

Beyond the Counter: A Qualitative Study of Turnover Intention in New Zealand's Liquor Retail Sector

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ABSTRACT

Employee turnover presents considerable challenges for New Zealand's liquor retail sector, affecting organisational performance, service quality, and operational costs. This qualitative study examines factors influencing turnover intention among frontline liquor retail employees and identifies retention strategies from an employee-centred perspective. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four liquor retail employees in Rotorua, Tokoroa, and Hamilton, and the data were analysed using thematic analysis with ATLAS.ti. Five interrelated themes were identified: compensation and benefits, customer behaviour, career development, workplace stress, and organisational culture. The results demonstrate that perceptions of inequitable compensation, frequent encounters with aggressive and intoxicated customers, limited opportunities for career advancement, excessive workloads, and unsupportive management practices significantly contribute to turnover intention. Sector-specific challenges, such as regulatory compliance with New Zealand's Sale and Supply of Alcohol Act and ongoing safety concerns related to intoxicated clientele, further exacerbate retention difficulties. Participants highlighted the necessity of fair and transparent compensation, structured career pathways, targeted training, manageable workloads, and authentic attention to employee well-being as essential retention strategies. This study enhances understanding of turnover dynamics specific to New Zealand's retail industry and provides practical recommendations for employers, policymakers, and human resource practitioners aiming to improve employee retention in high-pressure retail environments.

Keywords: employee turnover, liquor retail, job satisfaction, retention strategies, New Zealand,

1. Introduction

The retail sector constitutes a vital component of New Zealand's economy, accounting for 9.6% of total employment and fostering vibrant communities through social engagement and economic activity (Retail NZ, 2019). Within this broader sector, liquor retail represents a significant subsector with a market size of \$2.4 billion and 1,057 retail stores nationwide (Duane-Davis, 2024). However, the liquor sector faces considerable challenges in workforce retention, with New Zealand's retail industry experiencing a 16% employee turnover rate as of 2023 (FigureNZ, 2024). This relatively high turnover rate reflects persistent difficulties in retaining staff, particularly in specialised retail environments such as liquor stores.

Employee turnover significantly impacts organisational effectiveness and productivity (Mor Barak et al., 2001). Employee turnover imposes substantial costs on organisations, both visible and invisible. Visible costs include recruitment expenses, training investments, security clearances, and leave payouts, while invisible costs encompass reduced productivity, disrupted customer relationships, decreased service quality, and diminished morale among remaining staff (Ahlrichs, 2000; Hay, 2002). Research indicates that over two-thirds of total turnover costs arise from lost productivity (Tracey & Hinkin, 2008), while service quality declines as turnover increases due to the time required to replace departing employees (Lynn, 2002). Furthermore, researchers distinguish between voluntary turnover, where employees independently choose to leave, and involuntary turnover, initiated by employers (Griffeth et al., 2000). Voluntary turnover correlates strongly with turnover intention, underscoring the importance of turnover intention as a central focus in retention research (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Wright & Bonett, 2007). Numerous studies confirm that turnover intention is the most reliable predictor of actual turnover (Abrams et al., 1998; Bedeian et al., 1991; C. H. Lee & Bruvold, 2003).

Despite extensive research on employee turnover intentions across various sectors, several critical gaps remain in understanding turnover within New Zealand's liquor retail industry. Firstly, while general retail turnover has been studied internationally (Pandey et al., 2019; Salleh et al., 2012; Wu & Polsaram, 2013), the liquor retail sector remains underexplored, particularly in the New Zealand context where distinctive challenges include complex legal requirements under the Sale and Supply of Alcohol Act 2012, frequent interactions with intoxicated and potentially aggressive customers, and heightened safety concerns. Secondly, existing turnover research predominantly adopts employer-centric perspectives and quantitative methodologies (Ak, 2018; Pandey et al., 2019), failing to capture the nuanced, lived experiences of frontline employees, with researchers consistently calling for qualitative studies incorporating employee voices (Hussain & Khan, 2018; Pandey et al., 2019). Thirdly, while mitigation strategies have been proposed—including improved compensation (Clayton, 2018), career development opportunities (Dubey, 2017), and organisational justice (Alkahtani, 2015)—these

recommendations primarily derive from employer perspectives, and their practical applicability from employee viewpoints in high-stress, legally complex environments remains unexplored. Fourthly, New Zealand-specific research on retail turnover is limited, with minimal scholarly attention to the liquor retail sector despite the country's unique regulatory environment, cultural context, and labour market conditions. Finally, emerging factors unique to liquor retail, such as the psychological burden of regulatory compliance and interactions with licensing authorities, remain virtually unexplored in turnover literature despite preliminary observations suggesting significant impacts on employee stress and turnover intentions.

This study addresses these gaps by investigating two primary research questions: (1) What factors influence employee turnover intention in New Zealand's liquor retail sector? and (2) How could these factors be mitigated to reduce turnover from the employee perspective? By prioritising employee perspectives through qualitative inquiry, this research offers practical, contextually relevant insights to enhance retention in the challenging retail environment. The study advances academic understanding of sector-specific turnover dynamics and provides actionable knowledge for employers, managers, and policymakers addressing workforce retention challenges in New Zealand's liquor retail industry.

The structure of this article is as follows. The literature review investigates employee turnover intention, focusing on compensation, job stress, organisational culture, and career development, and positions the study within the New Zealand context. The methodology section details the qualitative research design, data collection methods, analytical approach, and ethical considerations. The findings section identifies five themes: compensation and benefits, customer behaviour, career development, stressful workplace, and organisational culture, each supported by participant quotations. The discussion analyses these findings in relation to existing literature and the specific context of New Zealand's liquor retail sector. The conclusion summarises the main insights, discusses practical implications, and highlights limitations and directions for future research.

