

The Influence of Public Employee Trust on Organizational Commitment in Jinan, China: The Mediating Roles of Burnout

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Abstract

This study investigates the influence of public employee trust on organizational commitment in Jinan, China, with a particular focus on the mediating role of burnout. A total of 204 public employees participated in the research, selected through purposive sampling. Using a quantitative research design, the study empirically confirmed that public employee trust has a significant positive impact on organizational commitment. Moreover, burnout was found to partially mediate this relationship, indicating that while higher trust directly enhances organizational commitment, it also reduces burnout, which in turn strengthens employees'

commitment. Despite these contributions, the study is limited by its single-city sample, cross-sectional design, and reliance on self-reported data. Future research should employ larger and more diverse samples, longitudinal designs, and additional mediators or moderators to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how trust shapes commitment in the public sector. The findings have important implications, suggesting that building trustful work environments and reducing burnout can enhance employee commitment, while policymakers and administrators should adopt strategies that foster trust and promote employee well-being to strengthen organizational performance.

Keywords: public employee trust, burnout, organizational commitment

1. Introduction

Organizational commitment has long been recognized as a crucial factor influencing the stability, efficiency, and effectiveness of public sector organizations (Mostafa et al., 2023). In the context of China, where public employees play a vital role in delivering essential services, understanding the antecedents of organizational commitment is particularly important. The Chinese public sector is characterized by relatively formal administrative structures and hierarchical relationships, in which organizational procedures, authority, and supervisor–subordinate relationships play an important role in employees’ daily work. In addition, collectivist orientations in Chinese society tend to emphasize group harmony, interpersonal relationships, and organizational belonging (Zhou et al., 2025). These institutional and cultural characteristics make trust in supervisors and interpersonal relationships particularly relevant to employees’ attitudes toward their organizations. Recent research on Chinese public employees supports the importance of this context. Lin et al. (2024) found that perceived superior trust was positively associated with organizational commitment among public employees in China, while Miao et al. (2024) showed that trust in supervisors played an important role in linking participative leadership with organizational commitment among Chinese civil servants.

Existing studies suggest that trust contributes positively to work attitudes, motivation, and performance (Utomo et al., 2023). In the Chinese public sector, the importance of trust may be further strengthened by hierarchical organizational relationships because employees’ interactions with supervisors can influence their perceptions of support, fairness, and organizational belonging (Gao & Wang, 2025). However, in the public sector context, particularly within the Chinese setting, the mechanisms through which trust influences organizational commitment remain underexplored. Burnout, characterized by emotional exhaustion and reduced professional efficacy, may serve as a critical mediating factor in this relationship. Higher levels of trust can reduce burnout by alleviating stress and fostering supportive work environments, which in turn promote stronger commitment to organizational goals (Ariawan et al., 2023). This proposed mechanism is supported by recent evidence from Chinese public employees, as Lin et al. (2024) found that burnout mediated the relationship between perceived superior trust and organizational commitment.

Although recent studies have provided evidence on trust, burnout, and organizational commitment in the Chinese public sector, further research is needed to examine these relationships in specific local public-sector contexts and to consider how China's hierarchical and collectivist characteristics may shape the proposed relationships. To address this gap, the present study investigates the influence of public employee trust on organizational commitment in Jinan, with a specific focus on the mediating role of burnout. By doing so, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the psychological processes that link trust and commitment, provides context-specific evidence from the Chinese public sector, and offers implications for enhancing employee well-being and organizational performance..

2. Literature Review

This section reviews the relevant literature to establish the theoretical foundation of the study. It examines the relationships between public employee trust, burnout, and organizational commitment, with particular attention to the mediating role of burnout. The review identifies research gaps and provides support for the proposed hypotheses.

2.1 Public Employee Trust and Organizational Commitment

Public employee trust refers to the confidence employees place in their organization, leaders, and colleagues, reflecting perceptions of fairness, reliability, and integrity within the workplace (Yu, 2022). Trust is widely recognized as a cornerstone of effective organizational functioning, as it reduces uncertainty, fosters cooperation, and strengthens psychological bonds between employees and their institutions (Silva, Moreira & Mota, 2023). In the public sector, where employees are often motivated by service values and long-term stability, trust becomes especially critical for sustaining positive work attitudes and minimizing turnover intentions.

