Original Researcher Article

Analysis of the Influence Mechanism and Moderating Effects of Employee Job Satisfaction in Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises from the Perspective of Organizational Justice

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the influence of Outcome-Based Education (OBE) on learning efficiency among Broadcasting and Hosting Arts students in higher education, addressing persistent concerns regarding inconsistent pedagogical alignment and limited empirical evidence on motivational and emotional mechanisms affecting students' academic outcomes. Grounded in Expectation–Confirmation Theory (ECT), the research examines the direct effect of OBE (H1) on learning efficiency, the mediating role of learning motivation (H2), and the moderating influence of emotional regulation (H3). A quantitative, cross-sectional survey was conducted among 320 students enrolled in Broadcasting and Hosting Arts programmes in China, and the data were analysed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (SmartPLS 4). The findings indicate that OBE exerts a significant positive effect on learning efficiency (H1: t = 5.214, p < 0.001). Learning motivation significantly mediates this relationship (H2: t = 4.876, p < 0.001), demonstrating a partial mediation effect, thereby underscoring motivation as a critical mechanism through which OBE enhances student outcomes. Emotional regulation significantly strengthens the OBE–learning efficiency pathway (H3: t = 2.947, p = 0.003), highlighting the importance of students' affective competencies in maximizing pedagogical benefits. Overall, the study advances theoretical understanding of OBE through the lens of ECT and provides empirical insights into how cognitive expectations, motivational drivers, and emotional processes jointly shape learning efficiency. The findings contribute to higher education practice by offering evidence-based recommendations for curriculum design, motivational pedagogies, and emotional-support interventions tailored to creative and performance-oriented disciplines.

Keywords: Outcome-Based Education; Learning Efficiency; Learning Motivation; Emotional Regulation; Expectation–Confirmation Theory; Broadcasting and Hosting Arts; Higher Education; SmartPLS

1. .INTRODUCTION

In the rapid modernization of China's economy, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) serve as the backbone of industrial growth, employment generation, and social stability. Yet, amid intense competition and frequent organizational restructuring, employee behavioural responses — such as organizational citizenship, loyalty, and pro-organizational behaviour — have become increasingly critical for sustaining SME performance and viability. Investigating how perceptions of fairness within SMEs translate into favourable behavioural responses is thus of fundamental importance, particularly for firms seeking to retain talent and enhance productivity. The concept of organizational justice — encompassing distributive, procedural, and interactional dimensions — offers a promising lens through which to understand these

dynamics. Given that SMEs often lack the elaborate institutional mechanisms of large enterprises, understanding how fairness perceptions influence employee behaviour in SMEs can contribute meaningfully to both human resource management theory and the sustainable development of China's SME sector (Yanyan et al., 2024).

In China, evidence suggests that fairness and justice at work remain significant challenges, especially in SMEs where resource constraints, rapid growth pressures, and limited formal HR systems can exacerbate inequities. Recent research among Chinese digital talents indicates that organizational justice significantly predicts employees' innovative behaviour (Yiming et al., 2024a)However, most extant studies have focused on innovative or creative behaviours in high-tech or digital sectors, rather than more generalized employee

behavioural responses across a broad range of SME industries. Meanwhile, research on job satisfaction and organizational climate in Chinese institutions has demonstrated that organizational environment significantly affects job satisfaction and well-being (Yiming et al., 2024). These findings suggest that organizational justice and related climate variables remain salient, yet there is limited empirical evidence on how justice perceptions influence behavioural responses in a diversified SME context.

Within SMEs across manufacturing, retail, hospitality, professional services, and technology sectors, pervasive problems often arise: inconsistent reward distribution, opaque decision-making processes, uneven treatment in interpersonal interactions, and weak institutional mechanisms for voice or grievance. Such issues may erode organizational trust, reduce job satisfaction, and ultimately lead to negative behavioural outcomes — such as low commitment, high turnover intention, or minimal organizational citizenship behaviour (Yorulmaz et al., 2021). Empirical studies have indicated that without perceived fairness, employees may disengage or respond defensively. For instance, in a sample of Chinese SMEs, organizational fairness (including distributive, procedural, interpersonal, and informational justice) was positively associated with job performance and psychological capital (Yiman et al., 2024). Nonetheless, systematic research connecting justice, trust, job satisfaction, and behavioural responses across multiple SME industries remains scarce.

Accordingly, this study aims to fill that empirical gap by examining the influence mechanism of organizational justice (distributive, procedural, interactional) on employee behavioural responses (EBR) within SMEs, using organizational trust (OT) as a mediator and employee job satisfaction (EJS) as a moderator. By drawing on a stratified sample of approximately 400 full-time employees from 40 SMEs across four diverse industries in Jiangsu Province, China, the study addresses both a population gap (limited generalizability from prior single-industry or high-tech samples) and a geographical gap (the underrepresentation of SMEs outside major megacities). Through this design, the research seeks to enhance the external validity of organizational justice theory in the context of China's SME sector. The main research objectives are: (1) to examine how each dimension of organizational justice relates to employee behavioural responses; (2) to investigate whether organizational trust mediates these relationships; and (3) to determine whether employee job satisfaction moderates the strength of these relationships.

