

Factors Influencing Early-Career Employer Loyalty among Undergraduate Students in the United Arab Emirates

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ABSTRACT

Employee retention in the United Arab Emirates is still a significant challenge for businesses. Despite this challenge, the expectations of the incoming workforce are largely overlooked. Drawing upon Social Exchange Theory, this study evaluates the expectations of undergraduates on what drives them to stay within an employer. Specifically, it focuses on how offering career growth opportunities, job security, workplace flexibility, support, and pay importance can foster employee loyalty before they enter the market. A purposive sample of 15 undergraduate students from various universities in the United Arab Emirates, aged between 18 and 25, were interviewed. The qualitative data collected from the interviews were analyzed by using thematic analysis. This study found that the main elements that drive undergraduate students to stay within an employer include career development and workplace support. It also found that the primary causes of the turnover of employees before they have spent any time working in an industry include rigid company structures and a lack of growth opportunities within these industries. Importantly, the participants defined an employer who can retain its employees as one who provides more than just transactional rewards but also those that provide emotional satisfaction. The study's conclusion is that employee retention in the UAE is driven by a sense of reciprocity between the employee and the employer. This reciprocity is fostered by treating concepts such as flexibility and career development as discretionary benefits to the employee. For companies in the United Arab Emirates, then, there is an imperative for them to shift their focus from creating a transactional relationship between themselves and their employees to one that fosters high-quality social exchanges.



Introduction

Background of the Study

Organizations struggle to maintain their workforce, because employee retention still is a primary challenge for them. Indeed, the wisdom set in the workplace is lost when skilled workers leave, and in turn the costs are huge which is experienced during recruitment and training (Khan, 2021). Experts claim that analyzing the drivers of undergraduates becomes highly necessary during times when the work market lessens its mobility, especially when individuals accept a working position below their qualification, which changes what people expect from work and increases how often they quit (Jackson, 2020). Such work-related expectations appear strong among these students finishing their university who are getting ready to enter the workforce because those learners hold unique values, focus points, and plans for their future working position.

Understanding what keeps young professionals loyal is crucial in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) today. In late 2025, the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization (MOHRE) reported an 8.9% jump in the total workforce and a 6.6% rise in active businesses, leading to a steady growing job market (Rasheed, 2025). Mostly, younger generations make up the workforce (Emirates News Agency-WAM, 2025). While businesses try to maintain the employees they already have, there are only few who seek what students expect before entering the workforce. And this creates a major gap in understanding what new graduates truly want.

Loyalty in the early stages of someone's career is commonly influenced by different kinds of internal and external elements. According to recent data, 68% of graduates have said that they look into pay when they are applying for jobs, with work stability as second at 52%, and professional development programs at 49%. For most of the fresh graduates, things like flexible hours, clear guidelines, a growing environment, and a healthy work-life balance are more important than the salary or a safe job (Ewen, 2026). If companies want to attract hard working people, the companies must need to understand what can motivate people and create flexible work options (Workbox Staffing, 2024).

Statement of the Problem

Because of certain expectations, little-to-no experience, poor guidance, and evolving technology, fresh graduates face difficulty in job hunting. To solve this, governments, companies, and universities all need to work together and take responsibility (Yahui and Henry Dagogo, 2025). In today's generation, flexibility is valued, wherein they prefer a mix of hybrid and remote working over strict rules and regulations and companies that openly show their ideas through performance tasks and those that have access to mental health services (Rotich, Maket, and Kurgat, 2025).

A significant number of college graduates show early professional discontent and want to leave their companies within a few years after entering, despite known work pressures. These Generation Y people have very high expectations and frequently feel that their higher education justifies greater immediate cash reward than entry-level pay (Maceda, 2018). Although changing companies might be a wise professional decision, "job-hopping" creates ongoing operational issues for managers in a number of industries (Apriliani et al., 2025, cited in AK, 2018).

Traditional retention literature typically looks at factors like corporate commitment, ongoing turnover intentions, and proven loyalty, and it nearly entirely focuses on people who have been absorbed into a company (Weng and McElroy, 2012). Undergraduate students' pre-entry expectations are overlooked as a result of this focus. Employment-related views are significantly influenced by career growth possibilities, a healthy work-life balance, and organized workplace flexibility, according to research tracking Generation Z (Sholekha and Esthi, 2025). Organizations

may fail to meet growing young professional expectations in their recruitment and retention efforts if they don't understand what undergraduate students value most. This makes it challenging to attract talent in competitive, quickly changing environments (Mazlan and Jambulingam, 2023). In the UAE, where young professionals make up a sizable fraction of the workforce and the job market is extremely competitive, this problem is worsened. Thus, the issue is the limited understanding of the variables influencing early-career loyalty intentions among UAE undergraduate students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the key drivers of early-career loyalty intentions among undergraduate students in the UAE as they prepare to transition into the workforce. Even though the UAE's high global competitiveness and the labor market are youth with approximately 51% of the workforce (Rasheed, 2025), Businesses still find it difficult to retain this generation due to mismatch in both of their expectations, low job satisfaction, and poor adjustment in the workplace (Kent, 2024). Grounded in Social Exchange Theory (SET), this study helps solve this problem by exploring what new graduates want out of work. This looks at how things like career growth tracks, job stability, flexibility, support, and pay importance whether an employee plans to build a long-term career with an employer.

