

Emotional Intelligence as a Catalyst for Career Sustainability in Retail Employees during Workplace Volatility: A Conceptual and Qualitative Investigation

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Abstract

The retail sector's rapidly changing and uncertain environment poses significant challenges to employee career sustainability—the ability to maintain employability, motivation, and well-being over time. Emotional intelligence (EI), the capacity to understand and regulate emotions, is theorized to be a vital personal resource supporting employees in managing such volatility. This study develops a conceptual framework positioning EI as a catalyst for career sustainability amidst workplace unpredictability. Complementing this theoretical foundation, qualitative case studies involving retail HR managers and frontline employees provide empirical insights into how EI manifests in practice, enhancing adaptability and career resilience. The findings validate the buffering role of EI against workplace volatility and highlight the importance of organizational support. This integrative approach offers novel contributions to theory and practical guidance for HR strategies to foster long-term career sustainability in the retail workforce.

Keywords

- Emotional Intelligence
- Career Sustainability
- Retail Employees
- Workplace Volatility
- Qualitative Case Study

1. Introduction

The retail industry is characterized by frequent technological innovation, evolving consumer behaviors, and organizational restructuring, creating a highly volatile workplace environment. This volatility threatens employee career sustainability, understood as the capacity to continuously develop employability, maintain psychological well-being, and pursue meaningful work over time (De Vos et al., 2020). Frontline retail employees face high emotional labor demands and job insecurity, magnifying the challenges to sustaining long-term career success (Smith & Jones, 2024).

Emotional intelligence (EI)—the ability to perceive, understand, regulate, and utilize emotions effectively (Salovey & Mayer, 1990)—has emerged as a critical personal resource that equips employees to navigate workplace stress and adapt proactively to change (Goleman, 1995; Wong & Law, 2002). Empirical research associates EI with improved job satisfaction, resilience, and performance (Mayer et al., 2016), yet there remains a research gap in understanding how EI specifically supports career sustainability under volatile retail conditions.

This study addresses this gap through a combined conceptual and qualitative empirical investigation. First, it develops a conceptual framework grounded in Conservation of Resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989), positing EI as a core resource buffering employees against the adverse impacts of workplace volatility on their careers. Second, the study employs

qualitative case studies involving retail HR professionals and frontline employees to gather rich, contextual insights into how EI fosters career adaptability and resilience in real-world retail settings.

By integrating theoretical foundation with empirical evidence from primary data, this research offers a robust understanding of the mechanisms through which emotional intelligence enhances career sustainability. It also underscores the role of organizational support in amplifying these effects, providing actionable implications for human resource management in retail.

1.1 Methodology

This study employs a mixed approach, blending conceptual framework development with empirical qualitative research to explore the role of emotional intelligence (EI) in sustaining retail employees' careers amid workplace volatility. The conceptual phase involved an extensive review of existing literature on emotional intelligence, career sustainability, workplace volatility, and organizational support. Drawing primarily from Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989), a theoretical framework was constructed, hypothesizing that EI serves as a critical personal resource that enables employees to adapt and maintain career resilience despite volatile conditions.

To empirically enrich and validate the conceptual model, the second phase utilized a qualitative multiple case study approach. This phase involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 12 participants, comprising five human resource managers responsible for employee development and seven frontline retail employees from diverse retail organizations. Participants were purposively selected to obtain a range of perspectives across roles and organizational settings. The interviews focused on participants' experiences with emotional intelligence in their work, adaptability to organizational change, perceptions of workplace volatility, and the role of organizational support in career sustainability.

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework. This process involved familiarization with data, coding, generating initial themes, reviewing and defining themes, and producing a comprehensive narrative that integrates empirical findings with the conceptual model. Ethical considerations were rigorously maintained: informed consent was obtained from all participants, confidentiality was assured, and pseudonyms were used to protect identities. The study adhered to institutional guidelines for research ethics to ensure participant welfare and data integrity.

By integrating thematic insights with the theoretical framework, this methodology allows a nuanced understanding of how emotional intelligence operates in practice within volatile retail contexts, bridging conceptual propositions with real-world applications.

1.2 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework positions Emotional Intelligence (EI) as the central personal resource that directly enhances Career Sustainability for retail employees operating in volatile workplace environments. It highlights how EI contributes to career sustainability both by direct effects and indirectly through facilitating Employee Adaptability—the capacity to flexibly respond to changing job demands, role shifts, and technological advancements common in retail.

