

## **Ex post i-deals, work-life balance, and work well-being in the hospitality industry: The moderating role of gender**

### **Abstract**

**Purpose** – This study aims to examine the effect of several types of ex post i-deals on work-life balance and work well-being, focusing on the mediating effect of work-life balance on the relationship between ex post i-deals and work well-being as well as the moderating effect of gender on the relationship between ex post i-deals and work-life balance in the hospitality industry.

**Design/methodology/approach** – We use a questionnaire survey of 642 hotel managers from developed cities in China and analyze the data with structural equation modeling. We also conduct on-site interviews among 20 hotel managers to support conclusions of the survey.

**Findings** – The results indicate that task i-deals as well as career and incentives i-deals significantly promote work-life balance, thereby indirectly improving work well-being. However, the impact of flexibility i-deals on work-life balance and work well-being is insignificant. The influence of career and incentives i-deals on work-life balance for males is slightly stronger than that for females.

**Practical implication** – This study has practical implications for hotel employers in terms of using various ex post i-deals to motivate and retain hotel managers by improving personal work-life balance and work well-being.

**Originality/Value** – As one of early attempts to highlight the potential of i-deals to serve as solutions for work-life conflicts and unhappiness issues among hotel managers, we provide novel insights into the mediating process between ex post i-deals and work well-being from the work-life balance perspective as well as distinct influences of various ex post i-deals on work-life balance for male and female managers.

**Keywords** – Ex post i-deals; Work-life balance; Work well-being; Gender; Mediating effect; Moderating effect

**Paper type** – Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Idiosyncratic deals (i-deals) are normally defined as flexible, personalized, and mutually beneficial employment arrangements negotiated between employees and employers (Hornung *et al.*, 2008). In terms of negotiation time, i-deals can be divided into ex-ante i-deals (personalized employment arrangements designed to attract talent during the recruitment stage) and ex post i-deals (personalized employment arrangements after the recruitment stage for motivating and retaining employees; Rousseau and Kim, 2006). In terms of their content, i-deals are usually either development i-deals, which include career development opportunities, personalized job tasks, compensation, and benefits, or flexibility i-deals, which include customized schedules and workplaces (Hornung *et al.*, 2008).

Most existing studies focus on how flexibility i-deals alleviate the work-family conflicts of Western employees in high-tech organizations and public service units (Hornung *et al.*, 2009; Wang *et al.*, 2019). Nevertheless, a recent exploratory study (Sun *et al.*, 2020) demonstrates that it is difficult to popularize flexibility i-deals in solving work-life conflict issues in the Chinese hospitality industry. According to these researchers, marketing managers and senior managers are the typical recipients of flexibility i-deals, but the frequent human interactions in the hospitality industry make on-call hours a part of these employees' normal daily life. These researchers also raised the possibility that other types of i-deals could be helpful for work-life balance in the Chinese hospitality industry context; however, this possibility has not been verified by empirical study. Given these inconsistent findings, it is necessary to re-examine the influence of various ex post i-deals on hoteliers' work-life balance.

As on-call hours and long working hours have become a cultural phenomenon that is difficult to question and change in the hospitality industry, managers are increasingly required to sacrifice their personal lives and family responsibilities for their heavy workloads (Liu-Lastres *et al.*, 2022). This often leads to work-life conflicts and unhappiness (Cain *et al.*, 2018; Jolly *et al.*, 2022). These concerns are shared by hotels internationally because they are harmful to hotelier motivation and retention (Chen and Chen, 2021; Guzzo *et al.*, 2022; Varga *et al.*, 2021; Zhao *et al.*, 2011). According to a widely circulated industry report (Very East, 2020), it has become normal for middle- and high-level hoteliers in the Chinese hospitality industry to leave an employer within 3 years. Studies focusing on the relationship between ex post i-deals and work well-being remain sparse, especially in the context of the hotel industry and other

service industries. Despite research exploring the impact of work-life balance on subjective well-being (Gao and Jin, 2015; Hornung *et al.*, 2008), there is little research into the mediating mechanism between various i-deals and work well-being from the perspective of work-life balance.