Main Research Question: To what extent do workplace benefits and colleague relationships shape early-career loyalty among undergraduate students in the UAE?

Research Objectives: (1) Investigate how perceived incentives shape undergraduate early-career loyalty intentions in the UAE; (2) Evaluate which drivers act as primary motivators for retention versus catalysts for resignation; (3) Define the qualities of an ideal employer; (4) Analyze the student-employer relationship through SET to identify specific benefits with both parties required to build trust; and (5) Provide evidence-based insights for UAE organizations/companies to align recruitment strategies with graduate expectations.

This study is important because it gives people a clear look at the UAE business scene and what actually motivates young professionals to stay committed early in their careers, especially in a market that ranks third globally for business efficiency (International Institute for Management Development, 2024), businesses still have pressure on them just to retain talent in an environment that is supported by legislation that integrates the position of UAE as a global model for investment (Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratisation - MOHRE, 2026). This study provides HR professionals insights to match strategies with undergraduate students' values, which is critical because work engagement, leadership, and payment indicates the turnover intentions by shaping an employee's expected career path (Marlita et al., 2025). Theoretically, applying SET to the "pre-entry" expectations of UAE undergraduates bridges the gap between preparation from academic backgrounds and workforce entry, which shows how relationships are perceived before a contract is signed. Furthermore, supporting undergraduate research is important for creating a solution needed to address evolving challenges across industries (Adebisi, 2022). Lastly, for students, this study provides a guide to evaluate employers for their long-term satisfaction, showing how undergraduate research helps with deep learning and resilience, providing them with critical thinking skills that are necessary to implement in a working environment (Walkington et al., 2020).

Literature Review

Introduction to Early-Career Loyalty

This literature review examines academic perspectives on early-career loyalty and employee retention. It explores the changing workplace expectations of recurring recruits, specifically evaluating career growth, job security, flexibility, workplace support, and pay importance. Because the initial starting experience remains enough to have success between the employee and the employer (Chillakuri, 2020), this section introduces Social Exchange Theory (SET) as the primary framework. As a model for interpreting organizational behavior (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005), SET serves as a tool to analyze the beneficial relationships between UAE undergraduate students and future employers. With these concepts, it highlights the existing gaps in the literature and establishes a ground for investigating pre-entry intentions of staying.

Career Growth

Career development opportunities serve as a critical job resource that strengthens organizational commitment and mitigate turnover. When career development, organizational support, and commitment operate simultaneously, they create a cumulative effect on employee retention (Ferdiana, Khan, and Ray, 2023). Growth is mostly dependent on interpersonal learning and mentoring, which is a reciprocal process in which mentors are both givers and recipients of learning, in addition to traditional upward mobility (Rekha and Ganesh, 2019).

Investing in an employee's skill set delivers a high-quality transaction that fosters institutional loyalty, according to Social Exchange Theory. This relationship is not general, though, as a person's prior education and work credentials significantly shows the training-to-turnover relationship (Jun and Eckardt, 2023). For undergraduates entering the workforce, this relationship is further discussed by an expectation-reality gap. Recent data demonstrates that 42% of graduates stay in their regular positions due to market uncertainty and a lack of feasible alternatives rather than true organizational commitment, showcasing this friction (Soliman, 2026).

Job Security

The gig economy's growth has changed labor markets around the world, often substituting "algorithmic precarity" and a lack of employer-sponsored benefits for traditional stability (Javokhir et al., 2025). According to research, "precarious employment" conditions are fostered by such low job security, which reduces a person's subjective professional success during the school-to-work transition (Zhong & Xu, 2023). A secure workplace is an essential tool for reducing the "negative hedonic value" of uncertainty in the competitive market of the UAE. Organizations can cultivate the institutional trust required to guarantee the long-term commitment of early-career professionals by reducing these psychological and financial expenses.

Workplace Flexibility

Flexibility in the workplace has changed from being an optional benefit to a basic requirement for the new workforce, and it is highly correlated with increased job satisfaction among Generation Z. According to recent quantitative research, the main factor influencing discretionary work behavior is structural flexibility. Businesses foster a supportive environment that motivates early-career workers to return the favor with greater dedication and effort by providing remote choices, flexible scheduling, psychological safety, and organizational justice (Rama, 2025). This desire shows a conscious pursuit of holistic well-being rather than a lack of professional discipline, suggesting that modern workers function best when given control over their workplace (Jermisittiparsert, Ghosh, and Rillera, 2025).

In the social exchange, flexibility is a high value, non-financial resource. The extent of this structural autonomy is mostly rewarded with improved retention intentions and greater discretionary output. In addition, flexible work arrangements play an important role in optimizing the well-being of employees, echoing the notion that structural flexibility fosters positive psychological conditions that lead to long-term commitment to an organization (Weideman and Hofmeyr, 2020).

