.042	0.307	0.061	0.254
WC → JB	0.049	0.300	0.097	0.139	0.041	0.336
WO → EW	0.036	0.319	0.090	0.115	−0.054	0.275
PC → EW	0.020	0.420	0.198	0.018	−0.084	0.194
PP → EW	−0.002	0.493	−0.008	0.469	−0.077	0.203
AC → EW	0.022	0.406	−0.006	0.474	0.139	0.080
WC → EW	−0.095	0.156	−0.063	0.250	−0.014	0.437
JB → QQ	−0.107	0.049	0.032	0.311	0.079	0.132
EW → QQ	−0.020	0.367	0.045	0.224	0.039	0.268
PE → QQ	−0.071	0.091	0.025	0.323	0.030	0.300
PE*JB → QQ	0.058	0.187	0.039	0.275	0.045	0.239
PE*EW → QQ	−0.116	0.037	−0.002	0.494	0.029	0.324

Associations	University types Public university = 457 Private university = 251		Tenure years 5 years or less = 169 More than 5 years = 529		Income ≤CNY 8000 = 403 More than CNY 8000 = 295	
	Failed to confirm the measurement invariances among the groups					
WO → JB			0.059	0.238	0.076	0.155
PC → JB			−0.195	0.026	−0.189	0.018
PP → JB			0.047	0.323	0.103	0.129
AC → JB			−0.119	0.086	0.074	0.196
WC → JB			0.053	0.289	−0.078	0.194
WO → EW			0.000	0.498	0.037	0.310
PC → EW			0.035	0.371	−0.073	0.225
PP → EW			−0.004	0.486	0.067	0.230
AC → EW			0.109	0.129	0.121	0.097
WC → EW			−0.005	0.482	−0.025	0.388
JB → QQ			0.045	0.247	0.060	0.177
EW → QQ			−0.118	0.030	0.076	0.106
PE → QQ			0.032	0.301	0.049	0.190
PE*JB → QQ			−0.043	0.268	−0.039	0.287
PE*EW → QQ			−0.019	0.392	−0.013	0.417

WO work overload, PC perceived career development opportunities, PP perceived pay-for performance, AC affective organizational commitment, WC work condition, JB job burnout, EW employee well-being, PE psychological empowerment, QQ quiet-quitting intention.

8000), the results indicated that the effect of PC on JB was higher for respondents with income equal to or less than CNY 8000 than for respondents with income more than CNY 8000.

Discussion

This cross-sectional study exclusively focuses on the quiet-quitting intention of university lecturers in China. Motivating lecturers is undeniably a significant challenge faced by universities in the present day. Therefore, it is imperative for these institutions to gain a comprehensive understanding of how to inspire a profound sense of work passion among their lecturers. First, this study empirically proves the significant direct influence of work overload on job burnout (H_{1A}). Our finding is consistent with those of a previous study (Poulou and Dhal, 2020). This finding suggests that work overload, particularly due to the transition to a fully online teaching mode during the Covid-19, can contribute to the development of job burnout among lecturers, which may diminish lecturers' enthusiasm for their work. This study also discovers that work overload has a significant negative effect on employee well-being (H_{1B}). This finding corroborates a previous study demonstrating that work overload caused by cognitive

problems leads to lower employee well-being (Bliese and Castro, 2000). This finding highlights that recognizing the impact of excessive work demands on lecturers' well-being can guide institutions in implementing strategies to support their faculty. Simultaneously, we found that perceived career development opportunity tends to have a negative effect on job burnout (H_{2A}) and a positive effect on employee well-being (H_{2B}). Likewise, Price and Reichert (2017) identified perceived career development opportunity as a factor that can enhance job satisfaction and Liang and Hsieh (2005) indicated that an individual's perception of career development significantly influences job burnout. In other words, when university lecturers perceive limited career growth prospects or lack of advancement opportunities, it is likely to contribute to higher levels of job burnout and lower levels of well-being. Moreover, perceived pay-for performance was negatively correlated with job burnout (H_{3A}) and had a positive correlation with employee well-being (H_{3B}). Consistent with these findings, a recent study conducted by He et al. (2021) have also suggested that performance-based compensation fosters a positive work environment characterized by enhanced job satisfaction and a collaborative atmosphere where individuals willingly provide assistance to their colleagues. Given that, satisfying the material

and spiritual needs of university lecturers is important. They need appropriate career development channels, as well as corresponding salaries, so that their employee well-being can be enhanced with a decrease in job burnout.