Notably, more than 50% of the global tourism and hospitality workforce are females (UNWTO, 2019). With the increasing trend of dual-career families and female employees, employers have to consider family-friendly policies and gender issues in the workplace (Mooney, 2020; Scandura and Lankau, 1997). Research on the gender differences in responses to various ex post i-deals and its theoretical foundation are necessary but quite limited. Early studies have demonstrated gender can affect individuals' work-related reactions to the same employment arrangement within the same organization (Mathieu and Zajac, 1990; Scandura and Lankau, 1997). Hospitality i-deals should be tailored to the needs and reactions of male and female employees, which not only respects individuality but also responds to Mooney's (2020) call for respecting gender diversity and equality in the hospitality industry. The i-deals research shows that women prefer to negotiate flexibility i-deals more than men due to their family roles and responsibilities (Bayazit and Bayazit, 2019; Collins *et al.*, 2012; Zhao *et al.*, 2011). Their findings raise the possibility that gender could make a difference in the influence of ex post i-deals on work-life balance. However, how and why the gender affects the associations between various ex post i-deals and work-life balance remains to be empirically clarified.

To address the above research gaps, we focus on how to use ex post i-deals to improve work-life balance and work well-being of employed male and female staff by investigating the following relationships: a) the effect of various ex post i-deals on work-life balance and work well-being; b) the mediating effect of work-life balance on the ex post i-deals and work well-being relation; and c) the moderating effect of gender on the ex post i-deals and work-life balance relation. The ex post i-deal negotiation is typically treated as a job redesign behavior that modifies job demands and resources in a way that will benefit employees' work well-being (Hornung *et al.*, 2014; Plomp *et al.*, 2016; Tadić *et al.*, 2015). Another research regards the negotiation of ex post i-deals as an approach to achieve complementary person-environment fit by redesigning work arrangements that meet personal needs and environmental demands (Wang *et al.* 2019). As the job demands-resources model and person-environment fit theory are also used for explaining the formation mechanism of work well-being and work-life balance

(Tadić et al., 2015; Wang *et al.*, 2019), we adopt them as the theoretical foundation for this study. Given that most Chinese people believe work is essential for their family welfare (Tang and Hornung, 2015), we select the Chinese hospitality industry context.

Theoretically, this study firstly combines job demands-resources model and person-environment fit theory to elaborate the direct and intermediary mechanism between ex post i-deals, work-life balance, and work well-being. It also uses the gender egalitarianism theory to enrich the moderating mechanism between ex post i-deals and work-life balance by highlighting how gender influences the varying contributions of ex post i-deals to work-life balance. Practically, it provides hotel employers with a comprehensive solution for optimizing ex post i-deals to improve hotel managers' work-life balance and work well-being. It also offers references to gender diversity management in the hospitality industry by understanding gender differences in responses to various ex post i-deals from the perspective of work-life balance policies.

## **2. Theoretical background and hypothesis development**

### *2.1. Theoretical background*

According to the structure of the job demands-resources model, job demands are characteristics that require individuals to expend effort, time, or money, whereas job resources are job characteristics that have positive functions for individuals (Radic *et al.*, 2020). Studies drawing on the job demands-resources model suggest that challenge job demands and job resources significantly improve employees' work well-being, whereas hindrance job demands damage employees' work well-being (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2009; Tadić *et al.*, 2015). The contents of task i-deals and career and incentives i-deals involve the increase of challenge job demands (e.g., job responsibility and complexity) and job resources (e.g., job autonomy, career growth, learning opportunities, and incentives), whereas the contents of flexibility i-deals involves the decrease of hindrance job demands (e.g., role conflict and work overloads). Therefore, the ex post i-deal negotiation can be understood as a job redesign behavior that both employees and employers can initiate and benefit (Hornung *et al.*, 2014). Relevant research finds that job crafting, a bottom-up job redesign behavior, is positively associated with work well-being (Tims *et al.*, 2013). This suggests that the negotiation of ex post i-deals may also help to improve work well-being.