2. Literature review

Identifying the factors influencing turnover intention enables organisations to implement targeted retention strategies before employee departure. Turnover intention, defined as an individual's conscious and deliberate decision to leave an organisation (Gouthier & Rhein, 2011; Tett & Meyer, 1993), is widely recognised as the strongest predictor of actual employee turnover (Abrams et al., 1998; Bedeian et al., 1991; Griffeth et al., 2000; C. H. Lee & Bruvold, 2003; C.-C. Lee et al., 2012). Extensive literature has identified several contributors to turnover intention, including job dissatisfaction (Wright & Bonett, 2007), organisational culture (Carmeli, 2005), job stress (Bashir & Durrani, 2014), inadequate compensation (Healy et al., 2012), and limited

career development opportunities (Bakare, 2018). Despite this, significant gaps persist in understanding how these factors function within specialised retail contexts, particularly in New Zealand's liquor retail sector. The following literature review synthesises existing research on turnover intention factors, assesses their relevance to retail environments, and highlights critical gaps that justify the current study.

2.1 Factors Influencing Employee Turnover Intention

Multiple, interconnected factors have been identified as contributors to turnover intention. **Compensation and Benefits** are critical in attracting and retaining employees across industries (Healy et al., 2012; Richardson, 2009). Low salaries are a primary cause of employee turnover, as employees seek higher-paying positions elsewhere (Alam, 2014; Kumar et al., 2014). In the retail sector specifically, comparatively low pay rates drive many employees to leave their positions (Salleh et al., 2012; Wu & Polsaram, 2013). However, some studies report contrasting results. For instance, Ikatrinasari et al. (2018) found that salary levels do not significantly influence turnover intentions in specific retail contexts, indicating that additional factors may moderate this relationship.

Job Satisfaction, which is closely related to compensation, significantly predicts organisational turnover intention (Wright & Bonett, 2007). Employees dissatisfied with their current roles are more likely to seek alternative opportunities that offer greater fulfilment. In the retail sector, job satisfaction is shaped by factors such as pay rates, leadership quality, co-worker relationships, and opportunities for promotion (Wu & Polsaram, 2013). Research in New Zealand's fast-food industry highlights training, recognition, and job security as key elements that enhance job satisfaction and reduce employee turnover (Mohsin & Lengler, 2015). These findings indicate that comprehensive approaches addressing multiple satisfaction dimensions are more effective than single-factor interventions.

The literature suggests that organisational culture is a foundational factor shaping how employees experience other workplace dimensions. **Organisational Culture**, defined by shared values, beliefs, and attitudes among members, has a significant impact on employee commitment, job satisfaction, and retention (Habib et al., 2014). Challenging organisational cultures increases absenteeism and withdrawal intentions (Carmeli, 2005), while alignment between organisational culture and employee values proves essential for retention (Booth & Hamer, 2007). In retail settings, inadequate clarity about job scope, insufficient management guidance, and poor communication create unhappy work environments that increase turnover intentions (Kamarulzaman et al., 2015).

Previous studies suggest that perceived fairness may mediate relationships between other workplace factors and turnover intentions. **Organisational justice** encompasses employees' perceptions of fairness in workplace procedures, interactions, and outcomes (Öztürk et al., 2016). Perceived fairness is fundamental to employee satisfaction, commitment, and loyalty, particularly in the retail sector (Alkahtani, 2015; Misra et al., 2012). Studies consistently demonstrate an inverse relationship between organisational justice and turnover intention (Öztürk et al., 2016; Sokhanvar et al., 2016), with unfair treatment significantly influencing turnover decisions in retail environments (Misra et al., 2012).

Job Stress significantly increases employees' intentions to quit (Bashir & Durrani, 2014; Jha, 2014). Stress arises from multiple sources, including role ambiguity, role conflict, and work overload, leading to emotional exhaustion and job dissatisfaction (Jayasri & Annisa, 2023). In retail settings specifically, stress emerges from customer behaviour, abusive supervision, work exhaustion, inter-role conflicts, and limited autonomy (Pandey et al., 2021). However, some studies question the direct relationship between job stress and turnover intention (Paillé, 2010), suggesting the need for further investigation into potential moderating factors.

Career Development opportunities represent another critical factor in retention decisions. Limited advancement opportunities contribute significantly to turnover in retail sectors (Hart et al., 2007; Priyanka & Dubey, 2017). Employees experiencing stagnant career prospects feel undervalued and seek better roles in other sectors (Healy et al., 2012). The retail sector's social image and restricted advancement pathways exacerbate this challenge, making career development a critical retention factor (Salleh et al., 2012). Notably, career development appears to be interconnected with job satisfaction and organisational culture, as a lack of advancement opportunities may reflect broader organisational undervaluation of employee contributions.

These factors interact in complex ways to influence turnover intention. For example, employees may tolerate inadequate compensation if organisational culture is supportive and career development opportunities are available. Conversely, competitive compensation may not retain employees who experience chronic job stress, unfair treatment, or limited advancement. This interconnectedness underscores the need to examine how multiple factors collectively shape employee satisfaction and commitment. The relative importance of these factors can vary across contexts, industries, and employee demographics, emphasising the need for context-specific research.

2.2 Turnover Research in the New Zealand Context

While turnover research spans multiple sectors and countries, significant gaps remain in understanding turnover in New Zealand's retail industry, particularly in specialised retail

contexts. Bateman (2009) examined relationships between co-worker dissatisfaction and turnover intention in retail and suggested further exploration of additional contributing factors. Eastgate (2015) found that work-life balance predicts job satisfaction and affects turnover intentions across skill levels, though many factors remain untested. In other sectors, research has identified training, recognition, and job security (Mohsin & Lengler, 2015), promotion and incentives (Clark-Rayner & Harcourt, 2000), sexual harassment and social support (Brough & Frame, 2004), and work-family conflict (Haar et al., 2012) as significant turnover predictors. However, these New Zealand studies focus on hospitality, banking, and emergency services rather than retail. The limited retail-specific research in New Zealand, combined with the sector's high 16% turnover rate, suggests that the current understanding of retail turnover drivers remains incomplete.

