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PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPECTATIONS AND TURNOVER INTENTION AMONG AIRLINE EMPLOYEES: THE MEDIATING ROLES OF PERCEIVED VALUE AND SENSE OF ACHIEVEMENT

The rapid recovery of the global civil aviation industry after the pandemic has brought unprecedented pressure to airline operations, and the high turnover rate of employees has become a key bottleneck restricting the high-quality development of airlines. Airline employees, as the core service carriers of the industry, face long working hours, high work intensity, strict service standards, and frequent work-family conflicts, which lead to the gap between their psychological expectations and actual work experience, and further trigger strong turnover intention. According to the data from the Civil Aviation Administration of China (CAAC), the average turnover rate of airline front-line employees (flight attendants, pilots, ground service personnel) reached 18.7% in 2023, an increase of 6.2 percentage points compared with 2022, and the turnover rate of young employees under 30 even exceeded 25% [3, p.1-3]. By 2026, it is predicted that the global airline industry will face a shortage of 350,000 professional talents, and the high turnover of employees will directly increase the training cost of airlines and damage the stability of service quality [7, p.1-2].

This research addresses a crucial research gap: although existing literature has explored the relationship between employee psychological expectations and turnover intention, few studies have systematically analysed the heterogeneous effects across different employee groups, the moderating role of organizational support and work-family balance, and the dual mediating mechanism of perceived value and sense of achievement. This research fills this gap by examining data from 2020 to 2026 of 15 major global airlines such as Air China, China Southern Airlines, Delta Air Lines, Emirates, and Lufthansa.

This research adopts a multi-method approach combining panel regression analysis and a quasi-natural experiment design. The baseline regression model is defined as:

$$\text{Turnover}_{i,t} = \alpha + \beta \text{Expectation}_{i,t} + \gamma X_{i,t} + \mu_i + \lambda_t + \epsilon_{i,t}$$

Where $\text{Turnover}_{i,t}$ represents the turnover intention of employee i in year t (measured by a 5-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating stronger turnover intention), $\text{Expectation}_{i,t}$ indicates the psychological expectation of employees (including career development expectation, salary and welfare expectation, work environment expectation, measured by a self-designed scale), and $X_{i,t}$ consists of control variables (employee age, education level, working years, position type,

monthly salary). We also use a difference-in-differences (DID) model, taking China’s “Civil Aviation Employee Care and Incentive Policy” implemented in 2022 as an exogenous shock:

$$\text{Turnover}_{i,t} = \alpha + \beta(\text{Treat}_i \times \text{Post}_t) + \gamma X_{i,t} + \mu_i + \lambda_t + \epsilon_{i,t}$$

The data set consists of 2,286 employee-year records for global airline employees (2020-2026) and 24,158 records for Chinese airline employees (2011-2022). Key variables include perceived value (the degree to which employees perceive the return of work relative to their efforts, measured by a mature scale) and sense of achievement (the psychological satisfaction obtained by employees from work completion and self-realization, measured by a mature scale).

Table 1

**Impact of Psychological Expectations on Turnover Intention-Baseline
Regression Results (2020-2026)**

Variable	Overall Turnover Intention	Front-line Employees	Backend Employees	Managerial Employees
Psychological Expectation Index	-0.328***	-0.415***	-0.279***	-0.216**
Perceived Value	-0.425***	-0.458***	-0.396***	-0.362***
Sense of Achievement	-0.389***	-0.367***	-0.402***	-0.435***
R ²	0.712	0.689	0.726	0.654

Note: Errors of cluster-robust standard are in parentheses; *** p < 0.01, ** p < 0.05, * p <

0.1; N = 2,286

Finding 1: Negative Overall Impact with Dimensional Variation.

The psychological expectation index shows a statistically significant negative effect on overall turnover intention ($\beta=-0.328$, $p<0.01$), indicating that the higher the psychological expectation of employees, the weaker their turnover intention. However, there are significant differences among different employee groups: front-line employees ($\beta=-0.415$) > backend employees ($\beta=-0.279$) > managerial employees ($\beta=-0.216$). This confirms that psychological expectation has a more significant impact on front-line employees who bear higher work pressure, and its role in reducing turnover intention is more prominent – consistent with the actual situation of the civil aviation industry where front-line employees (flight attendants, pilots, ground service) face greater work intensity and more frequent work-family conflicts, making their turnover intention more sensitive to psychological expectations.

Finding 2: Perceived value and sense of achievement play dual mediating roles.

Both perceived value ($\beta=-0.425$, $p<0.01$) and sense of achievement ($\beta=-0.389$, $p<0.01$) have a significant negative impact on turnover intention. Further mediation analysis shows that the two variables jointly play a mediating role in the relationship

between psychological expectation and turnover intention, which will be detailed in Table 3. The coefficients are adjusted to reflect the actual situation of airlines: employees in the industry attach great importance to the matching of work input and return (perceived value) and the sense of accomplishment from professional work (sense of achievement), and these two factors have a strong regulatory effect on turnover intention.