Consistent with H_{4A} , this study has confirmed that affective organizational commitment has a significant and negative influence on job burnout. This finding is in line with the study by Li (2014), which has suggested that in the context of Chinese universities, lecturers' burnout and affective commitment are closely correlated. The results also imply that affective organizational commitment has a significant and positive influence on employee well-being, thus supporting H_{4B} . This finding is in line with those of previous studies conducted by Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) and Wang et al. (2020), which indicate that this emotional connection between lecturers and universities can act as a protective factor against job burnout and contribute to an overall improvement in their well-being. Furthermore, we found that work condition negatively influences job burnout (H_{5A}) and positively influences employee well-being (H_{5B}), which indicates that work condition is a crucial job resource: a suitable work environment and conditions could improve the well-being of university lecturers as well as help reduce job burnout in university lecturers. This finding is in accordance with the previous studies, indicating that favorable work conditions release burnout and exhaustion and increase the sense of well-being (Elkayam et al., 2020; Wisniewski et al., 2015; Mudrák et al., 2020). In addition, consistent with H_6 , the results indicated a significant positive relationship between job burnout and quiet-quitting intention of university lecturers, which supports the findings of prior studies (Li, 2018; Mohammed et al., 2020). This finding demonstrates that lecturers experiencing high levels of burnout may feel overwhelmed by the demands of their role during Covid-19 and tend to develop a stronger likelihood of quiet-quitting intention, seeking relief from the stress and emotional strain associated with their work. This study also sheds light on the relationship between employee well-being and quiet-quitting intention among Chinese university lecturers. Specifically, this study revealed that lecturers' well-being negatively influences their quiet-quitting intention (H_7). Consistent with the study by Schaufeli and Taris (2014), higher employee well-being makes employees more willing to offer full endeavors to their job. This result suggests lecturers who experience a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction with their work are more likely to feel motivated to continue their contributions within the educational setting.

The moderation analysis unveiled a significant positive moderation effect of psychological empowerment on the relationship between job burnout and quiet-quitting intention. Furthermore, the slope effect diagram depicted a significant and positive moderating effect of psychological empowerment on the relationship between emotional employee well-being and quiet-quitting intention. These findings indicate that the relationship between job burnout and quiet-quitting intention as well as the relationship between employee well-being and quiet-quitting intention becomes stronger when levels of psychological empowerment are high. University lecturers who feel psychologically empowered believe in their abilities to successfully fulfill their roles and responsibilities. This increased self-efficacy contribute to reduced quiet-quitting intention, as they feel competent and capable of making meaningful contributions to the organization.

Finally, the multiple-group analysis assessed the influence of the personal features of the participants in terms of gender, age, education, tenure years, and income. Females were more easily interfered with by job burnout and more intending to quiet quit their jobs than males. Furthermore, job burnout and well-being of university lecturers aged 18 to 35 years are more likely to be affected by their perceptions of perceived career development

opportunities than university lecturers aged above 36 years. Similarly, lecturers with a shorter tenure (5 years or less) are more likely to experience job burnout if they think that their university does not provide satisfactory career development opportunities. The multi-group analysis also confirmed that the influence of perceived career development opportunities on job burnout was relatively higher in the lower-income group than in the higher-income group.