Workplace Support

Workplace support is broad-based resources, encouragement and professional advice to maximise employee achievement and well-being. Support is not only about emotional validation but it also includes the practicality that helps people to overcome everyday challenges (Anderson, 2024). Further, this context creates an environment of involvement, with the knowledge of importance and continuous learning and working together (Spreitzer et al., 2005). Such a cultural context is crucial when students from the university environment face severe psychological stress in the transition period from school to the workplace. Finally, the relationship between the supervisor and subordinate is the key factor to this well-being and ensuring organizational commitment. A sense of relational intimacy that provides rich emotional safety for entry-level employees is fostered when they see their immediate supervisors as genuine. These genuine experiences are seen as a legitimate investment in the organization, and in return, these individuals give more institutional loyalty and discretionary effort (Cabral-Cardoso and Santos, 2024).

Pay Importance

Rewards continue to be a cornerstone of influencing employee conduct, motivation to engage in daily work, and health (Gerhart, Kim, and He, 2025). A systematic review shows that compensation and benefits are important transactional attributes of an individual's anticipatory psychological contract (Dassler et al., 2022). Pay is a contextual issue, but it is often assumed to be one of the key reasons why employers are attractive to early career professionals, and is a fundamental measure of the fairness of an exchange. But the lack of financial reward does not equate to professional respect, creating negative hedonic value when a person feels there is systemic injustice. If organizational justice is violated through poor pay, however, employees tend to decrease their institutional commitment, thereby leading to the large number of early-career turnover events among new university graduates that are commonly reported (Thompson et al., 2021).

Theoretical Foundation

Theoretical Framework: Social Exchange Theory

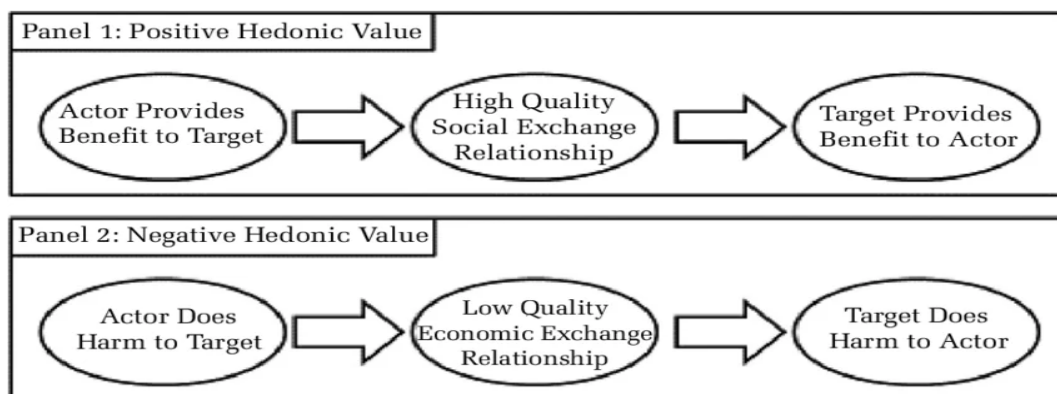


Figure 1. Generic Model of Social Exchange Theory (Cropanzano et al., 2017).

This study is based on Social Exchange Theory (SET), a psychological and sociological theory that suggests social behavior is a product of the exchange process (EBSCO, 2024). The theory proposes that people compare their relationship on a subjective cost-benefit analysis and the alternatives. Social Exchange Theory (SET) was based on the early theories of Homans, Blau, and Emerson who developed the theory of reciprocity in human exchanges (Fixsen et al., 2015). In the modern human resource management context, these classical approaches were translated into the practice of human resource management by researchers like Gould-Williams and Davies (2005) who showed that certain human resource practices act as investments in the organization that lead to positive behaviour of public sector employees.

Reciprocity and the Psychological Contract

The norm of reciprocity is at the heart of SET, which assumes that the rendering of a benefit by one party entails an obligation by the other party to provide a benefit in return (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). As part of the early career context, when pupils believe that an organisation invests in good resources, for example, in career development and/or in workplace flexibility, that is seen as a 'discretionary investment' (Gould-Williams and Davies, 2005). This leads to a high quality social exchange with 'Positive Hedonic Value' as the emotional reward of the exchange results in long-term loyalty and commitment to the organization (Cropanzano et al., 2017).

Economic versus Social Exchange Relationships

The employment relationship includes two aspects: economic and social exchange. The economic exchange is a short term transaction based on financial considerations where there is a clear opportunity for an exit when better market opportunities arise. On the other hand, social exchange is about investments of socio-emotional capital and about trust that can be sustained over time, and is the basis of the affective commitment and loyalty that is expected from first-year students (Shore et al., 2006). This is an operational separation that is evident in studies conducted on the job hopping phenomenon among the young professionals (Lee et al., 2023). Base salary is a very transactional incentive to make job changes, whereas structural career development is a socio-emotional resource and the only true predictor of long-term retention. In the end, it reflects the social exchange theory of support, which suggests that when others feel supported, they are more inclined to return the favor by staying with the organization. In conclusion, this reflects social exchange theory of support, which means that the more supported an individual feels, the more willing they will be to reciprocate by remaining at the company.