The negotiation of ex post i-deals can also be understood as an approach to achieve complementary person-environment fit by redesigning work arrangements that meet personal needs and environmental demands (Wang *et al.* 2019). Under the person-environment fit theory, the complementary person-environment fit can be achieved by needs-supplies fit (i.e., making environmental supplies satisfy personal needs) or demand-abilities fit (i.e. making personal abilities meet environmental demands). We propose that ex post ideals are helpful for both demand-abilities fit and needs-supplies fit because ex post ideals not only satisfy personal needs by providing personalized work arrangements but also meet family demands by increasing personal abilities (Wang *et al.* 2019). Further, the person-environment fit theory also suggests that the more an individual fits his/her environment, the stronger well-being he/she will perceive (French *et al.*, 1982), supporting the contributions of work-life balance to work well-being.

According to the gender egalitarianism theory, the biological sex makes people in the low gender egalitarianism context believe that females' roles differ from males' roles. Specifically, most females tend to prioritize their family role rather than their work role while males have the opposite priority (Lyness & Judiesch, 2014; Scandura and Lankau, 1997). For instance, males in the low gender egalitarianism Asian have more responsibilities for the glory and prosperity of family and spend more time at work than women (Andersen *et al.*, 2013; Bayazit and Bayazit, 2017; Lyness & Judiesch, 2014; Tang and Hornung, 2015), whereas females spend more time at family than men due to more responsibilities for housework and childcare (Collins *et al.*, 2012; Scandura and Lankau, 1997). This suggests gender may moderate the ex post i-deals and work-life balance relation. Based on the above theories, our conceptual model is proposed (see Figure 1).

Insert Figure 1 Here

## *2.2 Ex post i-deals and work-life balance*

Work-life balance is a measure of how effective and balanced an individual can be in allocating personal time, resources, and energy to their work and non-work roles (Haar *et al.*,

2014). The non-work roles include family and other domains (e.g., leisure, education, community, religion) that require personal energy, time, and commitment (Kirchmeyer, 2000; Lyness & Judiesch, 2014; Milkie and Peltola, 1999; Tsaur and Yen, 2018). Hospitality i-deals are designed to meet individuals' desires for work arrangements customization in terms of task autonomy, development opportunities, financial incentives, non-financial incentives, schedule, and workplace (Sun *et al.*, 2020). From the perspective of the person-environment fit theory, ex post i-deals respond to hoteliers' personal needs on personalized and flexible tasks, compensation, benefits, schedule, and workplace (Sun *et al.*, 2020), and also provide them with more autonomy, money, energy, and time for fulfilling family responsibilities (Heras *et al.*, 2017; Wang *et al.*, 2019). Most studies find that flexibility i-deals significantly alleviate work-family conflicts and increase work-family enrichment for hospital employees, clerical workers, clerical supervisors, and store managers (Hsieh *et al.*, 2008; Tang and Hornung, 2015). However, hospitality studies note that popularizing flexibility i-deals is quite difficult in most hotels because their demands on on-call hours and long working hours (Bayazit and Bayazit, 2019; Sun *et al.*, 2020; Sun *et al.*, 2021). Another study suggests that informal organizational family support (e.g., job autonomy and career impact) significantly predicts employees' work attitudes and perceptions of work-family conflict (Behson, 2005). Several cross-cultural studies also suggest that Eastern employees have different attitudes toward the negotiation of shorter or more flexible working hours, which are often adopted to satisfy the work-life balance needs of Western employees. Specifically, Eastern employees are inclined to avoid asking for shorter working hours for fear of being considered to be weak or slack, and they tend to prefer employee welfare and entertainment strategies to achieve work-life balance (Chandra, 2012; Cooke, 2009). Furthermore, they are more likely to believe that a successful career not only meets their need for personal achievement in the work role but also their need for glory and prosperity in the family role (Redding, 1990; Tang and Hornung, 2015). Thus, task-, career-, and incentives-related i-deals may be helpful for their work-life balance because of their benefit to family welfare, life quality, and work and career upkeep (Sun *et al.*, 2020). Accordingly, the hypotheses were presented as follows:

H1a: Task i-deals are positively associated with work-life balance.