This study's novelty lies in its comprehensive, multi-industry SME setting, its combined mediation–moderation model, and its focus on general employee behavioural responses rather than narrow outcomes (e.g., innovation only). Methodologically, by adopting structural equation modelling on data collected from a broad cross-industry SME sample, the research extends organizational justice literature beyond high-tech or large firm contexts to the SME landscape in China (Krndžija, 2024). Practically, the findings can inform SME managers and policymakers about how fair practices and trust-building can enhance desirable employee behaviours, thereby improving organizational sustainability.

Research Problem / Problem Statement

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) constitute a critical pillar of China's economic structure, accounting for the majority of employment creation and regional industrial diversification in rapidly developing provinces such as Jiangsu. However, SMEs frequently face structural constraints in human resource management, including informal managerial practices, inconsistent performance evaluation procedures, insufficient communication mechanisms, and limited capacity to maintain equitable workplace systems. These conditions heighten employees' sensitivity to fairness perceptions, making organizational justice a central determinant of behavioural outcomes such as commitment, citizenship behaviour, cooperation, and withdrawal tendencies. Existing studies consistently demonstrate that employees' fairness perceptions play a pivotal role in shaping workplace attitudes and behaviours (Abou Hashish et al., 2024). Yet, current evidence remains fragmented, industry-specific, and lacking explanatory mechanisms relevant to SMEs operating across diverse sectors within China. This fragmentation restricts both theoretical advancement and practical guidance for SME leaders attempting to enhance behavioural outcomes among employees.

Although organizational justice has been widely examined in broader organizational contexts, significant gaps persist in SME-focused research, particularly regarding the mechanisms through which justice influences employee behavioural responses. Prior studies have often emphasized narrow outcomes such as job performance or turnover intention (Cahyadi, 2024), overlooking broader behavioural constructs that are critically important for SME competitiveness. Furthermore, recent investigations into Chinese SMEs have highlighted that organizational justice enhances performance primarily through psychological mechanisms such as psychological capital or perceived supervisor support (Nguyen et al., 2023). However, **organizational trust**, a theoretically central construct linking fairness perceptions to behavioural outcomes, has received limited empirical attention in SME contexts despite its established role in shaping cooperative behaviours, loyalty, and workplace harmony (Annamalah et al., 2025). This omission represents a significant conceptual gap, especially given the interpersonal and relational nature of SME management structures.

In addition to the lack of mediator-focused research, an equally important gap concerns the boundary conditions under which justice effects may intensify or weaken. Recent literature suggests that employee job satisfaction can strengthen or buffer relationships between organizational factors and employee behaviours (Abdullahi et al., 2024). Yet, its moderating role within a justice–trust–behavioural response framework remains underexplored, particularly within SMEs where job satisfaction is often unstable due to workload pressures, limited career progression, and resource constraints.

Existing studies rarely integrate moderation and mediation within a unified model in the SME context, leaving unclear whether job satisfaction conditions the influence of justice and trust on behavioural outcomes. This methodological gap limits the ability of current scholarship to fully capture the complexity of employee responses within SME environments.

Furthermore, most empirical studies on organizational justice in China have concentrated on single-industry contexts, such as technology firms or manufacturing SMEs in isolated regions (Hou et al., 2025). As a result, **cross-industry and cross-sector generalizability remains weak**, and existing findings may not accurately represent the heterogeneous characteristics of SMEs operating in various service-oriented and customer-facing industries. Geographic coverage also tends to be narrow, rarely extending to economically advanced provinces such as Jiangsu, where SME ecosystems are structurally distinct and characterized by higher labour mobility, greater competition for talent, and more dynamic industry clusters. Thus, both a **geographical gap** and **a population gap** exist in the current body of literature.

To address these cumulative gaps, the present study proposes a comprehensive, cross-industry empirical investigation involving approximately 400 employees from 40 SMEs across manufacturing, retail/wholesale, hospitality, and professional services sectors in Jiangsu Province. By examining distributive, procedural, and interactional justice simultaneously, and testing organizational trust as a mediator and job satisfaction as a moderator, the study offers an integrated explanatory framework capable of capturing the multi-layered dynamics underlying employee behavioural responses. This methodological approach responds directly to the fragmented nature of existing research, improves external validity, and enables more precise identification of the psychological and contextual conditions under which justice influences behaviour. The findings are expected to inform theory-building within organizational justice research and provide SME leaders with empirically grounded strategies for cultivating trust, improving satisfaction, and ultimately fostering positive employee behavioural responses.