Application to Early-Career Loyalty in the UAE Labor Market

Applying SET to the UAE competitive market enables this study to explore how the students compare the "costs" of being in the UAE (staying simply due to rigid hours or low growth) with the 'benefits' offered by the employers. Employers who fail to meet expectations (Negative Hedonic Value) will receive the student's withdrawal of commitment, which will result in early-career turnover. This research examines the implications of making that shift from a "Low-Quality Economic Relationship" to a "High-Quality Social Exchange" for organizations to gain the loyalty of the next generation of workers using SET.

Research Gap

The majority of studies concentrate on professionals who are currently employed or Western labor markets, even if the literature emphasizes the general significance of determinants like income and growth. Understanding undergraduate students' pre-entry expectations, particularly in the context of the United Arab Emirates, is severely lacking. The "why" behind students' decision-making processes is frequently overlooked in current studies. To solve this gap, this study uses an

inductive methodology to investigate how these five factors contribute to influencing the loyalty intentions of undergraduate students before they enter the job market.

Conceptual Framework

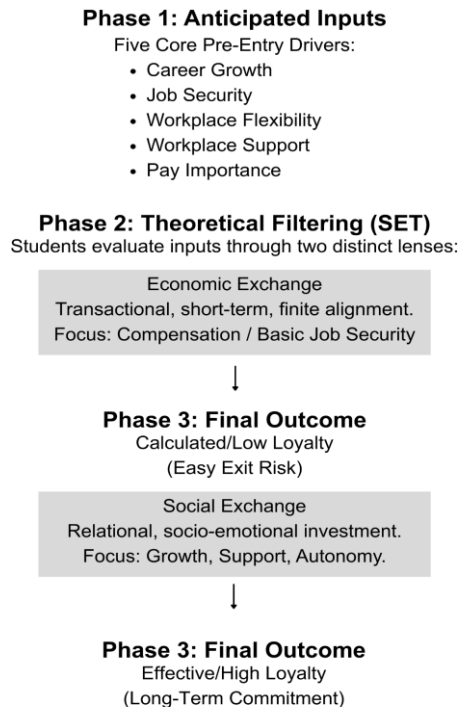


Figure 2. Conceptual Framework Formulation

With this framework, having a clear understanding on career growth and mentoring act as an input without using the funds that start social exchange dynamics. When these undergraduates see a sense of teaching and clear paths for improvement, these students see them as something they can use for the long-term rather than just a short-term benefit. When the act of giving and taking is present, this investment creates a sense of psychological obligation for professionalism. As supported by Gervasi and Faldetta (2020), this type of strategy moves the workplace relationship away from short-term transactions and into long-term reciprocity. Since career growth satisfies intrinsic needs for professional capability, it shifts the psychological contract from an economic perspective to a social one. This builds a sense of trust and commitment necessary to lower early-career turnover.

Research Methodology

The methodology used to examine the early-career loyalty intentions of undergraduate students in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is described in this section. This study used a qualitative research design to achieve a "deep understanding" of personal experiences that numerical data is unable to present (Saylor Academy, 2012). This study used an inductive, interpretive research approach. Instead of using existing findings from recent research, an inductive approach is used to allow the themes to develop on the spot based on the participants' responses, making sure that the results are based on the genuine perspectives of UAE undergraduates. As Naeem et al. (2023) noted, a "goal-free" framework allows theories and patterns to formulate naturally from raw data (Scriven, 1991). This study used semi-structured interviews as its primary research strategy. The interview

questions were designed to explore the five key drivers of early-career loyalty as presented in the literature, as well as other perceptions of organizational value that is not mentioned from the five key drivers through the lens of Social Exchange Theory.

Population and Sampling

The target participants for this study are undergraduate students aged from 18 to 25 that are currently enrolled in UAE universities. When it comes to choosing the 15 participants, this research utilized purposive sampling that meets the study's criteria. This method ensures that the respondents can provide meaningful information and deep understanding into early-career loyalty. The respondents were found through student networks, university campus, and WhatsApp messaging groups. The primary data was collected through a one-on-one interview via Google Meet and in-person. The interviews lasted approximately 10–15 minutes. Before each interview, the researcher verbally reviewed and recited the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form with the respondent to ensure they understood the study's purpose and their rights. With the participants' signed consent, the online sessions were recorded to ensure accurate transcription and analysis.

Measurement of Variables

The study used a semi-structured interview guide with 10 open-ended questions, allowing balanced structure with a conversational flow to help engage with students comfortably.

As a qualitative study, variables are not measured numerically. Instead, Social Exchange Theory (SET) are mapped directly onto the interview questions, allowing participants to define these concepts in their own words.

The table below shows are the research variables that match and define with each of the interview questions:

Table 1. Questionnaire Design.

Research Variable / Focus Area	Question Text
Organizational Alignment	Q1: When you think about your future career, what kind of employer or company would you most like to work for, and why?
Career Growth & Development	Q2 & Q3: How would career growth affect your decision to stay? / What kind of learning or promotion opportunities would make you stay longer?
Job Security & Stability	Q4: What role does job security play when you think about staying with an employer?
Workplace Flexibility	Q5: How do flexible working arrangements, such as flexible hours or remote work, influence whether you would stay?
Workplace Support	Q6: What kind of support from managers or the workplace would make you more willing to stay?
Pay Importance & Rewards	Q7: How do salary and financial benefits influence your decision to remain with an employer?