H1b: Career and incentives i-deals are positively associated with work-life balance.

H1c: Flexibility i-deals are positively associated with work-life balance.

### 2.3 *Ex post i-deals and work well-being*

The hedonic view defines work well-being as the degree to which employees perceive their working experience as pleasurable, otherwise known as subjective well-being (Guzzo *et al.*, 2022; Hwang and Wang, 2021). The eudemonic view conceptualizes work well-being as an employee's evaluation of their own self-actualization and potential development, which is psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989). The integrated view combines the above two views, conceptualizing work well-being as the overall quality of an employee's experience and efficacy at work (Horn *et al.*, 2004; Huang, 2014). We adopt the integrated view because of its broader scope. Ex post i-deals may be positively related to work well-being because job demands and flexible working conditions have positive effects on work well-being (Elovainio *et al.*, 2014; Joyce *et al.*, 2010). Furthermore, the i-deals research shows that i-dealers are more likely to be satisfied with, committed to, and engaged in their work and organizations (Hornung *et al.*, 2010; Ng and Lucianetti, 2016; Rosen *et al.*, 2013). In some studies, employee satisfaction, commitment, and engagement are included as indicators of work well-being because they reflect employees' work-related cognitive experience, psychological attachment, and emotional state, respectively (Fisher, 2010; Kara *et al.*, 2013; Tadić *et al.*, 2015). From the perspective of job demands-resources model, negotiating flexibility i-deals involves efforts in decreasing hindrance job demands, whereas negotiating task i-deals or career and incentives involves efforts in redesigning job resources or challenge job demands (Sun *et al.*, 2021). As job resources and demands are highly associated with work well-being (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2009; Tadić *et al.*, 2015), ex post i-deals may contribute to work well-being by redesigning job demands and resources. Accordingly, the hypotheses were presented as follows:

H2a: Task i-deals are positively associated with work well-being.

H2b: Career and incentives i-deals are positively associated with work well-being.

H2c: Flexibility i-deals are positively associated with work well-being.

### 2.4 *The mediating effect of work-life balance*

On the basis of person-environment fit theory, this study views ex post i-deals and work well-being as antecedent and outcome of work-life balance, respectively. As we stated earlier, ex post i-deals meets demands of personal family roles on autonomy, money, energy, and time,

and thereby contribute to work-life balance (Wang *et al.*, 2019; Sun *et al.*, 2020). Work-family programs play vital roles in enhancing job and life satisfaction and alleviating negative emotions (Haar *et al.*, 2014; Marks and MacDermid, 1996). Prior studies identified i-deals as a kind of work-family program that is beneficial in reducing work-family conflicts, improving family welfare and life quality, and maintaining work and career (Hornung *et al.*, 2009; Sun *et al.*, 2020). Further, as individuals with high person-environment fit levels often report stronger well-being (French *et al.*, 1982), work-life balance is positively related to work well-being (Haar *et al.*, 2014; Wepfer *et al.*, 2018), whereas work-life conflict is negatively related to work well-being (Fiksenbaum, 2014; Leineweber *et al.*, 2013). Thus, we propose the following hypotheses based on the person-environment fit theory:

H3: Work-life balance is positively associated with work well-being.

H4a: Work-life balance mediates the task i-deals and work well-being relation.

H4b: Work-life balance mediates the career and incentives i-deals and work well-being relation.

H4c: Work-life balance mediates the flexibility i-deals and work well-being relation.