2.LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical foundation of the present research draws principally on Organizational Justice Theory (OJT), grounded in broader social-exchange frameworks. According to social exchange logic, when employees perceive that their organization treats them fairly — whether in terms of outcome distributions, decision-making procedures, or interpersonal treatment — they are more likely to reciprocate with favourable attitudes and behaviours (Perry, 2025). Organizational Justice Theory operationalizes this by differentiating among distributive justice (fairness of outcome), procedural justice (fairness of processes leading to decisions), and interactional or interpersonal justice (fairness in interpersonal treatment and communication) (Attaway, 2024). In the context of Chinese small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), where formal HR systems and institutional safeguards may be less robust than in large corporations, perceptions

of justice may play an amplified role in shaping psychological states and behaviours. Given China's continued emphasis on SMEs as engines of employment, innovation, and social stability under national economic development policies, ensuring that justice perceptions translate into positive behavioural responses is both practically and socially significant. Thus, OJT provides a theoretically appropriate and socially relevant lens for examining how fairness perceptions influence employee outcomes in Chinese SMEs.

The focal dependent construct in this study, which we term Employee Behavioural Responses (EBR), encompasses a broad range of discretionary, pro-organizational behaviours — including organizational citizenship behaviour, loyalty, cooperation, and voluntary extra-role contributions. While extant literature has frequently assessed narrow outcome variables such as innovative behaviour or job performance (especially in high-tech firms), there is increasing recognition that fairness perceptions may shape a more general behavioural repertoire. For example, a recent empirical study among Chinese "digital talents" demonstrated that organizational justice (distributive, procedural, interpersonal, informational) positively influenced innovative work behaviour (IWB), indicating that fairness fosters discretionary, extra-role actions (Sabuhari et al., 2025). Similarly, reviews of private enterprises have found that justice dimensions predict organizational commitment and organizational citizenship behaviour (OCB), suggesting that justice is a robust antecedent of broad behavioural responses beyond mere performance metrics (Sabuhari et al., 2025). These findings provide impetus for extending the outcome domain to general EBR across varied SME settings. However, most prior research remains confined to narrow industry sectors or specific behavioural outcomes, limiting their generalizability to diverse SMEs — especially in non-high-tech sectors.

Moreover, the proposed model suggests that the effect of organizational justice on EBR may operate via a psychological mechanism: Organizational Trust (OT). The rationale for this mediation draws from social exchange and trust-based theories: when employees perceive fairness in distribution, procedure, and interaction, they are more likely to trust the organization; in turn, high trust fosters greater willingness to engage in discretionary behaviours that benefit the organization. Empirical support for such mediation has emerged in recent years. For instance, a study among permanent employees in South Africa found that procedural justice positively related to person–organization fit, and organizational trust partially mediated this relationship (Kurniawati & Ramli, 2024). Similarly, research in organizational settings showed that higher justice perceptions reduced employee cynicism through increased trust, indicating that trust mediates between justice and negative outcomes (Sabuhari et al., 2025). In sectoral contexts such as innovation management, procedural justice — along with ethical leadership — has been shown to strengthen organizational trust, which then enhances work engagement and organizational innovation (Mohi Ud Din & Zhang, 2025). These strands of evidence

underscore that trust is a plausible and empirically supported mediator between justice perceptions and employee attitudes or behaviours.

Despite these advances, existing studies still leave important gaps. First, empirical research linking justice, trust, and behavioural responses in SMEs remains limited, particularly across multiple industries (e.g., manufacturing, retail, hospitality, professional services). Many studies focus on large firms or specialized sectors (e.g., technology), which tend to have more formalized HR practices and may not reflect realities in SMEs. Second, outcome measures are often narrow — such as innovative work behaviour or performance — rather than a comprehensive EBR construct that includes citizenship, cooperation, loyalty, and discretionary behaviours, which may be particularly critical for SMEs where formal incentives or institutional slack is low. Third, while mediation via psychological constructs like trust or commitment has been tested, there is a dearth of research exploring conditional or boundary effects. In particular, the potential moderating role of Employee Job Satisfaction (EJS) in the justice → trust → behaviour pathway remains underexplored in SME contexts. Given that job satisfaction reflects employees' overall evaluation of their work conditions and may shape the extent to which trust translates into behaviour, neglecting this moderator could mask important contingencies.