Retention Catalysts	Q8: What factors would make you want to stay with a company for several years after graduation?
Turnover Triggers	Q9: What factors might make you decide to leave an employer early in your career?
Long-term Loyalty Definition	Q10: In your opinion, what makes a company worth staying with for a long time?

Reliability and Validity

The primary instrument is a semi-structured interview consisting of 10 open-ended questions.

- **Interview Guide:** The primary instrument is a semi-structured interview consisting of 10 open-ended questions.
- **Design Rationale:** This format makes sure that the data collection is reliable while offering the flexibility to explore topics that are brought up unexpectedly or dive deeper into why participants prioritize certain factors.
- **Face Validity:** To ensure the interview guide measures the target drivers, the questions were reviewed and approved by a professor of a university (see Appendix).
- **Variables Measured:** The questions are based on the five factors that drive early-career loyalty namely: career growth, job security, flexibility, workplace support, and pay importance.

Ethical Considerations

The ethical protocols are maintained to protect the privacy of each participant in this study. Their participation was completely voluntary, and the participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time without consequences. The data handling was based on the compliance with UK GDPR and Data Protection Act 2018 standards. All responses were anonymous, and they are labelled as alphanumeric values to protect participant identities. Lastly, all files are secured with devices that have password-protected systems on it.

Data Analysis Method

The gathered data was examined using Thematic Analysis. This process involves:

- **Transcription:** Converting the audio recordings of the interviews into text.
- **Coding:** Systematically tagging key phrases and concepts related to student loyalty intentions.
- **Theme Generation:** Grouping these codes into broader, meaningful patterns.
- **Review and Synthesis:** Analyzing the connections between themes to directly address the research questions.

Results and Findings

Demographic Profile of Participants

As mentioned, this study consists of 15 undergraduate students based in the UAE. While their programs vary, all participants are preparing to transition from university into the a working environment, specifically looking to join internships, part-time, and full-time jobs.

Qualitative Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis below is based on the primary data collected from the interviews. The codes and descriptions in the tables showcase the common responses of each participant (S1–S15).

Table 2. *Thematic Analysis of Career Growth.*

Theme 1: Career Growth

This section presents how career growth creates commitment among UAE undergraduates.

Theme	Sub-theme	Codes	Question	Description
Career Growth	Reciprocity through Organizational Investment	Investment in my future	Can you tell me how career growth and development opportunities would affect your decision to stay with an employer?	S1: "I value career growth... as it shows investment in my future."
				S5: "...show that the company is invested in my future and development."
				S6: "...investment in my skills and progression increases motivation and loyalty."
		Personal & Professional Fulfillment		S8: "Benefits me both personally and professionally... fulfill my desire for challenge."
				S11: "...provides clear direction, purpose, and fulfilment."
		Skill Mastery		S4: "...motivates me to develop my skills."
S13: "If I feel like I'm learning new skills... I'm much more likely				

	Progression Visibility and "Anti- Stagnation"	Clear promotion pathways	to stay."
			S1: "...clear promotion pathways."
			S3: "...structured progression where effort leads to greater responsibility."
		Stagnation as an exit trigger	S12: "...opportunities to move into specialised roles and a clear development path."
			S3: "...less loyal in a stagnant role with no clear path to senior management."
		Alignment with long- term goals	S7: "...if things feel repetitive with no growth, I'd likely look elsewhere."
			S2: "...would consider leaving if there's no progression."
			S15: "It needs to align with my goals and future plans."
			S14: "...lack of personal growth or networking opportunities shows [company] priorities."

Theme 1 shows that career growth is important for understanding the commitment of undergraduates, driven by two sub-themes: reciprocity and progression visibility. UAE undergraduates see professional development as a small investment that creates a sense of responsibility, which they giveback with a higher commitment (S1, S4, S5, S6, S8, S11, S13). However, this depends on clear promotion pathways (S1, S3, S12). Career stagnation acts as a clear factor for resignation; when opportunities for career growth are unseen, these students look for external options (S2, S7, S14, S15).

Table 3. Thematic Analysis of Job Security.

Theme 2: Job Security

This section showcases how job security provides psychological and practicality for a stable job.