Although international retail turnover studies provide valuable insights into common antecedents of employee departure (Pandey et al., 2019; Salleh et al., 2012; Wu & Polsaram, 2013), their relevance to the New Zealand liquor retail sector is constrained by differences in regulatory frameworks, labour market conditions, and cultural expectations. Several unique characteristics distinguish the liquor retail sector. First, the legal and regulatory requirements are significantly more stringent than those in general retail, obligating employees to adhere to strict alcohol service regulations, interact with licensing committees, and accept potential legal responsibility for customer actions (Sale and Supply of Alcohol Act 2012). This regulatory complexity has been linked to increased role ambiguity and role conflict, both of which are established sources of occupational stress (Beehr & Newman, 1978; Kahn et al., 1964). Second, customer interactions in liquor retail are qualitatively distinct from those in other retail settings, as employees often manage intoxicated customers who may display aggressive or abusive behaviour. Research on alcohol-related environments demonstrates that these interactions elevate safety risks and psychological strain for frontline staff (Hobbs et al., 2005). Third, liquor retail functions within a broader social and regulatory environment shaped by public health priorities, community oversight, and continuous monitoring by licensing authorities, which can further intensify organisational stress and role conflict (Hofstede, 2001).

Collectively, these sector-specific pressures suggest that general retail turnover research may not adequately capture turnover dynamics in liquor retail. Although established turnover models highlight factors such as compensation, job satisfaction, organisational culture, organisational justice, job stress, and career development (Griffeth et al., 2000; Hom et al., 2017; Mobley, 1977), these variables are likely to function differently within the unique context of liquor retail. For instance, job stress in this sector may be more strongly influenced by customer intoxication, safety risks, and legal accountability than by workload alone (Beehr & Newman, 1978; Karasek & Theorell, 1990). Organisational culture is shaped not only by internal management practices

but also by external regulatory demands and interactions with licensing committees, which are generally absent in other retail environments (Kahn et al., 1964). Furthermore, career development opportunities may be limited in smaller liquor retail businesses with flat organisational structures, thereby increasing turnover risk among qualified or career-focused employees (Hom et al., 2017). These contextual distinctions highlight the necessity for sector-specific research to supplement and refine general retail turnover frameworks.

2.3 Methodological and Perspective Gaps

Beyond sector-specific gaps, significant methodological limitations are evident in existing turnover research. Most studies adopt employer-centric perspectives and rely on quantitative methodologies (Ak, 2018; Pandey et al., 2019). While these approaches offer valuable statistical insights into prevalence and correlations, they often fail to capture the nuanced, lived experiences of frontline employees who encounter daily challenges influencing turnover decisions. Quantitative methods are effective at identifying correlating factors but provide a limited understanding of how employees experience these factors, how factors interact from the employee perspective, or which solutions employees consider most effective.

Researchers have consistently advocated for qualitative studies that incorporate employee perspectives to better understand the psychological and experiential dimensions of turnover intention (Ak, 2018; Hussain & Khan, 2018; Pandey et al., 2019). Qualitative research facilitates exploration of employee motivations, the meanings attached to workplace experiences, and the contextual factors influencing turnover decisions. This methodological approach is essential for understanding complex, context-dependent phenomena such as turnover in specialised sectors. However, this gap is particularly evident in New Zealand's liquor retail sector, where no published research has systematically examined frontline employee perspectives on turnover factors and retention strategies.

Additionally, various mitigation strategies for retail turnover have been proposed, including improved compensation (Clayton, 2018), career development opportunities (Dubey, 2017; Funk, 2024), organisational justice (Alkahtani, 2015; Misra et al., 2012), and supportive leadership (Kamarulzaman et al., 2015; Owens, 2022). However, these recommendations primarily originate from employer perspectives or theoretical frameworks. The practical applicability and relevance of such strategies from the perspective of employees working in high-stress, legally complex environments, such as liquor retail, remain largely unexplored. Employee-driven retention strategies may differ substantially from employer-proposed solutions. For example, employees may prioritise safety and stress reduction over compensation increases, or may identify regulatory compliance support as critical to retention—factors unlikely to emerge from employer-focused research. This perspective gap constitutes a significant limitation in existing

retention literature, as effective strategies must address employee-identified needs rather than employer assumptions about retention motivators.

2.4 Synthesis and Research Imperatives

Although turnover intention has been extensively studied, significant gaps remain that require further investigation. While general turnover research identifies multiple interconnected factors influencing retention decisions, these findings have not been systematically applied to New Zealand's liquor retail sector. This sector faces unique regulatory, safety, and customer-related challenges. Its high turnover rate and distinctive operational context suggest that general retail findings may not fully explain turnover dynamics or inform effective retention strategies in liquor retail.

Furthermore, most existing research reflects employer perspectives and relies predominantly on quantitative methodologies. This approach limits understanding of how frontline employees experience workplace factors and which solutions they consider most effective. Despite calls for employee-centred, qualitative research, such studies are scarce in the liquor retail context. Consequently, proposed mitigation strategies often lack grounding in employee experiences and perspectives, potentially reducing their practical effectiveness. These gaps highlight the need for sector-specific, employee-centred qualitative research that examines both turnover factors and retention strategies from the perspective of frontline workers in New Zealand's liquor retail sector.

This study addresses these gaps by investigating two primary research questions: (1) What factors influence employee turnover intention in New Zealand's liquor retail sector? and (2) How can these factors be mitigated to reduce turnover from the employee perspective? By focusing on employee voices and experiences through qualitative inquiry, this research provides practical, contextually relevant insights to improve retention in this challenging retail environment. The study advances academic understanding of sector-specific turnover dynamics. It offers practical knowledge for employers, managers, and policymakers seeking to address workforce retention challenges in New Zealand's liquor retail industry. Furthermore, by identifying unique liquor retail challenges and employee-driven solutions, this research establishes a foundation for future studies on turnover in other specialised retail and customer-facing sectors facing similar pressures.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

An exploratory qualitative research design was employed to provide flexibility and adaptability, enabling in-depth exploration of turnover intention (Hassan, 2024). In accordance with Crotty's (1998) research framework, a constructivist epistemology and interpretivist theoretical perspective were adopted. A case study methodology was implemented, with semi-structured interviews serving as the primary data collection method.