Workplace Volatility is modelled as a contextual factor comprising frequent organizational changes, job insecurity, and external market instability, which negatively impact career sustainability by increasing uncertainty and stress. Emotional intelligence acts as a buffering

resource, reducing the adverse effects of volatility through improved emotional regulation and motivation maintenance.

Perceived Organizational Support is incorporated as a key moderating variable that strengthens the positive relationship between EI and career sustainability. Supportive organizational practices (e.g., transparent communication, fairness, training opportunities) provide external resources that complement employees' emotional competencies, enhancing their adaptability and commitment to career development.

The framework further emphasizes the dynamic interaction between personal resources (EI), workplace environment (volatility), and organizational context (support), illustrating the multi-level influences on sustaining retail careers. Employee adaptability mediates the pathway from emotional intelligence to career sustainability by enabling proactive coping and learning, measured through qualitative insights describing real employee experiences of managing change and maintaining optimism.

This integrated model is grounded in Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989), which posits that individuals strive to conserve and build key resources—like EI and organizational support—to mitigate stress and promote sustained functioning in challenging situations.

2. Literature Review

Emotional intelligence (EI) has emerged as a pivotal concept in organizational psychology and human resource management, recognized for its impact on employee well-being, adaptability, and performance. Originally defined by Salovey and Mayer (1990) as the ability to perceive, understand, regulate, and utilize emotions, EI was later popularized as a critical leadership and workplace competency by Goleman (1995). The dimensionally validated Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS) (Wong & Law, 2002) breaks EI into four measurable facets: self-emotion appraisal, others' emotion appraisal, use of emotion, and regulation of emotion. These facets jointly contribute to employees' psychological resilience and interpersonal effectiveness, which are particularly vital in service sectors like retail that demand constant emotional labor (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2016).

Empirical research consistently demonstrates that employees with higher EI tend to experience lower stress, enhanced job satisfaction, and better performance outcomes (Sy, Tram, & O'Hara, 2006; Côté, 2014). In retail contexts, which are often characterized by high emotional demands, frequent customer service interactions, and role ambiguity, EI becomes a key resource for managing emotional dissonance and maintaining engagement. Mayer et al. (2016) reported that retail workers with elevated EI showed greater emotional resilience, conflict management skills, and the ability to sustain motivation during periods of organizational upheaval. Lee and Carson's (2024) experimental training intervention further supports that EI development enhances retail employees' adaptability and customer handling abilities, helping preserve their career trajectories despite volatile work conditions.

Career sustainability, broadly defined as the capacity to sustain employability, health, motivation, and meaning in work across changing career stages and environments, is gaining increasing attention in workforce development (De Vos et al., 2020). This construct integrates dimensions of career adaptability, psychological well-being, work engagement, and ongoing learning tendencies. Retail employees, facing job insecurity, automation, and fluctuating consumer demands, confront heightened risks to career sustainability (Smith & Jones, 2024). Their longitudinal study revealed that career adaptability—closely linked to emotional competencies like self-regulation and optimism—predicts greater career satisfaction and retention in retail amidst repeated organizational changes.

Workplace volatility—characterized by unpredictable organizational restructuring, job insecurity, and rapid technological changes—has been shown to negatively affect employee well-being and career attitudes (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Rojas, 2023). Employees experiencing such volatility often report anxiety, decreased job satisfaction, and intentions to leave, which threaten career sustainability (Sverke, Hellgren, & Näswall, 2002). However, the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989) explains how personal resources like EI help employees preserve psychological energy and adapt under stress. Kim and Beehr (2022) found EI mediated the negative impact of job insecurity on work engagement and career optimism, suggesting employees with strong emotional regulation sustain motivation even under uncertain conditions. They further proposed a moderated mediation model where perceived organizational support strengthens EI's positive effects on adaptability and career outcomes.

Employee engagement has emerged as a key psychological state linking EI to sustained career success. Zhang et al. (2024) demonstrated, using multi-industry data including retail, that high EI leads to greater work engagement, which then predicts increased career satisfaction and persistence. This aligns with Maslach and Leiter's (2017) findings that emotional competencies reduce burnout, increase vigor, and promote work meaningfulness, thus enabling employees to tolerate job demands and remain committed over time—factors crucial for sustainability in volatile retail contexts.

Beyond individual traits, organizational factors also shape career sustainability. Ethical human resource practices—including fair treatment, transparent communication, developmental support, and participative decision-making—create a psychological climate that enhances employee trust and commitment (Mahembe & Engelbrecht, 2014; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Kundu and Gahlawat (2016) found a strong relationship between perceived ethical climate and employee job satisfaction in retail, which supports career commitment. Moreover, perceived organizational support functions as a valuable resource that synergizes with personal EI by providing employees with emotional and instrumental backing to navigate volatility (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Kim & Beehr, 2022).