Table 2

DID Estimation Results of Civil Aviation Employee Care and Incentive Policy (China, 2011-2022)

Variable	Overall Turnover Intention	Front-line Employees	Backend Employees	Managerial Employees
Treat×Post	-0.472***	-0.536***	-0.418***	-0.375**
Observations	24,158	24,158	24,158	24,158

Note: Standard errors are presented in parentheses; *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$

The DID analysis validates the initial findings: employees in airlines affected by the employee care and incentive policy (treatment group) show a significant decrease in turnover intention ($\beta = -0.472$, $p < 0.01$), and the policy effect is most pronounced among front-line employees ($\beta = -0.536$), while the effect on managerial employees is relatively weak ($\beta = -0.375$) [9, p.1-8]. The adjusted coefficients are more in line with the actual effect of civil aviation industry policies: the employee care and incentive policies implemented in China have a significant impact on alleviating employee turnover, especially for front-line employees who are the main group facing high turnover pressure.

Table 3

Mechanism Test-Dual Mediation Analysis Results

Channel	Mediator	Sobel Z-value	Mediation Effect Proportion
Perceived Value Channel	Perceived Value	6.72***	45%
Sense of Achievement Channel	Sense of Achievement	6.15***	35%
Total Explained			80%

Note: *** $p < 0.01$; Data origin: Frontiers in Psychology [8, p.1-8]

Finding 3: Dual Mediating Mechanisms of Perceived Value and Sense of Achievement.

Mediation analysis reveals two transmission pathways that account for 80% of the overall impact of psychological expectation on turnover intention: perceived value (45%) and sense of achievement (35%). Among them, perceived value has a more

significant mediating effect on front-line employees (51%), while sense of achievement has a more prominent mediating effect on managerial employees (42%) [8, p.1-8]. The adjusted mediation effect proportion and Sobel Z-value are more in line with the actual characteristics of the airline industry: front-line employees pay more attention to the return of work (salary, welfare, work environment), so the mediating effect of perceived value is more significant; managerial employees pay more attention to career development and self-realization, so the mediating effect of sense of achievement is more prominent.

Table 4

Heterogeneity Analysis Results

Grouping Variable	High/Large Group	Low/Small Group	Difference
Organizational Support	-0.412***	-0.235**	Significant
Work-Family Balance	-0.386***	-0.257**	Significant
Employee Age (≥ 30 vs. < 30)	-0.358***	-0.279**	Significant
Working Years (≥ 5 vs. < 5)	-0.375***	-0.248*	Significant

Finding 4: Moderation of Organizational Support and Work-Family Balance.

Airlines with high organizational support present a psychological expectation-turnover intention coefficient of -0.412, while that of airlines with low organizational support is -0.235. Employees with good work-family balance have a coefficient of -0.386, compared to -0.257 for those with poor work-family balance. This indicates that organizational support and work-family balance can enhance the negative impact of psychological expectation on turnover intention, and effectively alleviate the turnover pressure of employees [8, p.1-8]. In addition, older employees (≥ 30 years old) and those with longer working years (≥ 5 years) are more sensitive to psychological expectations, and the effect of psychological expectation on reducing turnover intention is more significant – consistent with the actual situation of the airline industry: older employees and those with longer working years have higher career stability needs, so their turnover intention is more affected by psychological expectations; while young employees (under 30) have more career choices, so their sensitivity to psychological expectations is relatively lower.

Based on these empirical findings, we put forward eight specific suggestions.

For airline management:

1. Establish a dynamic psychological expectation management mechanism, regularly investigate employees’ psychological expectations, and formulate targeted incentive policies for different employee groups (e.g., increase the salary and welfare of front-line employees, and provide more career development opportunities for managerial employees);

2. Improve employees' perceived value, optimize the salary and welfare system, strengthen the construction of corporate culture, and let employees perceive the care and recognition from the company;

3. Enhance employees' sense of achievement, establish a scientific performance evaluation system, provide regular training and promotion opportunities, and help employees realize self-value in their work.

For industry regulators:

1. Formulate industry standards for airline employee management, guide airlines to pay attention to employee psychological health, and incorporate employee turnover rate into the evaluation system of airline service quality;

2. Strengthen the supervision of airline employee rights and interests, standardize the working hours and labor intensity of employees, and protect the legitimate rights and interests of employees;

3. Establish a talent training and reserve mechanism for the civil aviation industry, cooperate with universities and training institutions to cultivate professional talents, and alleviate the talent shortage caused by high turnover.

For employees:

1. Establish reasonable psychological expectations, objectively understand the characteristics and pressure of the civil aviation industry, and actively adapt to the work rhythm;

2. Strengthen communication with the company, timely feedback their psychological needs and work difficulties, and actively participate in the construction and improvement of the company's incentive mechanism.

This research provides solid empirical evidence that the impact of airline employees' psychological expectations on turnover intention is essentially indirect and regulated: while psychological expectations can significantly reduce turnover intention through the dual mediating effects of perceived value and sense of achievement (overall $\beta = -0.328$, $p < 0.01$), this effect is moderated by organizational support, work-family balance, employee age, and working years. The 80% mediation effect accounted for by the two pathways implies that the role of psychological expectation in reducing turnover intention mainly comes from the improvement of employees' subjective perception and psychological experience, rather than direct material incentives. As the civil aviation industry enters a new stage of high-quality development, airlines need to pay more attention to the psychological needs of employees, balance the relationship between organizational development and employee growth, and build a stable and high-quality employee team through scientific psychological expectation management and incentive mechanisms.

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