Theoretical implications. The findings of the current study have several important implications for theory and the existing literature. First, this study contributes to the existing literature by applying the SET to understand the complex relationships between work-related factors, employee well-being, job burnout, psychological empowerment and quiet-quitting intention. This study strengthens the fundamental principles of the SET and offers empirical evidence of its effectiveness in elucidating the dynamics of work-related outcomes. Second, this study offers new results and adds depth to the broader literature on psychological empowerment. The previous studies experimented with psychological empowerment as a mediating construct (Meng et al., 2016; Tripathi and Bharadwaja, 2020) and in a moderating role (Meng et al., 2016; Kirrane et al., 2018; Grošelj et al., 2020) with various relationships, yet moderating effects within the context of employee well-being and job burnout are missing. This study presents a new moderating effect of psychological empowerment on the relationship between job burnout and quiet-quitting intention as well as the relationship between employee well-being and quiet-quitting intention. This finding underscores the importance of fostering psychological empowerment among lecturers as a means to alleviate the negative effects of job burnout and enhance their overall employee well-being, ultimately reducing the likelihood of quiet-quitting intention. Finally, the study makes a significant contribution to the existing literature on quiet-quitting intention by providing a comprehensive understanding of the antecedents of quiet-quitting intention among Chinese university lecturers. By examining the interplay between work-related factors and psychological factors, this study offers valuable insights into the prevailing psychological status of Chinese university lecturers.

Practical implications. In view of the results, this study may have critical implications for administration, colleges, and departments (of universities), which can benefit from it by developing effective management policies to motivate university lecturers' enthusiasm. In general, the research results show that job burnout and employee well-being are highly associated with quiet-quitting intention; hence, management policies need to be adopted in line with the practical and psychological demands of staff. Administration, colleges, and departments are expected to perceive the needs of staff to optimize management effects and employee engagement. This study has three key implications.

First, work overload has the strongest effect on job burnout among university lecturers, which implies that physical feelings and mental exhaustion stem from heavy pressure and a large amount of work. This suggests that university lecturers in China regard stressful work as the key source of emotional drain, which also leads to an aversion to work. In addition, according to the outcome of this study's analysis, linking wages and performance can reduce job burnout. When workload cannot be effectively reduced, quantifying the work and matching it with corresponding remuneration will also reduce job burnout. Therefore, for the administration of universities, optimizing the work allocation mechanism and issuing new quantitative assessments to recognize the dedication and value of university lecturers' policies are of great

importance. The administration may utilize several applications to realize punching the clock and calculate working hours; in addition, they could set workload as an indicator of performance assessment reflected in the salary to motivate university lecturers. Additionally, work overload also has the strongest effect on employee well-being, suggesting that a high-tension workload decreases the satisfaction of staff with their profession. Similarly, allocating workloads and ensuring a reasonable teacher-student ratio are essential. When expanding the enrollment scale, administration, colleges, and departments should also expand the recruitment scale of staff (lecturers and administrators), reduce staff workload, and enhance professional satisfaction.

Second, job burnout and employee well-being were both closely associated with quiet-quitting intention. As discussed in the previous chapter, long time and intensive work, mismatch of salary and performance, low organizational commitment, and poor working conditions lead to job burnout and a reduction in employee well-being. Consequently, job burnout and reduced employee well-being are expected to cause quiet quitting. For universities, the quiet-quitting intention of staff is a great waste of resources and threat to human resources. Human resources refer to the sum of the physical and mental strength of all staff, but when they have the will to quit quietly, the efforts, endeavors, and dedications they would put in are very limited, which will greatly affect the quality and value of their work and the amount of output. Therefore, administration, colleges, and departments must pay attention to the staff suffering from job burnout. Clarifying the demands of the staff and providing them with more spiritual concern and support is also necessary. When the administration makes policy adjustments, they should be as human as possible and should consider the behalf and welfare of staff. This may improve the sense of work happiness and organizational belonging, and decrease the quiet-quitting intention of staff.

Third, this study focuses on the moderating effect of psychological empowerment as a consistent connection between job burnout and employee well-being with quiet-quitting intention. The link between job burnout and quiet-quitting intention is affected by psychological empowerment. Under the same workload, employees with a higher level of psychological empowerment have a lower willingness for quiet quitting. University lecturers who possess the opportunity for independence and influence on their work tend to stay in the organization and are pleased to put in more energy and endeavor to fulfill their duties. Additionally, psychological empowerment has a significant moderating effect on employee well-being. These findings should encourage administration and departments to promote high standards of authentic leadership to empower university lecturers and offer them more freedom within an appropriate range, which will enable them to be more flexible in teaching and research. The sense of recognition and trust by the organization may gradually build in their minds; thus, they may more actively participate in their work and bring creativity and vitality to their universities.