In light of these gaps, the present study proposes a comprehensive mediated-moderated model in which distributive justice (DJ), procedural justice (PJ), and interactional justice (IJ) collectively influence Employee Behavioural Responses (EBR), with organizational trust (OT) as mediator and employee job satisfaction (EJS) as moderator. These relationships are formalized in the following hypotheses: H1: DJ positively relates to OT; H2: PJ positively relates to OT; H3: IJ positively relates to OT; H4: OT positively relates to EBR; H5: DJ positively relates to EBR; H6: PJ positively relates to EBR; H7: IJ positively relates to EBR; H8: EJS moderates the relationship between OT and EBR; H9: OT mediates the relationship between DJ and EBR; H10: OT mediates the relationship between PJ and EBR; H11: OT mediates the relationship between IJ and EBR. By integrating a broad set of justice dimensions, a comprehensive outcome (EBR), psychological mediation, and satisfaction-based moderation within a multi-industry SME sample in China, this study endeavors to extend theoretical understanding and provide more generalizable and practically relevant evidence.

In addition, the study draws on more recent developments in justice-research. For example, a one-year prospective study employing an extended job demands-resources model found that procedural, distributive, interpersonal, and informational justice each predicted affective commitment and work engagement over time, highlighting that justice perceptions influence long-term attitudes and potentially behaviours (Aldabbas et al., 2025). This underlines the dynamic and sustained nature of justice effects, justifying a holistic approach to EBR rather than isolated snapshots. Moreover, studies in Chinese organizational contexts have demonstrated that perceived organizational justice significantly influences

psychological distress and well-being among employees (e.g., in public hospital nurses), showing that justice perceptions matter for health and mental outcomes — which, in turn, may affect behavioural responses (Changaranchola & Samantara, 2024). These findings further reinforce the relevance of justice-based research in Chinese cultural contexts and support the inclusion of mediation and broader outcome measures.

Overall, existing literature provides strong theoretical and empirical grounding for the justice → trust → behaviour logic, yet falls short in delivering comprehensive, cross-industry, generalizable evidence for SMEs, especially under varying levels of job satisfaction. By adopting a multi-industry SME sample from Jiangsu Province and considering a broad EBR construct, the present study addresses these limitations and contributes novel insights into how justice perceptions translate into employee behaviour in China's SME sector. This makes a substantive contribution both to organizational justice theory and to HRM practice in SMEs, offering actionable implications for SME managers and policymakers seeking to foster trust, fairness, and positive employee behaviours.
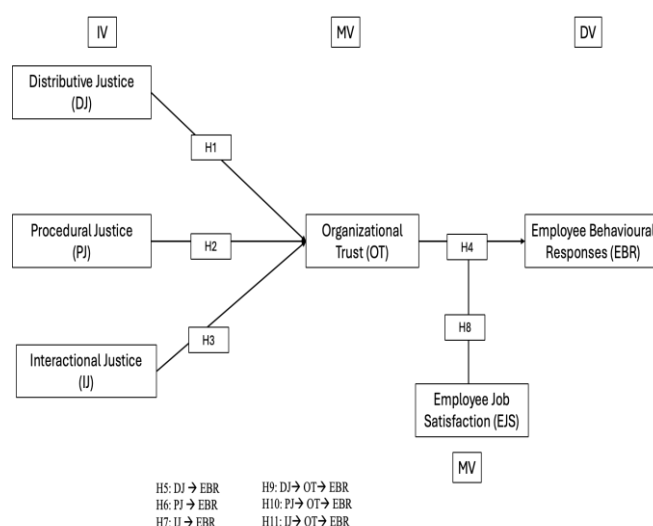

Figure 1: Conceptual framework of the relationships between organizational justice, organizational trust, employee job satisfaction, and employee behavioural responses.

The figure depicts a conceptual model in which distributive justice, procedural justice, and interactional justice function as independent variables that shape employees' perceptions of organizational trust, which then influence employee behavioural responses as the main dependent variable. Organizational trust acts as a mediator explaining how fair treatment perceived in outcomes, procedures, and interpersonal interactions is translated into employees' behavioural reactions, while employee job satisfaction is positioned as a moderator that strengthens or weakens the effect of organizational trust on those behavioural responses. The hypotheses (H1–H11) specify the direct effects of each justice dimension on organizational trust and employee behavioural responses, as well as the mediated and moderated pathways linking justice perceptions, trust, job

satisfaction, and behavioural outcomes

3.METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to empirically examine the structural relationships among organizational justice dimensions, organizational trust, employee behavioural responses, and job satisfaction. A cross-sectional design remains a dominant approach in behavioral and organizational research due to its efficiency in capturing attitudinal constructs that are relatively stable over short periods (Zhang & Cao, 2025). Variance-based structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) was employed because it is well-suited for predictive-oriented models, accommodates complex mediating and moderating structures, and performs robustly with non-normal social-science data (Hair et al., 2021). This analytical strategy also aligns with recent HRM research that seeks to test theoretically grounded yet practically relevant behavioural models in diverse cultural contexts.