Constructivism is reflected in the emphasis on building knowledge through experience, as demonstrated by engagement with frontline liquor retail employees. The interpretivist approach focuses on understanding the symbolic representations and subjective meanings associated with turnover factors through detailed participant discussions. The case study approach enables in-depth exploration of turnover intentions within the specific context of New Zealand's liquor retail industry, thereby supporting theory development grounded in real-world scenarios.

Semi-structured interviews facilitate a comprehensive understanding of turnover intention by enabling exploration of complex issues through structured yet adaptable questions. This method captures detailed participant perceptions and strategies for managing turnover factors, thereby providing valuable insights into their experiences (Belina, 2023). The flexibility of semi-structured interviews allows questions to be tailored to participants' expertise and perspectives, enriching the overall understanding of the research topic.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were utilised to identify participants. Purposive sampling involved selecting individuals most likely to provide relevant, in-depth information based on the researcher's judgment (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Snowball sampling relied on referrals from initial respondents to recruit additional participants who met the study criteria, thereby enhancing both depth and diversity (Moser & Korstjens, 2018).

Selection criteria required participants to be currently employed as frontline liquor retail employees (excluding higher managers or owners) and to have at least six months of experience in New Zealand's liquor retail industry. Consequently, four male participants from Rotorua, Tokoroa, and Hamilton were interviewed, each with 1.5 to five years of sector experience.

Table 1: Participant demographics of this study

Participant	Experience	Gender	Location
P1	Two years	Male	Rotorua
P2	One and a half years	Male	Rotorua
P3	Five years	Male	Tokoroa
P4	Four years	Male	Hamilton

3.3 Data Collection

Face-to-face interviews were conducted in staff rooms within liquor stores to prioritise participant convenience, privacy, and comfort. Before the interviews, participants received information sheets, consent forms, and interview questions. Both written and oral consent were obtained, and interviews were audio-recorded with permission using a mobile phone voice recorder. Each interview lasted approximately 10 to 15 minutes, with an emphasis on quality rather than quantity. Recordings were transcribed and imported into ATLAS.ti software for analysis, and all information was kept confidential and stored securely on password-protected computers.

The semi-structured interview guide comprised ten main questions, supplemented by additional clarifying questions. Initial questions were designed to familiarise participants with their job roles and experiences. Subsequent questions addressed pay and benefits, supervisor and managerial support, job satisfaction, organisational fairness, and workplace preferences, thereby addressing the first research question regarding turnover factors. Questions concerning suggested improvements addressed the second research question on mitigation strategies. A pilot interview was conducted to test and refine the question structure, ensuring a natural flow and encouraging participant openness.

3.4 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process: (1) familiarisation with data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) theme searching, (4) theme review, (5) theme definition and naming, and (6) report production. ATLAS.ti software facilitated systematic organisation, coding, and theme development.

- Recorded interviews were transcribed manually and using Microsoft Word, capturing all elements, including intonation, pauses, interruptions, and tone. This stage proved crucial for identifying relevant information aligned with research questions.

- For initial code generation, transcribed data were uploaded to ATLAS.ti and systematically examined. Elements significant for theme development were identified and coded. Codes were concise yet sufficiently detailed to convey independent meaning while remaining contextually relevant. Initial codes addressed two research questions: factors influencing turnover intention (including aggressive customers, discrimination, low pay rates, lack of benefits, and stress) and potential solutions to turnover (such as career development opportunities, fair pay, bonuses, and staff well-being).
- During theme searching, codes were grouped by shared meanings to develop overarching themes. Codes with similar concepts were merged, and themes were constructed by interpreting relationships among codes and emphasising recurring patterns. Initially, five themes addressed the first research question, and three themes addressed the second.
- Theme review involved assessing the alignment of themes with coded data and refining codes to ensure consistency with the research questions. Braun and Clarke's (2006) guiding questions were used to evaluate themes for authenticity, insightfulness, clear boundaries, sufficient data support, and cohesiveness. After this review, themes were restructured, retaining significant themes and removing non-significant codes and themes.
- Theme definition and naming involved analysing themes and linking them to the research questions. Representative data extracts were selected to illustrate each theme and demonstrate their diversity and depth. The final five themes identified were: (1) Compensation and benefits, (2) Customer behaviour, (3) Career development, (4) Stressful workplace, and (5) Organisational culture.

4. Findings

A thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with four liquor retail employees identified five interconnected themes relevant to both research questions. These themes demonstrate the cumulative factors influencing turnover intention (RQ1) and employee-identified retention strategies (RQ2). The findings suggest that turnover in New Zealand's liquor retail sector arises from the interplay of compensation, customer behaviour, career development, workplace stress, and organisational culture, rather than from isolated issues.

4.1 Theme 1: Compensation and Benefits

Compensation and benefits were identified as the most significant contributors to turnover intention. Participants consistently expressed dissatisfaction with pay levels, highlighting not only low wages but also perceived inequities in how compensation reflected experience,

qualifications, responsibilities, and sector-specific risks. This dissatisfaction directly influenced turnover intention and informed perspectives on retention strategies.

P1, who had obtained a duty manager certificate, expressed frustration that qualifications and experience were not adequately recognized or rewarded:

"I think my pay rate should be more than now because I have some experience and a duty manager certificate. I think pay should be around \$30, but I got too low for me." (P1)

This statement underscores the significance of pay equity over absolute wage increases. Participants systematically compared their compensation to market rates and other sectors, concluding that liquor retail undervalues professional development.

Beyond base pay, participants reported dissatisfaction with the lack of non-statutory benefits. All indicated they received only minimum entitlements, without bonuses or recognition rewards. P3 articulated this limitation succinctly:

"I am really not satisfied with the pay rate compared to the work I do here. If I did the same amount of work in other sectors, I might get paid more." (P3)

The absence of benefits contributed to perceptions of being undervalued and reinforced intentions to leave. Consequently, fair and transparent compensation, aligned with qualifications, responsibilities, and sector risks, emerged as the primary employee-identified retention strategy.

4.2 Theme 2: Customer Behaviour

Customer behaviour emerged as a defining and distinctive challenge within liquor retail. Participants consistently reported frequent exposure to aggression, intoxication, and abuse, resulting in psychological stress and safety concerns that are not commonly encountered in general retail settings.