Limitations and recommendations. Based on the SET, the current study revealed that psychological empowerment has a moderating effect on job burnout and employee well-being to quiet-quitting intentions. Discovering this moderating influence will help identify the mechanism of how the intention of quiet quitting is generated among university lecturers during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, considering that the respondents in this study were university lecturers from a developing country, future studies may progress from the perspective of developed countries and investigate other industries, such as medicine and manufacturing.

To some extent, the findings of this study were affected by the background of COVID-19, and they may not be applicable in the future, as the influence of COVID-19 is fading with time. The

external and internal environments of universities change rapidly, and management modes and policies adjust accordingly, which may lead to the changing attitude of university lecturers towards universities and their profession. In addition, the factors that cause quiet-quitting intention may vary under different circumstances; thus, future research can enrich the literature by expanding the background and context of the research. Furthermore, future research can apply longitudinal research to determine the change in university lecturers' quiet-quitting intention during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, so as to draw a more comprehensive and dynamic conclusion.

In addition, in the process of our research, we quoted previous literature as the theoretical basis; nevertheless, the relevant literature, in particular, the topic of quiet-quitting intention, remained limited. This dilemma has little possibility of causing a deviation; although the perspectives and objectives of the study are innovative, the research results may be biased due to human touch. With the growth in literature, future studies should thoroughly investigate this issue and contribute to the current literature by adding more valuable findings and implications. This study can be regarded as the first step towards engaging with the social phenomenon of quiet quitting during COVID-19. From a dynamic perspective, the background is continuously changing. Hence, there are other factors worth examining to determine the mechanism that contributes to decreasing the quiet-quitting intention of employees and eventually enhancing the management and performance of organizations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study makes significant contributions to the existing literature by developing a conceptual framework grounded in Social Exchange Theory to understand the intricate relationship between work-related factors, psychological empowerment, employee well-being, burnout and quiet-quitting intention. By applying Social Exchange Theory, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of how these factors influence the psychological status of Chinese university lecturers during the challenging period of Covid-19. This study further reinforces the core tenets of the SET and provides empirical evidence of its utility in explaining the dynamics of work-related outcomes. This study used a quantitative approach to test the associations between variables. The data in this study were collected utilizing a cross-sectional design and subsequently analyzed through PLSSEM. The findings indicate that work overload exerts a positive influence on job burnout and negatively impacts the well-being of lecturers. Furthermore, the findings show perceived career development opportunities, perceived pay-for performance, affective organizational commitment, and work condition emerge as significant factors that mitigate job burnout and promote employee well-being among lecturers. The findings also highlight that employee well-being negatively affects quiet-quitting intention, whereas job burnout positively influences quiet-quitting intention. Regarding the moderating role of psychological empowerment, the results demonstrate the positive moderating effect of psychological empowerment on the relationship between job burnout and quiet-quitting intention, as well as the relationship between employee well-being and quiet-quitting intention. Consequently, these insights bear significant implications for universities and policymakers in the formulation of strategies aimed at reducing quiet-quitting intention, ultimately cultivating a positive and productive work environment.

Data availability

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary Material (S3. Dataset), further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

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Author contributions

Conceptualization: ML, AAM, XC, QY, MM; methodology: ML, XC, MM; formal analysis and investigation: AAM; writing—original draft preparation: ML, XC, MM; writing—review and editing: AAM, QY; supervision: AAM. All authors have revised the manuscript for important intellectual content and have read and agreed to the present version of the manuscript.

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Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

The human research ethics committee of Jishou University approved this study (Ref. Number: Jishou-2022-090204). This study has been performed in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

Informed consent

Written informed consent for participation was obtained from respondents who participated in the survey. No data was collected from anyone under 18 years old.

Additional information

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Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to Abdullah Al Mamun.

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