Organizational commitment, defined as the psychological attachment and loyalty of employees to their organization, has been consistently linked to trust in prior research (Rodríguez-Fernández et al., 2021). Studies indicate that higher levels of trust can enhance affective commitment by promoting feelings of belonging and alignment with organizational values, while also supporting continuance and normative commitment through improved job security and fairness perceptions (Li et al., 2021). Trustful environments make employees feel valued and supported, strengthening their willingness to remain and contribute to the organization.

Empirical evidence supports this connection. Research has shown that trust in supervisors and institutions positively predicts organizational commitment across various cultural and professional contexts (Lin et al., 2024). For example, studies in both private and public sectors have confirmed that trust fosters stronger commitment by enhancing job satisfaction, reducing workplace conflicts, and facilitating open communication (Cheng, 2024). In the Chinese public sector, trust may be particularly influential due to the hierarchical nature of organizations and the importance of collective harmony.

However, Kumari et al. (2021) suggested that, although trust in the organization and employees' commitment partially mediate the relationship between corporate social responsibility practices and corporate reputation, their study did not establish a direct effect of trust on organizational commitment. Similarly, a study by Li et al. (2021), which involved 143 airline pilots, found that organizational identification and commitment mediated the relationship between organizational trust and safety-related behavior. This suggests that trust may not directly influence commitment but instead affects employee behavior indirectly through enhanced organizational identification." In light of these debates, it is necessary to further examine the relationship between public employee trust and organizational commitment in the Chinese public sector context.

H1: Public employee trust has a positive effect on organizational commitment.

2.2 Burnout and Organizational Commitment

Burnout is a psychological syndrome characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment that results from prolonged exposure to work-related stressors (Parmar et al., 2021). In the public sector, employees frequently face heavy workloads, bureaucratic pressures, and high service demands, making them particularly vulnerable to burnout (Ariawan et al., 2023). This chronic condition not only undermines individual well-being but also adversely affects key organizational outcomes, including job satisfaction, performance, and commitment.

Organizational commitment, as a psychological bond, reflects employees' identification with and attachment to their organization. High levels of burnout can erode affective commitment by weakening employees' emotional connection to their organization and diminish normative commitment by reducing their sense of obligation (Santiago-Torner et al., 2024). In addition, burnout negatively impacts continuance commitment by intensifying employees' intentions to withdraw (Parmar et al., 2022). In contrast, low burnout levels are associated with greater engagement, motivation, and loyalty, which in turn reinforce commitment (Lin et al., 2024).

A growing body of empirical research supports this negative association. Studies across public administration, education, and healthcare have consistently demonstrated that burnout significantly reduces organizational commitment by fostering cynicism, lowering morale, and increasing turnover intentions (Ribeiro et al., 2024; Salama et al., 2022; Ul Hassan et al., 2023). In the context of Chinese public employees, burnout may exert even stronger effects due to the cultural emphasis on collective responsibility and harmony, where emotional exhaustion can directly disrupt both personal well-being and professional dedication.

H2: Burnout is negatively associated with organizational commitment.

2.3 The Mediating Role of Burnout

While public employee trust has been shown to positively influence organizational commitment, the mechanism underlying this relationship requires further exploration. Burnout, as a key psychological construct in organizational behavior, may serve as a crucial

mediator. Employees who perceive high levels of trust in their organization and supervisors are more likely to experience supportive work environments, reduced stress, and enhanced job satisfaction (Ndlovu et al., 2021). These positive experiences can lower the likelihood of burnout, which in turn reinforces employees' commitment to their organization.

Conversely, when trust is low, employees may perceive their workplace as unfair, unsupportive, or unreliable, leading to higher levels of stress and emotional exhaustion (Theriou et al., 2024). Such conditions foster burnout, which diminishes the psychological bond employees feel toward their organization (Said et al., 2021). Therefore, burnout provides a pathway through which trust influences organizational commitment, explaining both the direct and indirect effects of trust on employee attitudes.