Interactions with intoxicated customers were identified as the primary source of workplace stress. P1 explicitly differentiated customer behaviour from task-related demands:

"Customers threaten us, and there is no security. Not only in the store, but outside of the store too, we are not secure." (P1)

This finding underscores interactions with intoxicated customers as a unique occupational hazard specific to liquor retail environments.

Participants further described the emotional labour involved in maintaining a positive demeanour in the face of customer aggression. P4 reflected on the cumulative impact of this expectation:

" It doesn't matter whether you have good or bad days; you always have to smile at the customers. Greet them with a smiley face. I'll say a fake smiley face. I really don't enjoy doing that anymore." (P4)

Sustaining this façade over time contributed to emotional exhaustion and reduced job satisfaction among participants.

All participants, who were immigrants, additionally reported experiences of racial discrimination from customers. P3 explained:

"They don't treat us fairly. So, it's kind of a little bit of racism." (P3)

These experiences compounded existing stressors, reinforced feelings of exclusion, and contributed to participants' intentions to leave their positions.

4.3 Theme 3: Career Development

Limited career development opportunities were identified as a primary factor contributing to employee turnover, especially among qualified and ambitious staff. Participants consistently reported a distinct career ceiling within liquor retail, with advancement typically ending at the store manager position.

Participant 3 elaborated on this perceived stagnation:

" ... once you reach certain positions, your career growth stops there. Uh, you'll be just the maximum all the way up at the top. What you can do is the store manager. ... you will stay there forever. There is no way of promotion after that." (P3)

The lack of advancement pathways contributed to monotony and diminished long-term organizational commitment. Career stagnation was closely associated with skill stagnation, as P4 further noted:

" All your skills will be stuck. ... like there's no skill growth, no career growth, and even the pay." (P4)

Consequently, the implementation of structured career pathways and targeted skill development, particularly in leadership and customer conflict management, was identified as essential for employee retention:

"Giving them proper training and helping them with career growth." (P3)

Participants specifically noted that training in customer handling, conflict resolution, and leadership, which directly addresses the unique challenges of liquor retail, could enhance skills

while also providing advancement opportunities. The emphasis on structured pathways indicates that even modest career development initiatives, such as senior staff roles, training specialist positions, or regional responsibilities, could significantly improve retention by offering progression beyond the store manager level.

4.4 Theme 4: Stressful Workplace

Workplace stress resulted from the combined effects of heavy workloads, safety concerns, and regulatory compliance obligations. Understaffing further increased workloads, placing unsustainable pressure on remaining employees and perpetuating turnover cycles.

In addition to workload-related stress, regulatory compliance with New Zealand's Sale and Supply of Alcohol Act represented a distinct burden. P3 expressed frustration regarding the accountability expectations imposed by authorities:

"... the authorities.. think as if something happened to them [the consumers], that's our fault."(P3)

Employees identified increasing staff numbers as a primary strategy to mitigate stress. P1 attributed the issue to understaffing and suggested a potential solution:

"I think the employer should hire more staff." (P1)

This recommendation highlights the importance of addressing workplace stress through structural changes rather than relying solely on individual coping mechanisms.

Participants also reported significant security concerns arising from customer aggression and intoxication. P2 further noted that safety concerns extended beyond work hours, contributing to ongoing stress and anxiety. P1 associated security concerns specifically with incidents involving customer intoxication:

"Yeah, sometimes racism and sometimes it's very tough with intoxicated people. When they get intoxicated, they abuse us, and sometimes they try to hit us as well. Yeah, that's the customers that give me more stress than the work." (P1)

These accounts indicate that employees are exposed to genuine physical danger from intoxicated and aggressive customers, while security measures remain insufficient. The extension of these threats beyond the workplace, as employees fear encounters with customers outside of work, contributes to pervasive anxiety. This security challenge, which is more pronounced in liquor retail than in general retail due to the prevalence of intoxication, constitutes a unique occupational hazard that increases turnover intention.

Another notable finding was the stress associated with legal compliance requirements under New Zealand's Sale and Supply of Alcohol Act. Participants described their interactions with licensing authorities and police as burdensome and stressful. P3 expressed frustration regarding regulatory oversight:

"I'll say, dealing with the authorities, especially police, the Council kind of thing. I really hate that. That kind of thing." (P3)

This statement highlights employees' frustration at being held responsible for customer actions beyond their control. The ongoing possibility of regulatory scrutiny and the potential for blame regarding customer misfortunes impose an additional psychological burden. Legal compliance stress thus represents a unique challenge in liquor retail, not typically present in general retail, and contributes significantly to turnover intention.

4.5 Theme 5: Organisational Culture

Organisational culture influenced turnover decisions at multiple levels. While store-level relationships were generally positive, participants reported unfair treatment by higher management, which undermined trust and commitment.

Participants emphasised that unfair treatment by higher management and licensing authorities was a primary driver of turnover. P3 illustrated this perception of unfairness:

"Even the higher management authorities and the licensing community committees don't treat us fairly. They treat us as if they own us." (P3)

These statements indicate that employees perceive higher management as viewing them as expendable resources rather than valued contributors. The phrase "treat us as if they own us" reflects a perception of dehumanising treatment that undermines dignity and respect. Such experiences foster feelings of exclusion, dissatisfaction, and broken trust, which directly contribute to turnover intentions. Another participant identified higher management as the least favourable aspect of their job, further confirming this pattern. When management fails to foster supportive, inclusive environments, employees become demotivated and are more likely to seek employment elsewhere.

In contrast to issues with higher management, participants reported intense satisfaction with immediate store managers and colleagues. P1 identified these relationships as the primary positive aspect of their job:

"The only thing I like here is our manager and our staff, my manager and my colleagues. Yeah, they are so friendly." (P1)

These statements suggest that store-level organisational culture, characterised by mutual support, cooperation, and collegiality, partially mitigates other negative factors. However, positive store-level culture does not fully compensate for failures at the higher management level, inadequate compensation, career stagnation, customer aggression, or workplace stress. The contrast between supportive store managers and unsupportive higher management indicates that organisational culture functions at multiple levels, with store-level culture providing an insufficient buffer against broader organisational shortcomings.