Theme	Sub-theme	Codes	Question	Description
Job Security	Psychological Stability & Wellbeing	Peace of mind / Unease prevention	What role does job security play when you think about staying with an employer?	S1: "Job security is important as it provides confidence and peace of mind."
				S7: "Job security gives peace of mind and allows better focus and planning."
				S14: "...not needing to worry about whether the job will still be real."
		Stress reduction		S2: "Knowing that my position is stable would make me less stressed and more loyal."
				S9: "...it provides stability, reduces stress, and helps me focus."
				Confidence in future planning
		S4: "...stability gives me confidence about my future."		
		S5: "...provides stability and confidence in my future within the company."		
	Foundation for High Performance	Focus on growth and contribution		S6: "...allowing me to focus on performance and growth without

			worrying about job continuity."
			S10: "...allows me to focus more on growth, perform better, and commit."
			S12: "...provides stability and allows me to focus on skills and contribution."
			S15: "...how can someone work if there is constant pressure of me losing what I worked hard for."
			S3: "Job security is the foundation that allows me to focus on my performance."
	Reciprocal Loyalty & Long-term Commitment	Stability-driven loyalty	S2: "...stable would make me... more loyal to the company."
			S12: "...feeling valued increases my loyalty to an employer."
			S13: "I value staying with a company where I can contribute consistently and offer loyalty in return."
			S8: "...ensures financial stability, supports my future, and helps me provide for my family."
			S11: "Job security is not the main retention factor in cybersecurity, as high demand makes it easy to find other jobs."
		Pressure mitigation	
		Financial & Personal Security	
		Market Context (The Divergent View)	

Theme 2 shows job security as a tool for undergraduates to stay within an employer across three sub-themes: psychological stability, performance growth, and reciprocal loyalty. Job security supports the mental well-being and lessens the risk for long-term stress (S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S7, S9, S14). And because of this, employees can mitigate the feeling of anxiety and can offer better performance at work (S6, S10, S12, S15). Further, when this is applied, it creates a sense of loyalty for the worker (S8, S12, S13), though individuals with high value on the market in computing fields may place less importance on it (S11).

Table 4. Thematic Analysis of Workplace Flexibility.

Theme 3: Workplace Flexibility

This section showcases how workplace flexibility reflects an organization's culture and its respect for employees.

Theme	Sub-theme	Codes	Question	Description
Workplace Flexibility	Trust and Professional Autonomy	Employer trust	How do flexible working arrangements, such as flexible hours or remote work, influence whether you would stay with an employer?	S2: "It makes me feel trusted and more comfortable."
				S6: "...showing trust and increasing job satisfaction."
				S9: "...shows trust from the employer, making me more likely to stay."
		Autonomy over results		S3: "A hybrid model shows that an employer trusts their team to deliver results without constant supervision."
				S13: "If an employer trusts me with my time, I'm more likely to stay loyal."
				Modern and respectful culture
	S11: "...flexibility is essential rather than optional."			
Holistic Well-being & Work-Life Integration	Work-life balance	S1: "...improve work-life balance... show that the company values		

				employee well-being."
				S5: "...help maintain a better work-life balance."
				S11: "It helps reduce burnout [and] improve work-life balance."
				S1: "Flexible hours or remote work reduce stress."
		Stress and Burnout mitigation		S7: "It reduces stress and improves productivity."
				S15: "...what's the point of working when it's a huge inconvenience on my part."
			Environmental control	S13: "...remote or hybrid setups allow me to control my environment."
		S14: "...it lets me balance university, student council, and volunteering while still earning."		

Theme 3 shows that workplace flexibility drives commitment through two sub-themes namely: autonomy and holistic well-being. Hybrid and remote working create organizational trust, replacing strict supervision with results that matter and treats graduates as professionals and not a newbie or student (S2, S3, S6, S9, S11, S13). Moreover, flexibility improves work-life integration and it prevents burnout for individuals that prioritizes balancing work with personal routines (S1, S5, S7, S14), making the employment relationship stable over time (S15).

Table 5. Thematic Analysis of Workplace Support.

Theme 4: Workplace Support

This section showcases how workplace support introduces a human element into the social exchange process for UAE undergraduate students.

Theme	Sub-theme	Codes	Question	Description
Workplace Support	Mentorship and Coaching Culture	Mentorship over micro-management	What kind of support from managers or the workplace would make you more willing to stay with an employer?	S3: <i>"I value mentorship over micro-management. A manager who... acts as a coach makes me much more likely to remain loyal."</i>
		Constructive feedback vs. Criticism		S2: <i>"I value constructive feedback [and] understanding during challenges rather than just criticism."</i>
				S7: <i>"...listen and give constructive feedback... non-judgmental communication."</i>
		Guidance for fresh graduates		S1: <i>"Feedback, guidance, and encouragement are important, especially as a fresh graduate."</i>
				S5: <i>"Supportive managers who provide guidance... would make me more willing to stay."</i>
	Psychological Safety and Emotional Support	Psychological safety		S13: <i>"Psychological safety is also key, allowing open, judgment-free communication."</i>
		Reassurance and peace of mind		S4: <i>"...having someone to rely on during challenges... provides reassurance and peace of mind."</i>
		Approachability and understanding		S9: <i>"...important to me, especially when they are approachable."</i>

				S15: "An understanding environment would be amazing."
	Empowerment and Professional Respect	Autonomy		S11: "Supportive managers, fair workloads, autonomy... build loyalty."
				S14: "...let you have autonomy in the workplace (let you do the tasks/job on your own way)."
		Recognition and inclusion		S10: "...provide clear communication, regular feedback, recognition... would make me more willing to stay."
		Relational Support		S8: "...consistent healthy support by my managers through friendships and friendly relationships."