Empirical studies across organizational contexts have provided evidence for this mediating mechanism. Research has found that trust reduces stress and improves resilience, thereby lowering burnout and strengthening commitment (Ariawan et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2020). In the public sector, where employees face complex responsibilities and high service expectations, this mediating process is particularly salient. Understanding the role of burnout not only clarifies the psychological dynamics between trust and commitment but also offers practical insights for designing interventions to foster healthier and more committed workforces.

H3: Burnout mediates the relationship between public employee trust and organizational commitment.

2.4 Research Framework

The research framework in this study positions public employee trust as the independent variable, organizational commitment as the dependent variable, and burnout as the mediating variable. Public employee trust exerts a direct positive influence on organizational commitment, while burnout has a negative effect on employees' willingness to remain committed to the organization. At the same time, public employee trust is expected to reduce burnout, thereby indirectly enhancing organizational commitment. This framework shows how trust strengthens employee commitment both directly and indirectly by reducing burnout.

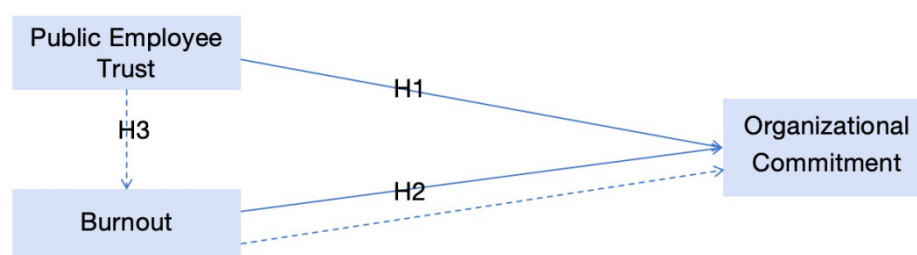


Figure 1. Research Framework

3. Methodology

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional design to examine the influence of public employee trust on organizational commitment, with burnout as a mediator. A total of 204 public employees in Jinan, China, participated, and were selected through purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the study objectives. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire, including validated scales for public employee trust, burnout, and organizational commitment. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, assured of confidentiality, and provided consent prior to participation. Descriptive statistics summarized sample characteristics and variable distributions, while correlation analysis examined relationships among trust, burnout, and commitment. Mediation analysis was conducted using the PROCESS macro in SPSS to test the hypothesized mediating role of burnout. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$. Ethical standards were strictly followed, including informed consent, anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any stage.

The questionnaire measured the main constructs using well-established and validated scales from prior studies. Public employee trust was assessed through items adapted from Adresi and Darun (2017), Braganza et al. (2021), and Dong and Chung (2021), which capture employees' perceptions of reliability, integrity, and fairness within the organization. Burnout was measured using the scale developed by Wu et al. (2019) and Yang et al. (2021), focusing on emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced professional efficacy. Organizational commitment was evaluated using the instrument adapted from Otoo and Rather (2024), which reflects employees' affective, normative, and continuance commitment toward their organization. These established measures provide evidence of the reliability and validity of the constructs examined in this study.

4. Data Analysis

Table 1 presents the results of the Cronbach's Alpha analysis for the study variables. All constructs demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency, as their Cronbach's Alpha values exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Specifically, Perceived Employee Trust reported a reliability coefficient of 0.843, indicating high reliability. Burnout showed a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.806, which also reflects good internal consistency. Organizational commitment achieved the highest reliability with a coefficient of 0.865, suggesting excellent internal consistency. Overall, the results confirm that the measurement scales are reliable and suitable for further analysis.