## 2.5 The moderating effect of gender

Gender, an individual characteristic that distinguishes between male and female (Faqih and Jaradat, 2015), has always been an indispensable topic in i-deals and work-family conflict research. Western studies demonstrate differences in male and female preferences in terms of the contents of i-deals. Specifically, female employees desire flexibility i-deals due to their family roles and responsibilities for housework and childcare and can sacrifice their career development opportunities in order to gain work-life balance (Collins *et al.*, 2012). Another research also suggested that the benefits of flexible work hours for individual job satisfaction and organizational commitment are stronger for females than for men (Scandura and Lankau, 1997). The current study focuses on the Chinese context, in which most people prioritize work time rather than personal and family time in order to obtain more family welfare by hard working (Tang and Hornung, 2015). According to the gender egalitarianism theory, most females in low gender egalitarianism cultural context are socialized to prioritize their family role rather than their work role while males have the opposite priority (Lyness & Judiesch,

2014; Scandura and Lankau, 1997). In the low gender egalitarianism Asian, Chinese men may have more responsibilities in terms of the glory and prosperity of family and spend more time at work than women (Andersen *et al.*, 2013; Bayazit and Bayazit, 2017; Lyness & Judiesch, 2014; Tang and Hornung, 2015). Accordingly, we propose the following hypotheses:

H5a: The task i-deals and work-life balance relation is stronger for male than for female.

H5b: The career and incentives i-deals and work-life balance relation is stronger for male than for female.

H5c: The flexibility i-deals and work-life balance relation is stronger for female than for male.

### **3. Methodology**

Due to the nature of this research, we carried out a questionnaire survey to examine our conceptual model and hypotheses and used on-site interviews to provide further evidence for our questionnaire survey findings.

#### *3.1 Participants and procedure*

We sampled middle and senior managers who had been serving at upscale hotels in developed cities in mainland China for at least 1 year to complete the questionnaire survey. We made this sample determination rule for two reasons. First, upscale hotels have higher likelihood of granting ex post i-deals due to their financial support and advanced human resource ideas. Second, middle and senior managers with longer tenure are more familiar with i-deals practices (Sun *et al.*, 2020). We employed a company to collect 679 self-report questionnaires in total, of which 642 valid responses were retained. Specifically, 59% were from first-tier cities and 41% were from second-tier cities; 55.5% were from five-star hotels and 44.5% were from four-star hotels; 54.5% were male and 45.5% were female; 89.7% were married and 10.3% were single; 85.2% had children and 14.8% had no children; 50.5% were department or associate managers, 25.1% were department or associate directors, and 24.5% were general managers or deputy general managers; and 55.7% were from front offices and 44.3% were from back offices.

In our on-site interviews, we selected the purposeful sampling method to recruit 20 middle and senior managers working in upscale hotels at least 1 year through the funneling technique with screening questions regarding job tenure, position, and star level of the hotel, supporting the transferability (Morse and Richards, 2002). Of the interview participants, 5 were department directors, 5 were general managers, and 10 were department managers; 11 were male and 9 were female; 10 were working in domestic hotels and 10 were working in international hotels (Table 1). We developed structured interviews with the following questions: “What personalized or customized work arrangements does your hotel use to motivate and retain middle and senior managers?”, “Which of them do you think is more helpful for your work-life balance?” and “Which of them do you think is the most helpful for your work well-being?”. They were then prompted to explain the reason for their choice.

Insert Table 1 Here

### 3.2 Measures

*Ex post i-deals.* The respondents rated their ex post i-deals using the three-dimensional hospitality i-deals scale ( $\alpha = 0.960$ ) developed by Sun et al. (2020), which assesses the extent to which they have obtained task i-deals (*Task*, 4 items,  $\alpha = 0.860$ ), career and incentives i-deals (*Career*, 16 items,  $\alpha = 0.950$ ), and flexibility i-deals (*Flexibility*, 5 items,  $\alpha = 0.848$ ). Sample items include, “Personally motivating job tasks,” “Career options that suit my personal goals,” and “A work schedule customized to my personal needs.”

*Work-life balance.* We measured the work-life balance of the respondents using their responses to a three-item scale (*Balance*,  $\alpha = 0.794$ ) developed by Haar (2013). A sample item is, “Nowadays, I seem to enjoy every part of my life equally well.”