Theme 4 positions workplace support has three sub-themes: career development, psychological safety, and empowerment. Graduates consistently reject micromanagement in favor of having training sessions for development that offer guidance and useful feedback (S1, S2, S3, S5, S7), which acts as an important tool and socio-emotional resource for long-term retention. Additionally, leadership that feels approachable builds psychological safety, and it basically lowers the mental distress from mistakes in the workplace (S4, S9, S13, S15). And lastly, managers integrate appreciation through autonomy, recognition, and inclusion, and treating graduates as respected peers rather than with intimidation (S8, S10, S11, S14).

Table 6. Thematic Analysis of Pay Importance.

Theme 5: Pay Importance

This theme showcases the role of pay as both a basic need and a direct reflection of an employee's value for the company.

Theme	Sub-theme	Codes	Question	Description
Pay Importance	Economic Baseline & Quality of Life	Baseline requirement	How do salary and financial benefits influence your decision to	S3: "Salary is a baseline requirement to meet the cost of living in the UAE."
		Financial needs &		S5: "...help meet my financial needs."

		Savings	remain with an employer?	S13: "...supports my living and savings goals."
		Quality of life		S1: "Salary and benefits matter as they affect my quality of life and motivation."
	Symbol of Value & Recognition	Reflecting employee value		S5: "...reflect the value of my work."
				S9: "...reflect how much a company values its employees."
				S12: "...matter as they reflect employee value."
		Appreciation & Motivation		S1: "Fair pay and benefits make me feel valued."
				S10: "...make me feel valued, secure, and motivated to stay."
		Fairness over amount		S2: "I'd like to feel like I'm being paid fairly for my work."
				S7: "...if the pay isn't fair, it's hard to ignore."
	Retention & Market Dynamics	Primary retention driver		S4: "...compensation is a key incentive... it remains a main reason for long-term retention."
				S15: "It's probably be my no.1 priority... anything will suffice for the right price."
		Market demand (Cybersecurity)		S11: "In cybersecurity, low pay leads to turnover due to high demand."
		The Role Variable (Part-time vs Full-time)		S14: "For my part-time role, salary is a lower priority... For full-time roles, however... [it]"

				<i>strongly influence[s] my loyalty."</i>
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Theme 5 positions pay importance as a core driver of loyalty from undergraduate students across three sub-themes: quality of life, recognition, and market dynamics. Basic pay is a baseline economic necessity for managing the local cost of living and having savings (S1, S3, S5, S13). Developing above basic needs, competitive salaries create respect and value. When compensation is fair, it becomes a powerful motivator; but when viewed as unfair, it turns to difficulty and damages loyalty (S2, S5, S7, S9, S10, S12). In full-time technical roles, wages plays a role in reducing turnover rates, where employee awareness of market value influences retention, as those with specialized talent compares the pay with competitive market rates (S4, S11, S14, S15).

Integration with Social Exchange Theory (SET)

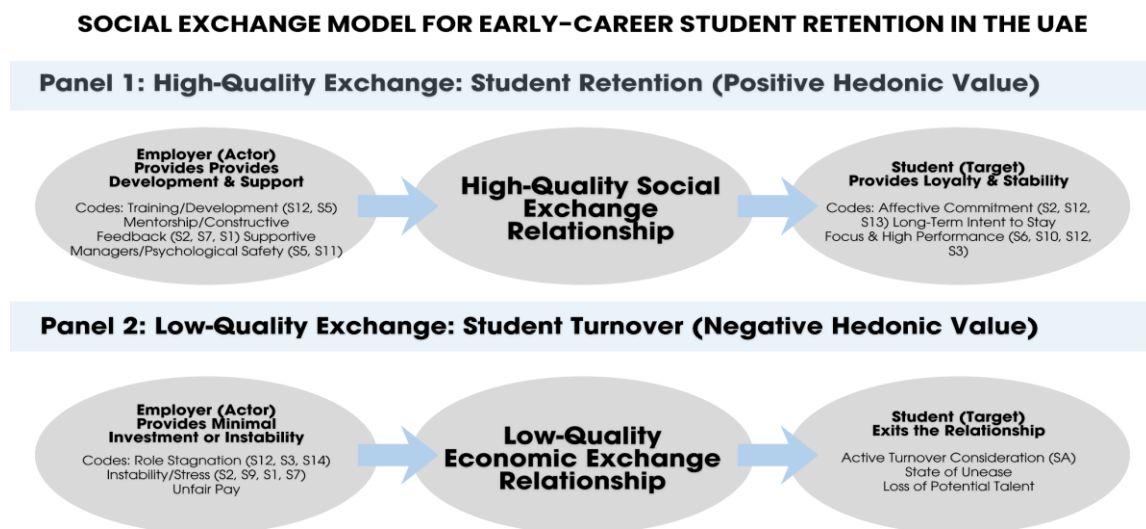


Figure 3. Social Exchange Theory Model for Early-Career Student Retention in the UAE.