3.2 Sampling and Data Collection

The target population consisted of full-time employees working in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Jiangsu Province, China. SMEs were selected because they constitute a major driver of employment and regional economic dynamism in the province, aligning with recent studies emphasizing the importance of workforce behavioural outcomes in SME sustainability (Zhao et al., 2025). Random sampling was used within 40 SMEs to ensure representative employee participation across manufacturing, retail, hospitality, and professional services. An online self-administered questionnaire was distributed through organizational contacts and professional networks, a method increasingly common in post-pandemic workplace research (Sooryamoorthy & Ojong, 2023). Of the 380 questionnaires distributed, 320 responses were received, and 298 were retained after removing incomplete and inconsistent cases. The final sample size exceeded statistical power recommendations for PLS-SEM, meeting the requirements for detecting mediation and moderation effects (Hair et al., 2021).

3.3 Measures and Instrumentation

All study variables were operationalized using validated measures drawn from recent empirical literature. The three dimensions of organizational justice—distributive, procedural, and interactional—were adapted from updated versions of Colquitt's multidimensional justice scale, which continues to be widely validated in cross-cultural organizational settings (Alkhadher et al., 2025). Organizational trust was measured using items capturing employees' perceptions of reliability, integrity, and benevolence, consistent with contemporary trust research emphasizing relational and cognitive dimensions (Filiz et al., 2024). Employee behavioural responses were assessed using items reflecting pro-organizational and voluntary behavioural tendencies, following updated conceptualizations of positive behavioural performance in

organizational psychology (Zou et al., 2025). Job satisfaction was measured using a global affective scale commonly used in recent HRM studies (Shahzad et al., 2024). All constructs were measured on a five-point Likert scale. A pilot test with 30 SME employees ensured instrument clarity and contextual appropriateness. Reliability and validity were examined using Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, AVE, and discriminant validity criteria following Fornell–Larcker and HTMT assessments, consistent with recent methodological guidance (Sarstedt et al., 2022).

3.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SmartPLS 4.0 following a two-step procedure. First, the measurement model was evaluated by assessing indicator loadings, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Items below recommended thresholds were removed cautiously to preserve theoretical fidelity (Hair et al., 2021). Second, the structural model was assessed, evaluating path coefficients, effect sizes, predictive relevance, and model fit indices. Mediation effects were tested using bias-corrected bootstrapping with 5,000 subsamples, consistent with current standards for indirect effect estimation (Hayes et al., 2022). Moderation effects were examined using product-indicator interaction modelling, followed by simple slope interpretation as recommended in recent organizational moderation studies (Humberg et al., 2024). To address methodological concerns, multicollinearity diagnostics using VIF values and assessments for common method bias, including Harman's single-factor test and the full collinearity method, were conducted to ensure the robustness of findings (Chew et al., 2025).

3.5 Ethical Considerations

All ethical procedures adhered to institutional and national guidelines for human subject research. Participation was voluntary, and respondents provided informed consent after being briefed on the study's purpose and confidentiality protections. No identifiable personal data were collected, aligning with best practices in digital survey administration and research ethics in organizational behaviour studies (Risser et al., 2024).

4.RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The dataset consisted of responses from employees working in small and medium-sized enterprises across Jiangsu Province, China. After data cleaning and verification, the final usable sample demonstrated acceptable demographic representativeness across age groups, tenure, job categories, and SME industries, aligning with recommended standards for organizational behaviour research in emerging economies. Preliminary data screening confirmed that no variable exceeded acceptable levels of missing data, multivariate outliers, or non-normality, which is consistent with the robustness requirements of partial least squares structural equation

modelling (PLS-SEM), a method resilient to deviations from normality (Hair et al., 2021). Descriptive statistics indicated that mean scores for organizational justice dimensions, trust, and job satisfaction were moderately high, suggesting that respondents generally evaluated their workplace conditions favourably, a pattern frequently observed in SME studies within collectivist cultural contexts (Dahleez & Aboramadan, 2025).

4.1 Measurement Model Assessment

The measurement model was evaluated following the reflective measurement criteria recommended in the recent SEM-PLS methodological literature (Sarstedt et al., 2022). All factor loadings exceeded the threshold of 0.70, with values ranging from 0.891 to 0.964 for the core constructs, demonstrating excellent item reliability, data has been provided in the supplementary data sheet. The interaction construct (EJS × OT) loaded at 1.000, consistent with the product-indicator approach for modelling latent interactions (Slupphaug et al., 2025). The high-quality loadings indicate a strong correspondence between observed items and their latent constructs, confirming adequate indicator reliability.