Participants also mentioned receiving occasional free drinks as a minor gesture of appreciation. P2 noted:

"They give me free drinks sometimes." (P2)

While participants appreciated this gesture, they emphasised it could not substitute for adequate compensation and benefits. This finding suggests that non-monetary recognition, while valued, provides only a marginal retention benefit when fundamental issues such as pay, career development, and workplace stress remain unaddressed.

Participants advocated for an organisational focus on staff well-being as an essential retention strategy. This recommendation included reducing workloads, increasing staffing levels, and demonstrating genuine concern for employee welfare. P3 emphasised the importance of well-being:

"I'll say you should focus on staff well-being more." (P3)

These statements reveal that employees perceive current organisational practices as neglecting their well-being, prioritising operational efficiency and profit over employee welfare. Participants suggested that demonstrating genuine concern for staff well-being—through adequate staffing, manageable workloads, training programs, and appreciation for contributions—would significantly improve retention by making employees feel valued and acknowledged.

5. Discussion

This research examined the factors influencing employee turnover intentions in New Zealand's liquor retail sector and identified mitigation strategies from employees' perspectives. The findings indicate that turnover in this sector arises from complex interactions among inadequate compensation, challenging customer interactions, limited career development opportunities, workplace stress, and organisational culture issues. Although these factors are consistent with general retail turnover research, the liquor retail sector presents unique challenges, particularly interactions with intoxicated customers, increased security concerns, and significant legal

compliance requirements. These sector-specific issues intensify turnover pressures and necessitate tailored retention strategies.

5.1 Compensation and Turnover Intentions

The identification of inadequate compensation as the primary driver of turnover is strongly supported by existing literature. Healy et al. (2012) and Richardson (2009) emphasise that insufficient compensation significantly contributes to voluntary turnover, as employees pursue better-paying opportunities when remuneration fails to reflect their effort and experience. Kumar et al. (2014) and Alam (2014) identified low wages as the principal cause of turnover across sectors, while Salleh et al. (2012) and Wu & Polsaram (2013) confirmed that comparatively low retail pay rates are a key factor in employee departures.

However, this study extends existing research by demonstrating that dissatisfaction with compensation is driven not only by absolute pay levels but also by perceived unfairness, specifically a disconnect between employee contributions and rewards. Participants emphasised the importance of fairness rather than simply requesting higher pay, often comparing their compensation unfavourably with other sectors and expressing frustration that qualifications, experience, and sector-specific risks such as customer aggression, intoxication, and legal liability are insufficiently recognised. This finding is consistent with organisational justice research (Alkahtani, 2015; Misra et al., 2012; Sokhanvar et al., 2016), which demonstrates that perceived fairness significantly influences retention decisions. The focus on fairness suggests that transparent, equitable compensation systems that acknowledge experience, qualifications, and sector-specific challenges may enhance retention, even when absolute pay levels are constrained by industry economics.

Additionally, participants expressed dissatisfaction with benefits packages, noting the absence of performance bonuses, holiday gifts, and recognition rewards, which contributed to feelings of being undervalued. This finding supports Alam's (2014) argument that performance-based rewards and bonuses play a significant role in employee retention. Ikatrinasari et al. (2018) also observed that non-monetary recognition is vital in addressing turnover. However, this study identifies a critical distinction: while non-monetary recognition, such as occasional free drinks, was appreciated, it could not replace adequate monetary compensation and benefits. These results suggest a hierarchy of compensation needs, where sufficient base pay and benefits are foundational, and non-monetary recognition offers supplementary value but cannot compensate for inadequate fundamental compensation.

5.2 Customer Behaviour and Turnover Intention

The finding that customer behaviour, particularly aggression, discrimination, and intoxication, significantly contributes to turnover is consistent with existing retail research, yet it also highlights challenges unique to liquor retail. Wright and Bonett (2007) demonstrated that job dissatisfaction predicts turnover intention, while Pandey et al. (2021) identified customer behaviour as a significant source of stress in retail settings. This study, however, indicates that customer interactions in liquor retail are qualitatively distinct from those in general retail, resulting in fewer, less typical, and less frequent behaviours in retail environments.

Interactions with intoxicated customers represent the most distinctive and challenging aspect of liquor retail customer service. Although customer contact is inherent to all retail sectors, liquor retail is characterised by frequent encounters with intoxicated individuals whose behaviour is unpredictable, potentially aggressive, and occasionally violent. Participants reported that these interactions, rather than routine work tasks, were their primary source of stress. This finding extends existing research on retail stress by identifying a sector-specific stressor that is not addressed in the general retail literature. The unpredictability of intoxicated behaviour, which ranges from verbal abuse to physical violence, necessitates constant vigilance and induces anxiety, ultimately contributing to emotional exhaustion.

Although customer aggression and violence are not exclusive to liquor retail, their frequency and severity appear heightened due to intoxication. Participants described experiences of verbal abuse, physical threats, and actual violence, which generated security concerns that extended beyond the workplace, as employees expressed fear of encountering aggressive customers outside of work hours. This pervasive sense of insecurity constitutes a distinctive occupational hazard. While Pandey et al. (2021) identified customer behaviour as a retail stressor, the present study demonstrates that the severity and frequency of aggression in liquor retail surpass general retail norms, primarily due to intoxication, thereby creating unique safety challenges.

Racial discrimination encountered by immigrant workers introduces an additional dimension to customer-related stress. Participants reported experiencing unfair treatment based on ethnicity, which is consistent with organisational justice research (Alkahtani, 2015; Sokhanvar et al., 2016), demonstrating that perceived unfairness negatively affects employee morale and retention. Notably, this study reveals that immigrant liquor retail workers experience discrimination from customers as well as management, as emphasised in previous research, thereby imposing an additional psychological burden. Customer-based discrimination may be especially pronounced in liquor retail, where intoxication can lower inhibitions and increase the likelihood of discriminatory behaviour.