Applying Social Exchange Theory (SET) to these findings shows that undergraduate loyalty in the UAE is not a fixed trait, but a dynamic response to the quality of the employment exchange. When organizations offer meaningful socio-emotional investments including career growth, mentorship, and psychological safety, early-career talent (S1, S2, S5, S7, S12) naturally reciprocates with long-term commitment. However, little to no support or proven unhealthy environments reduce the employment relationship to a purely work baseline. Based on these types of exchanges, negative factors such as role stagnation (S3, S12, S14), emotional stress (S1, S2, S7, S9), and unfair pay can lose the meaning of cost-benefit between employees and employers. When these costs outweigh the benefits of staying, newly recruited employees are pushed toward turnover consideration (S4) and voluntary organizational exit.

Discussion

This study evaluated how organizational benefits and exchange relationships shape early-career employer loyalty among undergraduate students in the UAE.

The findings show that student loyalty isn't a fixed trait. Instead, it is a direct response to how well a company supports its employees, which fits right into Social Exchange Theory (SET). Prospective hires look at career growth, job security, flexibility, workplace support, and pay

importance as a one whole rather than separate perks. With these, this study identified that pay and stability act as necessities. It covers the living expenses, it can ease anxiety, and minimize the risk of resignation (S1, S3, S9), but money alone will not keep people long-term. Real commitment comes from meaningful support like continuous skill-building, workshops/seminars, and training. Undergraduates see these efforts as tools that a company trusts them and wants to invest in their future (S1, S3, S5, S6).

In UAE's fast paced market, those preparing to enter the workforce think carefully about their time. Their commitment depends on the strategies the companies offer for their skills to develop and improve further in their career, the feeling of being safe to make mistakes, and getting mutual respect. When managers offer clear promotion paths, flexible hybrid schedules, and treat graduates as capable team members rather than basic extra hands (S3, S13, S14), it builds a genuine sense of obligation (S2, S6, S12). This mutual balance turns a basic job into a strong, long-term relationship. On the other side, when growth decreases, managers micromanage, policies stay overly strict, or there is no feedback at all (S2, S3, S7), students feel unappreciated and underwhelmed. This frustration acts as a trigger to quit or resign immediately. If companies and corporations want to keep young talent in the UAE, they need to look beyond basic paychecks and start to build a working environment that actively helps new hires grow personally and professionally.

Implications of the Study

Theoretical Implications

This research carries the literature by applying Social Exchange Theory to the pre-entry phase of employees from fresh graduates in a growing Middle Eastern economy. Specifically, it examines the structures of undergraduate students before they enter the workforce, thereby extending the traditional boundaries of the psychological contract framework.

Practical Implications for HR Practitioners

These findings offer practical implications for HR professionals, suggesting a needed shift from transactional hiring to relational talent management. Companies should not be relying on salaries to acquire such talents, organizations should establish advancement pathways and formal mentorship. By treating workplace flexibility as a core indicator of organizational trust and training managers in empathetic coaching, employers can foster the psychological safety required to retain emerging talent over the long term.

Policy Implications for Organizations

If UAE companies want to support the country's goals on employees and fostering a better workplace, they need to build these ideas directly into their workplace culture. Leaders must avoid false promotion promises and replace them with clear, merit-based goals that keep careers moving forward. Compensation also has to be in track with the actual cost of living. When companies make fair pay and clear practices the standard, new recruits feel genuinely valued and see a real reason to build a long-term career in the region.

Recommendations for Future Research

For future research, this study recommends to start the chain from the employers/companies. Giving attention to how HR teams recruit high-potential graduates and how they balance the cost of upfront hiring perks against long-term retention policies. Further, this would help explain why companies decide to invest in mentorship and workplace support in the first place, offering a complete, two-sided view of the employment relationship that current studies often miss.

Conclusion

This study looked at what makes undergraduate students in the UAE choose to remain to their early-career employers. Using Social Exchange Theory as a guide, this research sought how the workplace benefits the upcoming professionals on what they expect to receive to shape their future commitment to a company. By interviewing 15 undergraduate students, this qualitative research answered its main goals: looking at exactly how career growth, job security, flexibility, workplace support, and pay importance work together to drive long-term commitment.

The main findings show that undergraduate students in the UAE don't look at company benefits as separate, transactional perks. Instead, they see them as a support system that is connected. To chase clear opportunities to improve and gain experience, structured mentorship, and transparent promotion offers are what really drive long-term loyalty. In the same way, things like flexible working arrangements and psychological safety's involvement in a company act as tool for an organization to build trust and respect for their employees.

The findings show that while competitive pay is a critical baseline for meeting living costs and feeling rewarded, it isn't enough on its own to build a stable employment. Long-term commitment only is seen when compensation comes with high-quality mentorship and seminars with a supportive environment. Conversely, when graduates face things like role stagnation, poor work management, unsupportive managers, or unfair pay gaps, it serves as a reason for these employees to leave a company and instantly makes them start planning their next move.

Lastly, this study concludes that early-career loyalty among UAE undergraduates isn't just a static job status; it is a dynamic as presented in a two-way social contract. These undergraduate students enter the workforce with the willingness to grow and bring high productivity and long-term commitment to the table, but this is only possible if employers step up to prioritize the well-being, personal freedom, and career growth of these employees. When companies fail to provide this kind of exchange, it breaks the trust between the two parties before they even settle in, causing a drastic change in growing economy like the UAE to lose its best new talent far too early.

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