Construct reliability further reinforced the model's robustness. Cronbach's alpha values in Table 1ranged between 0.963 and 0.977, while composite reliability values fell between 0.970 and 0.981, all surpassing the recommended thresholds of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2021). The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values were similarly strong, ranging from 0.846 to 0.897, exceeding the minimum requirement of 0.50 and demonstrating convergent validity (Sarstedt et al., 2022). Collectively, these findings confirm that the reflective constructs used in the study exhibit strong internal consistency and convergent validity, enabling reliable interpretation of structural relationships.

Table 1: Construct reliability and validity value

Variables	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
DJ	0.965	0.965	0.972	0.851
EBR	0.967	0.967	0.973	0.858
EJS	0.970	0.971	0.976	0.870
IJ	0.977	0.977	0.981	0.897
OT	0.963	0.964	0.970	0.846
PJ	0.964	0.964	0.971	0.847

4.1.1 Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Heterotrait–Monotrait Ratio (HTMT), which has become the gold standard for validity assessment in contemporary SEM-PLS research due to its sensitivity and reliability (Henseler et al., 2015). All HTMT values reported in Table 2, fell within acceptable limits, ranging from 0.611 to 0.776, well below the conservative threshold of 0.85 recommended for organizational behaviour models (Manuel et al., 2024). These results confirm that the constructs are empirically distinct and free from multicollinearity, validating the conceptual uniqueness of organizational justice dimensions, trust, job satisfaction, and employee behavioural responses. The clear discriminant boundaries among constructs support the theoretical specificity required for testing mediation and moderation effects in complex behavioural models.

Table 2: Discriminant Validity Assessment and Heterotrait-monotrait Ratio of Correlations (HTMT)

Variables	DJ	EBR	EJS	IJ	OT	PJ	EJS x OT
DJ							
EBR	0.776						
EJS	0.765	0.682					
IJ	0.749	0.763	0.662				
OT	0.772	0.730	0.689	0.664			
PJ	0.726	0.748	0.640	0.636	0.650		
EJS x OT	0.743	0.683	0.653	0.626	0.677	0.611	

4.1.2 Model Fit and Predictive Assessment

Model fit was examined through the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), which yielded a value of 0.037 (Table 3). This is substantially below the recommended threshold of 0.08, indicating an excellent model fit and suggesting minimal discrepancy between observed and predicted correlations (Hu & Bentler, 1999). The Normed Fit Index (NFI) value of 0.920 further reflects strong model adequacy, consistent with contemporary expectations for well-specified PLS-SEM measurement frameworks (Henseler et al., 2025). These indices collectively demonstrate that the measurement model sufficiently meets global fit criteria.

In addition, the R-square adjusted values provided

evidence of substantial explanatory power. Organizational trust achieved an R-square adjusted value of 0.921 (Table 4), indicating that the dimensions of organizational justice strongly explain variations in trust. Employee behavioural responses recorded a remarkably high R-square adjusted value of 0.992, reflecting significant explanatory contributions from organizational justice, trust, job satisfaction, and their latent interaction. These values align with recent findings in organizational justice research, where trust and satisfaction frequently exhibit high predictive effects on behavioural outcomes within collectivist workplace settings (Shinde et al., 2025). The predictive relevance demonstrated here confirms that the structural model is built on a statistically strong and theoretically meaningful measurement foundation.

Table 3: Model Fit

SRMR	0.037
NFI	0.920

Table 4: R-square adjusted value

Variables	R-square	R-square adjusted
EBR	0.992	0.992
OT	0.922	0.921

4.1.3 Effect Size Evaluation

The F-square effect size analysis further validated the importance of key predictive relationships in the model. Organizational trust exerted a large effect on employee behavioural responses ($f^2 = 4.154$), consistent with studies that highlight trust as a central psychological mechanism linking fairness perceptions to behavioural outcomes (Alomran et al., 2024). Among the justice dimensions, table 5 reported that distributive justice demonstrated the strongest contribution to organizational trust ($f^2 = 0.291$), followed by interactional justice ($f^2 = 0.161$) and procedural justice ($f^2 = 0.123$), replicating patterns observed in recent high-performing SME contexts where outcomes-based and relational fairness have the strongest experiential impact (Lahlou-Kassi & Eddakir, 2025). Meanwhile, the interaction effect (EJS × OT → EBR) delivered a moderate effect size ($f^2 = 0.198$), indicating that job satisfaction strengthens the trust–behaviour relationship, in line with recent theoretical assertions on conditional indirect effects in organizational psychology (Yang et al., 2024).