Table 1. Cronbach's Alpha Analysis Results

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha	interpretation
Organizational Commitment	0.865	Good reliability
Perceived Employee Trust	0.843	Good reliability
Burnout	0.806	Good reliability

Table 2 presents the correlation coefficients among organizational commitment, perceived employee trust, and burnout. The results show that perceived employee trust is positively and significantly correlated with organizational commitment ($r = 0.739$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that higher levels of employee trust are associated with stronger commitment to the organization. Conversely, burnout exhibits a significant negative correlation with both organizational commitment ($r = -0.719$, $p < 0.01$) and perceived employee trust ($r = -0.707$, $p < 0.01$). These findings suggest that employees experiencing higher burnout tend to show lower organizational commitment and lower levels of perceived trust. The correlation analysis highlights the roles of trust and burnout in organizational commitment.

Table 2. Correlations

Variables	OC	PET	B
Organizational Commitment	1		
Perceived Employee Trust	0.739**	1	
Burnout	-0.719**	-0.707**	1

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3 shows the regression results of perceived employee trust on organizational commitment. The model is statistically significant ($F = 243.444$, $p < 0.001$) and explains 57.4% of the variance in organizational commitment ($R^2 = 0.574$). PET exerts a strong and positive effect on OC ($\beta = 0.739$, $p < 0.001$). This indicates that employees with higher levels of perceived trust are more likely to demonstrate stronger organizational commitment. The relatively high standardized beta coefficient ($\beta = 0.739$) further emphasizes the importance of PET as a predictor of OC.

Table 3. Regression analysis of PET on OC

Variables	R ²	F	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)			0.918	0.126	-	7.265	<0.001
	0.574	243.444					
PET			0.678	0.043	0.739	15.603	<0.001

a. Dependent Variable: OC

Table 4 presents the regression analysis results of burnout on organizational commitment. The model is statistically significant ($F = 216.547$, $p < 0.001$) and accounts for 51.7% of the variance in organizational commitment ($R^2 = 0.517$). Burnout demonstrates a significant negative effect on OC ($B = -0.666$, $\beta = -0.719$, $t = -14.716$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that higher

levels of burnout are associated with lower organizational commitment. The strong negative standardized beta coefficient ($\beta = -0.719$) underscores burnout as a substantial predictor that undermines employees' commitment to the organization. These findings highlight the critical need for organizational interventions aimed at reducing burnout to preserve and enhance employee commitment and overall workplace stability.

Table 4. Regression analysis of Burnout on OC

Variables	R ²	F	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)			0.924	0.133	-	6.94	<0.001
	0.517	216.547					
Burnout			-0.666	0.045	-0.719	-14.716	<0.001

a. Dependent Variable: OC

Table 5. Mediation Analysis Results (PROCESS Model 4)

Path / Effect	B	SE	t	p	95% CI (LL, UL)
Outcome: Burnout (M)					
PET → B	-0.701	0.049	-14.19	<0.001	[-0.798, -0.603]
Outcome: Organizational Commitment (Y)					
PET → OC (Direct effect, c')	0.423	0.056	7.55	<0.001	[0.313, 0.534]
B → OC	-0.364	0.057	-6.44	<0.001	[-0.475, -0.252]
Indirect Effect (PET→B→OC)	0.255	0.061*	—	—	[0.141, 0.384]
Total Effect (c)	0.678	0.043	15.6	<0.001	[0.593, 0.763]

The results of the mediation analysis are presented in Table 5. Perceived employee trust had a significant negative effect on burnout ($B = -0.701$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that employees with higher levels of trust reported lower levels of burnout. In turn, burnout exerted a significant negative effect on organizational commitment ($B = -0.364$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that higher burnout levels undermine employees' commitment to their organization. After including burnout as a mediator, PET remained a significant predictor of OC ($B = 0.423$, $p < 0.001$), demonstrating that the relationship is only partially mediated. The indirect effect of PET on OC through burnout was significant ($B = 0.255$, 95% CI [0.141, 0.384]), as the confidence interval did not include zero. The total effect of PET on OC was also significant ($B = 0.678$, $p < 0.001$). These findings indicate that burnout partially mediates the relationship between perceived employee trust and organizational commitment. In other words, trust directly enhances commitment but also indirectly strengthens commitment by reducing burnout.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that public employee trust has a significant positive effect on organizational commitment among public employees in Jinan, China, thereby supporting H1. This result reinforces previous research suggesting that trust is a cornerstone of organizational functioning, as it nurtures employees' affective attachment, loyalty, and willingness to remain with the organization (Pološki Vokić et al., 2021; Yu, 2022). When employees perceive their organization and supervisors as reliable, fair, and supportive, they are more inclined to develop a strong psychological bond with their workplace. In the context of China's public sector, where bureaucratic structures and hierarchical authority are prominent (Li, 2024), this finding underscores the importance of cultivating trust to enhance employees' sense of belonging. Moreover, trust is crucial for fostering human resource stability and ensuring the long-term sustainability of public service delivery.