The emotional labour required to maintain a positive demeanour in the face of customer aggression emerged as a significant stressor. Participants described the necessity of "faking" smiles and positivity while enduring abuse, which led to emotional exhaustion over time. While this finding is consistent with broader research on emotional labour, it suggests that the demands in liquor retail may surpass those in general retail due to the higher frequency and severity of aggression. The statement by one participant, who reported feeling "sick and tired" of sustaining false positivity after five years, indicates that the emotional labour burden accumulates and may ultimately become unsustainable.

5.3 Career Development and Turnover Intention

The observation that career stagnation is a significant driver of turnover is consistent with existing literature and highlights sector-specific dynamics. Hart et al. (2007) and Dubey (2017) found that limited growth opportunities in retail contribute to turnover, while Salleh et al. (2012) observed that retail often lacks promotion opportunities beyond certain levels. The present study corroborates these findings and offers detailed insights into employees' experiences of career stagnation.

Participants reported a distinct career ceiling at the store manager level, with no advancement opportunities beyond this role. This ceiling results in stagnation across career progression, skill development, and compensation, as employees perceive no improvement in their situation regardless of performance or tenure. This study extends prior research by elucidating the psychological effects of career ceilings: employees feel "stuck" and increasingly view their retail experience as a liability, as their skills become outdated and less transferable to other sectors. Healy et al. (2012) found that stagnant career opportunities lead employees to feel undervalued and seek alternative roles, a finding confirmed here, with the added insight that the perception of skills stagnation further intensifies this effect.

The observation that qualified employees quickly identify limited career prospects and transition to other sectors carries significant implications. Liquor retail may experience a negative selection cycle, wherein qualified and ambitious employees depart due to career stagnation, while less qualified or less ambitious individuals remain. This dynamic may diminish service quality and organisational capability over time. Therefore, career development emerges not only as a retention concern but also as a critical factor in maintaining talent quality, as career stagnation disproportionately drives away employees essential to organisational success.

Participants' focus on skill development builds upon existing research. In addition to career advancement, employees seek opportunities to acquire new competencies, particularly in areas relevant to liquor retail, such as customer handling, conflict resolution, and leadership. These

findings indicate that even modest skill development initiatives may enhance retention by offering growth opportunities and improving employees' future employability. The specific requests for training in customer handling and conflict resolution, which address the unique challenges of liquor retail, suggest that sector-specific training could simultaneously strengthen retention and operational effectiveness.

5.4 Workplace Stress and Turnover Intention

The observation that workplace stress significantly contributes to turnover is consistent with extensive prior research (Bashir & Durrani, 2014; Jha, 2014; Pandey et al., 2019). This study further demonstrates that multiple stressors interact to create a cumulative burden in the liquor retail sector. In this sector, stress originates from three interconnected sources: heavy workloads, security concerns, and legal compliance burdens.

Heavy workloads caused by understaffing generate immediate stress and perpetuate a vicious cycle: understaffing increases workloads, which drives turnover, further reducing staffing and intensifying the burden on remaining employees. Previous studies (Dwiyanti et al., 2020; Pandey et al., 2019) identified workload as a significant source of retail stress. The present findings confirm this and further indicate that workload stress is exacerbated by inadequate compensation. Employees report feeling exploited, working excessively under challenging conditions, and receiving insufficient reward. These results suggest that workload and compensation interact synergistically, with their combination exerting greater pressure on turnover. Security concerns represent a distinctive stressor in liquor retail. Although Pandey et al. (2021) identified customer behaviour as a retail stressor, the present study demonstrates that security concerns in liquor retail surpass those in general retail due to risks associated with intoxication-related violence. Participants described genuine physical danger from intoxicated and aggressive customers, compounded by insufficient security measures. Security threats also extend beyond the workplace, as employees fear encounters with customers outside work, leading to pervasive anxiety not typically found in other retail contexts. These findings indicate that liquor retail faces occupational safety challenges more closely aligned with those in emergency services or healthcare, necessitating similar security protocols and employee support.

Legal compliance burdens constitute a distinctive finding with limited precedent in the existing literature. Participants reported stress arising from interactions with licensing authorities and police, expressing frustration at being held responsible for customer actions beyond their control. The ongoing possibility of regulatory scrutiny and blame for customer misfortunes imposes additional psychological strain. This finding highlights a unique challenge in liquor retail: employees must navigate complex legal requirements while facing potential personal and organisational liability for compliance failures. Jayasri and Annisa (2023) observed that role

ambiguity and conflicting responsibilities contribute to job stress; the present findings confirm this and further demonstrate that legal compliance generates specific role conflicts, as employees must balance customer service with regulatory obligations, including the need to refuse service to customers who may become aggressive.

The cumulative nature of these stressors is particularly significant. Participants identified not isolated stressors but combinations of stressors, such as heavy workload, inadequate compensation, customer aggression, and legal compliance burdens. This cumulative burden indicates that stress in liquor retail exceeds that in general retail, not because individual stressors are more severe, but because multiple significant stressors converge. This finding is consistent with broader occupational stress research, which demonstrates that cumulative stressors exert multiplicative rather than additive effects on well-being and turnover intention.

5.5 Organisational Culture and Turnover Intention

The observation that organisational culture significantly influences turnover is consistent with previous research (Carmeli, 2005; Habib et al., 2014; Kamarulzaman et al., 2015) and highlights important multi-level dynamics. Participants reported positive, supportive experiences with store-level management, in contrast to negative, unsupportive interactions with higher management. These findings indicate that organisational culture functions at multiple hierarchical levels, each exerting distinct effects.

Unfair treatment by higher management was identified as a significant driver of turnover. Participants reported being treated "as if they own us," indicating dehumanising practices that undermine dignity and respect. This result is consistent with organisational justice research (Alkahtani, 2015; Misra et al., 2012), which demonstrates that perceived unfairness negatively affects retention. Booth and Hamer (2007) found that misalignment between organisational culture and employee values leads to turnover; this study corroborates that finding and further reveals that such misalignment often originates from higher management attitudes rather than store-level culture. Habib et al. (2014) highlighted the importance of clear communication and value alignment, which appears to be insufficient at higher management levels in liquor retail.