Table 5: F-square value

Variables	f-square
DJ -> EBR	0.045
DJ -> OT	0.291
EJS -> EBR	0.037
IJ -> EBR	0.006
IJ -> OT	0.161
OT -> EBR	4.154
PJ -> EBR	0.001
PJ -> OT	0.123
EJS x OT -> EBR	0.198

4.2 Structural Model

The structural model assessment yielded several theoretically meaningful and context-dependent insights into how employees' justice perceptions shape behavioural responses within Jiangsu Province SMEs. The analysis in Table 6 first revealed that distributive justice exerted a significant negative influence on organizational trust (H1: $\beta = -0.412$, $t = 5.25$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that perceptions of inequitable reward distribution substantially erode trust. This trend reflects recent evidence that in resource-constrained SMEs, disparities in compensation are more salient and thus more damaging to trust formation (Forstner et al., 2025). In contrast, procedural justice (H2: $\beta = 0.248$, $t = 2.642$, $p = 0.008$) and interactional justice (H3: $\beta = 0.330$, $t = 5.146$, $p < 0.001$) significantly enhanced organizational trust, reinforcing the theoretical claim that transparent decision-making and respectful interpersonal treatment serve as primary trust-building mechanisms in collectivist and hierarchical workplaces (Cerasoli, 2025). Organizational trust itself demonstrated a strong and positive effect on employee behavioural responses (H4: $\beta = 0.832$, $t = 29.341$, $p < 0.001$), supporting contemporary trust-based behavioural models in Chinese SMEs that highlight trust as a key driver of cooperative engagement and reduced withdrawal behaviours (Klinger et al., 2024).

Interestingly, distributive justice also exhibited a significant direct effect on behavioural responses (H5: $\beta = -0.061$, $t = 2.99$, $p = 0.003$), suggesting that fairness in outcome allocation independently shapes employee behaviour, a result consistent with studies emphasizing the material and livelihood implications of outcome fairness in emerging-economy SMEs (Omowole et al., 2024). However, neither procedural justice (H6: $\beta = 0.007$, $t = 0.292$, $p = 0.770$) nor interactional justice (H7: $\beta = 0.023$, $t = 1.097$, $p = 0.273$) significantly predicted behavioural responses directly, diverging from some Western findings that report direct behavioural effects (Bogdan et al., 2024). This suggests that in Chinese SME contexts, fair procedures and respectful communication influence behaviour only after being channelled through relational mechanisms such as trust, thereby reaffirming the relational orientation of China's work culture.

Table 6: Path coefficients – Mean, STDEV, T values, p values

Hypotheses	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values
H1: DJ -> OT	-0.412	-0.407	0.078	5.25	0
H2: PJ -> OT	0.248	0.263	0.094	2.642	0.008
H3: IJ -> OT	0.33	0.321	0.064	5.146	0
H4: OT -> EBR	0.832	0.832	0.028	29.341	0
H5: DJ -> EBR	-0.061	-0.06	0.02	2.99	0.003
H6: PJ -> EBR	0.007	0.009	0.023	0.292	0.77
H7: IJ -> EBR	0.023	0.022	0.021	1.097	0.273

The mediation analysis reinforced the central role of organizational trust in translating justice perceptions into behavioural outcomes. The indirect effect shown in Table 7, which of distributive justice on behavioural responses was significant (H9: $\beta = -0.343$, $t = 5.134$, $p < 0.001$); however, because its direct effect remained significant, no mediation occurred. This indicates that distributive justice influences behaviour both through trust and independently, aligning with emerging research showing that outcome fairness retains direct behavioural influence due to its tangible implications for financial security in SMEs (Jetrine & Mohammed, 2025). In contrast, procedural justice exhibited a full mediation effect (H10: indirect $\beta = 0.207$, $t = 2.67$, $p = 0.008$), as its direct effect was nonsignificant. This pattern confirms that procedural fairness affects behaviour exclusively through its capacity to build trust, a dynamic consistent with evidence that East Asian employees place stronger emphasis on relational legitimacy than on procedural formality (Al-Twal et al., 2024). Interactional justice also demonstrated full mediation (H11: indirect $\beta = 0.275$, $t = 4.95$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that respectful and dignified treatment improves behavioural outcomes entirely through trust. This finding corroborates recent work underscoring that interactional justice shapes employee behaviour by fostering relational harmony and psychological safety, rather than by exerting direct behavioural pressure (Xia et al., 2025).

The moderation analysis in Table 8, provided additional insight into contingency conditions influencing the justice–trust–behaviour mechanism. Employee job

satisfaction significantly moderated the relationship between organizational trust and behavioural responses (H8: $\beta = -0.102$, $t = 6.124$, $p < 0.001$), such that higher levels of satisfaction weakened the impact of trust on behaviour. This indicates that satisfied employees demonstrate favourable behaviour regardless of trust levels, whereas less satisfied employees rely more heavily on trust to guide their behavioural engagement. This finding aligns with recent affective-behavioural models showing that job satisfaction can operate as a compensatory mechanism that reduces dependence on relational cues (Driscoll, 2025), although it contrasts with studies reporting a strengthening moderating effect , possibly due to the unique motivational structures within