The negative relationship between burnout and organizational commitment, supporting H2, is also consistent with earlier studies demonstrating that emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced professional efficacy weaken employees' motivation and loyalty (Ariawan et al., 2023; Parmar et al., 2022). Public employees experiencing prolonged work stress may disengage psychologically, exhibit reduced enthusiasm for organizational goals, and display stronger withdrawal intentions. This finding is particularly relevant in the public sector, where employees often face heavy workloads, limited resources, and high public expectations. The detrimental effect of burnout highlights the necessity for public institutions to adopt proactive strategies, such as stress management programs, workload redistribution, and employee assistance initiatives, to mitigate burnout and preserve organizational commitment.

Furthermore, the mediating role of burnout in the relationship between trust and organizational commitment, supporting H3, provides important theoretical insights. Consistent with Ali et al. (2021) and Lin et al. (2024), the results suggest that trust not only directly enhances employees' attachment but also indirectly strengthens commitment by reducing emotional exhaustion. This dual pathway highlights trust as both a resource and a buffer: trustful organizational environments alleviate psychological strain, foster resilience, and reduce the likelihood of burnout, which in turn reinforces employees' willingness to remain committed to the organization. By explaining this mechanism, the study provides a clearer understanding of how trust promotes sustained employee commitment in the public sector.

Taken together, these findings contribute to both theory and practice. Theoretically, they extend the literature on organizational behavior in the public sector by demonstrating that trust and burnout are interrelated predictors of commitment, with burnout serving as a critical mediator. Practically, building trust and reducing burnout are essential strategies for public organizations to strengthen employee commitment and improve service performance.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the influence of public employee trust on organizational commitment in Jinan, China, with burnout as a mediating variable. The results confirmed that public employee trust positively affects organizational commitment (H1), burnout negatively affects organizational commitment (H2), and burnout partially mediates the relationship between trust and commitment (H3). These findings highlight the critical role of trust in fostering a committed and motivated workforce and demonstrate the psychological mechanism through which trust operates by reducing emotional exhaustion and burnout.

The study extends existing research by clarifying the mediating role of burnout in the trust–commitment relationship within the Chinese public sector context. It provides empirical evidence supporting the idea that trust not only directly enhances commitment but also indirectly strengthens it by mitigating burnout, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of organizational behavior in public institutions. For policymakers and administrators, the findings suggest the importance of cultivating trustful work environments and implementing strategies to reduce burnout. Measures such as supportive leadership, workload management, stress reduction programs, and employee counseling can enhance employees' psychological attachment and overall organizational performance.

Despite these contributions, the study has several limitations. First, the sample was limited to public employees in Jinan, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Second, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to infer causal relationships. Third, reliance on self-reported data may introduce common method bias. Future studies could address these limitations by using longitudinal designs and expanding the sample to multiple regions or countries. Additionally, researchers may explore other potential mediators or moderators, such as job satisfaction, public service motivation, organizational culture, or leadership styles, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms through which trust influences organizational commitment.

In conclusion, enhancing public employee trust and reducing burnout are essential strategies for fostering organizational commitment, improving employee well-being, and ensuring effective public sector performance.

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Author contributions

Mr Shang were responsible for study design and revising. Mr Shan was responsible for data collection. Mr Shang drafted the manuscript while Dr Janifer and Dr Norizan revised it. All authors read and approved the final manuscript. In this paragraph, also explain any special agreements concerning authorship, such as if authors contributed equally to the study.

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Obtained.

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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