Career adaptability, a core dimension of career sustainability, has been validated through empirical research as an essential set of psychosocial resources including concern for the future, control over career development, curiosity about possibilities, and confidence to pursue goals (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Hirschi's (2018) meta-analysis across sectors showed career adaptability robustly predicts employability and job satisfaction. In retail, Lee and Chen (2023) identified EI training as a catalyst for enhancing adaptability, reducing work-related stress, and improving employee retention.

Job security perceptions remain critical determinants of employee attitudes and behaviors. Retail employees often experience heightened job insecurity due to frequent restructuring and automation adoption (De Cuyper & De Witte, 2007). Research indicates that job insecurity negatively impacts well-being and career commitment, but EI moderates these effects by enhancing coping and positive reappraisal strategies (Kim & Beehr, 2022).

Despite significant insights into EI, volatility, and career sustainability, there remains a lack of integrated conceptual models supported by empirical qualitative data specifically addressing retail employees in volatile contexts. This research fills this gap by coupling a nuanced conceptual framework grounded in COR theory with rich qualitative insights derived from retail practitioners, thereby advancing theory and offering actionable strategies for HR management.

3. Qualitative Insights

The qualitative investigation involved semi-structured interviews with 12 participants, including five human resource managers and seven frontline retail employees across diverse retail organizations. Analysis of the interview data revealed several key insights that deepen understanding of the role of emotional intelligence (EI) in fostering career sustainability amid the volatility of retail workplaces.

3.1 Emotional Intelligence as a Vital Personal Resource

Participants consistently underscored emotional intelligence as a foundational skill for managing the emotional demands and uncertainties inherent in retail jobs. HR managers highlighted how emotionally intelligent employees demonstrate superior conflict resolution and customer de-escalation skills. One HR manager explained, “Those who understand their own emotions and regulate them effectively can navigate difficult customer interactions without burnout, which helps them sustain their roles longer” (Participant 3). Frontline employees echoed this, describing how emotional self-awareness allowed them to stay composed during stressful situations, maintain motivation, and focus on their career growth despite daily challenges.

3.2 Adaptability Driven by Emotional Competencies

Both employees and HR leaders emphasized the close link between EI and adaptability. Many employees shared experiences of frequent role changes, schedule fluctuations, and increased technological requirements, which demand constant adjustment. A retail associate remarked, “When I manage my emotions well, I can be more flexible and open to learning new systems or handling last-minute changes without feeling overwhelmed” (Participant 8). HR managers stressed that combining adaptability training with emotional skill development was crucial in maintaining workforce stability and ensuring sustained career trajectories during periods of organizational restructuring.

3.3 Workplace Volatility Shapes Career Perceptions and Anxiety

The theme of volatility—manifesting as frequent organizational changes, job insecurity, and competitive pressures—was evident across interviews. Employees recurrently expressed concerns about job stability and future prospects. One retail worker stated, “With so many reshuffles and uncertainty, it’s hard to feel secure or plan long term” (Participant 7). However, employees possessing higher emotional intelligence were observed to better manage anxiety linked to these conditions and retained more positive attitudes about their careers. HR managers also recognized the stress volatility creates but noted that employees equipped with EI tend to rebound more quickly and adaptively.

3.4 Organizational Support as a Critical Buffer

A strong consensus emerged on the importance of perceived organizational support in sustaining careers under volatility. HR professionals described initiatives such as emotional intelligence workshops, open communication channels, and transparent career planning that fostered feelings of support and security. One HR manager noted, “Providing emotional skill training and ensuring employees feel heard and valued helps them stay engaged and committed even when the business changes rapidly” (Participant 1). Employees confirmed that managerial empathy, fair treatment, and access to development opportunities significantly influenced their motivation to persist and grow, thus strengthening career sustainability.

3.5 Interplay between Individual and Organizational Resources

Participants' experiences highlight the dynamic interplay between personal emotional competencies and organizational environments in shaping career outcomes. Emotional intelligence empowers employees to cope and adapt, but organizational factors such as supportive leadership and clear communication are necessary to fully realize these benefits. This synergy underpins a holistic approach to fostering career sustainability in the volatile retail sector.

These qualitative insights provide real-world validation and contextual depth to the conceptual framework, illustrating how emotional intelligence functions as a key resource promoting adaptability and resilience amidst retail workplace volatility.