Table 7: Mediation Analysis

Total Effect			Direct Effect			Indirect Effect						Percentile Bootstrap 95% CI		Hypothesis Result
Coefficient	T value	P value	Coefficient	T value	P value	Hypotheses	Coefficient	SE	T Value	P value		LOWER	UPPER	Type of Mediation
-0.404	5.779	0	-0.061	2.99	0.003	H9::DJ->OT->EBR	-0.343	0.067	5.134	0		0.046	0.257	No Mediation
0.214	2.367	0.018	0.007	0.292	0.77	H10::PJ->OT	0.207	0.077	2.67	0.008		-0.347	-0.122	Full Mediation

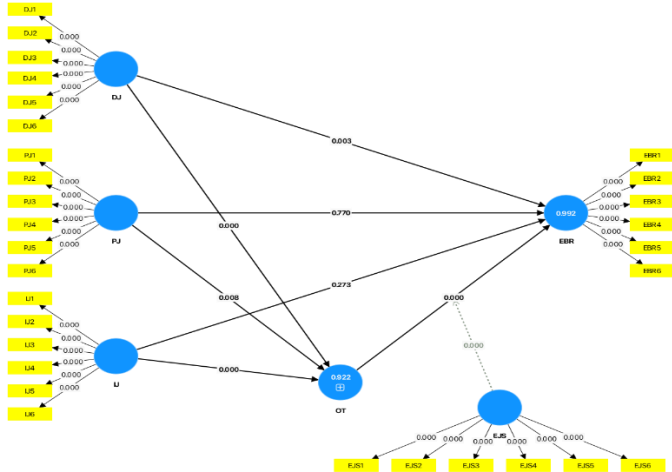|													
					-> EBR								
0.297	5.196	0	0.023	1.097	0.273	H11: IJ->OT->EBR	0.275	0.055	4.95	0	0.102	0.309	Full Mediation

Figure 2: Structural model showing the direct, mediating, and moderating effects of organizational justice dimensions on employee behavioural responses.

Chinese SMEs, where satisfaction is often tied to stability and work–life balance rather than relational trust.

Collectively, these results advance theoretical understanding by revealing a justice–trust–behaviour mechanism deeply rooted in the relational and structural characteristics of Jiangsu SMEs. The findings show that justice perceptions shape trust more strongly than they shape direct behavioural outcomes, and that distributive justice is the only justice dimension exerting a direct behavioural effect. These patterns emphasize that relational and affective mechanisms remain central in SME environments where formal HR structures are less institutionalized and interpersonal trust compensates for bureaucratic controls. The mediation and moderation insights offer valuable practical implications, indicating that SME leaders should prioritize procedural transparency, respectful communication, and satisfaction-enhancing HR policies to strengthen positive behavioural outcomes and build a stable, trust-based workforce.

Table 8: Moderation Analysis

Hypothesis	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values
H8: EJS x OT -> EBR	-0.102	-0.102	0.017	6.124	0

Figure 2 presents the structural equation model in which distributive justice, procedural justice, and interactional justice (independent variables) predict employee behavioural responses (dependent variable) both directly and indirectly through organizational trust as a mediator. Each construct is represented as a latent variable with its respective observed indicators, and the path coefficients displayed on the arrows indicate the strength and significance of the hypothesised relationships between variables. Employee job satisfaction is specified as a moderating variable that influences the relationship between organizational trust and employee behavioural responses, highlighting how higher job satisfaction can strengthen the positive effect of trust on employees' behavioural outcomes.

5.CONCLUSION

This study examined how the three dimensions of organizational justice—distributive, procedural, and interactional justice—influence employee behavioural responses in Jiangsu Province SMEs, with organizational trust as a mediator and employee job satisfaction as a moderator. Addressing the research problem of unclear justice–trust–behaviour mechanisms in emerging-economy SMEs, the findings demonstrate that organizational trust is the central psychological pathway through which fairness perceptions translate into behavioural outcomes, with full mediation observed for procedural and interactional justice and partial influence for distributive justice. The moderating analysis further revealed that job satisfaction weakens the predictive power of trust on behaviour, underscoring its compensatory role in shaping employee engagement. The study contributes theoretically by clarifying the differential effects of justice dimensions within a collectivist SME context, empirically by offering robust PLS-SEM evidence on mediation and moderation mechanisms, and practically by emphasising the need for SME leaders to strengthen procedural transparency, interpersonal respect, and satisfaction-enhancing HR policies. Despite its strong analytical design, the study is limited by its regional sampling frame and cross-sectional

data, which may constrain generalizability and causal inference. Future research should broaden geographic coverage, employ longitudinal designs, and investigate additional contextual moderators such as leadership style or organizational climate to deepen understanding of justice-driven behavioural processes in SMEs

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