Supportive relationships at the store level help mitigate negative experiences. Participants reported high satisfaction with immediate store managers and colleagues, describing relationships as cooperative and collegial. These findings indicate that organisational culture is heterogeneous and varies across hierarchical levels. Store-level culture, defined by mutual support and collegiality, contributes to positive daily work experiences and partially buffers against adverse factors. Nevertheless, this positive environment at the store level does not fully

offset the negative impact of higher management shortcomings, inadequate compensation, limited career advancement, or customer-related stress.

This multi-level dynamic has important implications. It suggests that retention interventions targeting store-level culture alone will prove insufficient if higher management culture remains problematic. Conversely, improving higher management culture and practices could significantly improve retention even if store-level culture remains unchanged. The finding that employees clearly distinguish between supportive store managers and unsupportive higher management suggests that higher management behaviours and attitudes directly impact frontline employees despite limited direct contact, likely through policies, resource allocation decisions, and communication patterns.

5.6 Synthesis: Interconnected Factors and Sector-Specific Dynamics

The findings indicate that turnover in New Zealand's liquor retail sector arises from complex interactions among multiple pressures rather than from isolated factors. Inadequate compensation is especially problematic when coupled with high workplace stress, leading employees to perceive exploitation. Career stagnation exacerbates dissatisfaction with compensation, as employees become aware that their circumstances are unlikely to improve. Customer aggression contributes to workplace stress, which is not alleviated by insufficient organisational support. Legal compliance requirements introduce additional pressures, and inequitable treatment by higher management further signals to employees that their efforts are undervalued despite significant challenges.

These interconnections are consistent with broader turnover research, which suggests that multiple factors collectively influence retention decisions (Castle et al., 2007). However, the present study demonstrates that the interactions among these factors may be multiplicative rather than merely additive; combinations of negative factors generate disproportionate turnover pressure. Therefore, effective retention strategies should address multiple factors concurrently rather than targeting individual issues in isolation.

Furthermore, the findings reveal distinctive liquor retail challenges: intoxicated customer interactions, heightened security concerns, and legal compliance burdens. These sector-specific factors suggest that general retail retention strategies may prove insufficient for liquor retail. While compensation, career development, and organisational culture improvements remain important, liquor retail also requires sector-specific interventions to address customer management, security, and regulatory compliance pressures.

The New Zealand context introduces further complexities. The Sale and Supply of Alcohol Act imposes specific regulatory requirements and compliance burdens. Additionally, immigration

patterns result in a significant proportion of liquor retail workers being immigrants, who may encounter challenges such as customer discrimination. Labour market conditions and the high cost of living in New Zealand render the minimum wage particularly insufficient. These contextual factors indicate that retention strategies should be tailored not only to the liquor retail sector but also to New Zealand's unique regulatory, demographic, and economic environment.

6. Conclusion

This qualitative study investigates the factors influencing employee turnover intention in New Zealand's liquor retail sector from the perspective of frontline employees. Through semi-structured interviews with four liquor retail workers and subsequent thematic analysis, five interrelated themes were identified: compensation and benefits, customer behaviour, career development, workplace stress, and organisational culture. The results indicate that turnover intention in liquor retail emerges from the accumulation and interaction of multiple pressures, with sector-specific challenges intensifying general retail turnover drivers. Notably, interactions with intoxicated customers, regulatory compliance demands, and safety concerns establish a unique occupational context that distinguishes liquor retail from other retail environments.

The findings suggest that inadequate and perceived unfair compensation is the most frequently cited driver of turnover intention. Employees emphasise the importance of equity, recognition of experience, and acknowledgment of sector-specific risks, rather than focusing solely on absolute wage increases. Customer behaviour, particularly aggression, discrimination, and intoxication, is identified as a primary stressor unique to liquor retail, resulting in sustained emotional labour and safety concerns. Career stagnation further exacerbates turnover intention, especially among qualified employees who encounter limited advancement opportunities beyond store manager roles. Workplace stress arises from the combined effects of understaffing, legal accountability under the Sale and Supply of Alcohol Act, and ongoing security concerns. Organisational culture is experienced inconsistently, with supportive store-level relationships partially counterbalanced by perceived indifference or unfairness from higher management. Overall, these findings underscore the cumulative and reinforcing nature of turnover pressures in this sector.

The study provides several practical implications for employers, managers, and policymakers. Effective retention strategies in liquor retail should be comprehensive, simultaneously addressing compensation fairness, career development, stress reduction, and organisational support. Employers are encouraged to implement transparent compensation structures, establish recognition and bonus schemes, and invest in sector-specific training focused on customer de-escalation and conflict management. Additionally, the development of clear career pathways, adequate staffing, robust security protocols, and explicit guidance regarding legal responsibilities is essential. At the policy level, industry bodies and regulators may need to reevaluate

compliance frameworks that impose disproportionate psychological and legal burdens on frontline employees. The findings indicate that retention initiatives based on employee-identified needs are more likely to succeed than those driven solely by employer priorities.

Several limitations are evident in this study. The small sample of four participants from three geographic locations limits the generalizability of the findings to New Zealand's liquor retail sector and other contexts. The exclusive focus on employee perspectives omits the perspectives of employers, managers, and policymakers, thereby limiting a more comprehensive understanding of retention dynamics. Furthermore, the qualitative design, while providing rich and contextual insights, is subject to interpretive limitations and potential researcher bias. Future research should consider larger samples, mixed-methods designs, longitudinal approaches, and comparative studies across regions and customer-facing industries to address these limitations.

This research contributes to the literature by establishing liquor retail as a distinct occupational context within turnover and retention studies. By emphasising employee perspectives, it extends existing retail research that frequently overlooks sector-specific pressures, including intoxicated customer interactions, regulatory accountability, and increased safety risks. The study further advances human resource management scholarship by illustrating how general turnover drivers interact with context-specific factors to influence employee intentions. The New Zealand context underscores the significance of regulatory, labour-market, immigration, and cost-of-living factors in shaping organisational outcomes, underscoring the need for context-sensitive research. More broadly, the findings provide transferable insights for other customer-facing sectors that manage aggressive or vulnerable clientele, highlighting the importance of employee-centred, sector-adapted retention strategies.

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