4. Discussion

This study's findings enrich understanding of how emotional intelligence (EI) functions as a vital personal resource supporting career sustainability among retail employees facing workplace volatility. The conceptual framework, grounded in Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989), is empirically validated through qualitative insights from HR managers and frontline workers, confirming that EI not only directly fosters sustained career motivation and psychological well-being but also enhances employee adaptability, which in turn promotes career longevity.

Participants highlighted emotional intelligence as indispensable for managing the emotional labor inherent to retail roles. Consistent with prior research (Mayer et al., 2016), employees with higher EI showed superior capacity to regulate stress, manage conflicts, and maintain composure under pressure. These competencies enabled employees to focus on long-term career aspirations despite daily operational challenges. This direct impact of EI on career sustainability underscores its critical role in buffering the adverse effects of workplace volatility, supporting the hypothesis that EI serves as a psychological resource that shields employees from stress-induced disengagement.

Moreover, employee adaptability emerged as the mediating mechanism linking EI to career sustainability. Interviewees frequently mentioned that emotional competencies gave them the confidence and flexibility necessary to adjust to frequent role changes, new technological demands, and fluctuating schedules. This finding aligns with Kim and Beehr's (2022) work identifying adaptability as vital for career resilience. Emotional intelligence enables employees not just to cope but to proactively engage with change, thereby sustaining career progression in volatile retail environments.

Workplace volatility remained a salient challenge influencing career outlooks among retail employees. The qualitative data echoed established literature (Rojas, 2023) highlighting job insecurity and market uncertainty as sources of anxiety and career uncertainty. However, employees with higher EI managed such stressors more effectively, maintaining optimism and motivation, demonstrating EI's buffering or protective role. This nuanced understanding enriches the model by integrating real-world employee perspectives, demonstrating how personal emotional resources alleviate volatility's psychological toll.

Perceived organizational support was another critical contextual lever empowering employees. HR managers and employees alike emphasized that transparent communication, emotional intelligence training, and supportive leadership significantly enhanced employee resilience and career commitment. These organizational resources amplify the positive influence of EI, as posited by Kim and Beehr (2022) and Mahembe and Engelbrecht (2014). Such findings suggest that fostering organizational climates that validate employees'

emotional experiences and provide developmental opportunities is essential for translating EI into sustained career outcomes.

In a nutshell,

- Emotional Intelligence positively impacts Career Sustainability both directly and indirectly by enhancing Employee Adaptability (mediator).
- Workplace Volatility negatively influences Career Sustainability, but Emotional Intelligence buffers this impact.
- Perceived Organizational Support moderates the strength of the relationship between Emotional Intelligence and Career Sustainability, amplifying positive effects.

Overall, the qualitative findings substantiate the integrated conceptual framework by revealing the interplay between personal emotional resources, adaptability, workplace stressors, and organizational support in shaping career sustainability. This multi-level perspective contributes theoretically by bridging gaps in existing EI and career sustainability literature through empirical grounding in retail contexts. Practically, it highlights the importance of combining emotional intelligence development with supportive HR strategies to enhance employee resilience and career continuity.

Future research could build on these insights through longitudinal designs measuring changes in EI, adaptability, and career outcomes over time, or through intervention studies testing the efficacy of EI training combined with organizational support programs in retail.

5. Conclusion

This study advances the understanding of emotional intelligence (EI) as a crucial catalyst for career sustainability among retail employees operating in volatile workplace environments. By integrating a robust conceptual framework with rich qualitative insights from HR managers and frontline workers, the research demonstrates that EI directly enhances employees' ability to manage stress and maintain motivation, while also fostering adaptability—an essential mediator for sustained career progression.

Workplace volatility, characterized by frequent organizational changes and job insecurity, poses significant challenges to career continuity in retail. However, this study highlights how EI buffers these adverse effects by empowering employees to regulate emotions and proactively navigate career disruptions. Additionally, perceived organizational support emerges as a vital contextual factor that strengthens EI's positive impact, underscoring the need for supportive HR practices and transparent communication to sustain employee engagement and growth.

The findings have important theoretical implications, reinforcing Conservation of Resources (COR) theory by illustrating the dynamic interplay between personal resources, contextual stressors, and organizational support in career sustainability. Practically, organizations in the retail sector should prioritize emotional intelligence development alongside fostering supportive climates to enhance workforce resilience and long-term employee retention.

Future research may extend these findings through longitudinal investigation and the evaluation of targeted interventions that combine emotional intelligence training with organizational support mechanisms. This dual approach will be instrumental in promoting resilient, adaptable retail workforces capable of thriving amid continuous change.

6. References

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