*Work well-being.* The respondents evaluated their work well-being on a four-dimensional scale (*Well-being*,  $\alpha = 0.947$ ) developed by Huang (2014) that integrates subjective and psychological perspectives on well-being. This scale covers the following domains: affective well-being (9 items,  $\alpha = 0.861$ ), cognitive well-being (5 items,  $\alpha = 0.858$ ), professional well-being (10 items,  $\alpha = 0.908$ ), and social well-being (5 items,  $\alpha = 0.854$ ). Sample items include,

“My job makes me feel satisfied,” “I can concentrate easily,” “My work has been recognized by my superior,” and “I have close contact with my colleagues in this hotel.”

### *3.3 Data analysis*

We used SPSS 22.0 and AMOS 22.0 to analyze the quantitative data collected by questionnaire surveys. SPSS 22.0 was used to perform Harman’s single factor test, calculate descriptive statistics, and conduct a reliability test. AMOS 22.0 was used for confirmatory factor analysis and path analysis. The bootstrapping method was used to examine the mediating effects and multi-group analysis was used to examine the moderating effects. We carried out content analysis to analyze the transcribed interview data by using two individual coders and Crawford (2013)’s coding procedure to confirm the reflexivity.

## **4. Results**

### *4.1 Common method variance test*

As each respondent was invited to respond to all of the items in the same questionnaire, we checked whether the common method variance issue was serious by conducting Harman’s single factor tests. Following Podsakoff and Organ (1986), we conducted a reliability analysis that included principal component analysis and an unrotated factor solution. Seven factors were extracted and 31.71% of the overall variance ( $< 40\%$ ) was explained by the first factor. Therefore, the common method variance in this study was judged to be acceptable.

### *4.2 Measurement model*

The results of confirmatory factor analysis showed that the theorized five-factor model mostly fitted the data reasonably ( $\chi^2 = 2,948.876$ ,  $df = 1,520$ ,  $IFI = 0.939$ ,  $TLI = 0.935$ ,  $CFI = 0.938$ ,  $SRMR = 0.035$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.038$ ). This five-factor model was superior to the four-factor model that combine task i-deals and careers and incentives i-deals into one factor ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 791.707$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), the three-factor model that further combine three dimensions of i-deals ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 1,188.575$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), the two-factor model that further combine i-deals and work-life balance ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 1,545.276$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and the single-factor ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 1,882.891$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) models. All of the standardized loading estimates were greater than 0.500 (range: 0.523 to 0.966) and all of the critical ratio values were greater than 1.960 (range: 9.309 to 21.575), which is statistically significant according to the criterion used in prior studies (e.g., Byrne, 2016). Table 2 shows

the correlations, squared correlations, composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), and descriptive statistics. All of the AVE values of variables were greater than 0.500 (range: 0.547 to 0.847) and the squared correlations among variables, and all CR values were greater than 0.700 (range: 0.794 to 0.957). Therefore, the convergent validity, discriminant validity, and composite reliability of the variables were deemed acceptable.

Insert Table 2 Here

### *4.3 Hypothesis testing*

At this step, we used age, marital status, children, department type, city tier, hotel size (star-level) as control variables to improve the rigor of results. The model fit index indicated that the hypothesized model adequately fitted the data ( $\chi^2 = 1777.216$ ,  $df = 649$ ,  $IFI = 0.921$ ,  $TLI = 0.914$ ,  $CFI = 0.921$ ,  $SRMR = 0.067$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.052$ ). As shown in Table 3, task i-deals were positively associated with work-life balance ( $\beta = 0.374$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and work well-being ( $\beta = 0.113$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), supporting H1a and H2a. Career and incentives i-deals were positively associated with work-life balance ( $\beta = 0.604$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and showed a non-significant effect on work well-being ( $\beta = 0.102$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ), supporting H1b but not H2b. The coefficients representing the impacts of flexibility i-deals on work-life balance and work well-being were non-significant ( $p > 0.05$ ), meaning that H1c and H2c were not supported. Work-life balance had a positive effect on work well-being ( $\beta = 0.814$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), supporting H3.

Insert Table 3 Here

We used 5,000 bootstrap samples with a 95% confidence level to test the intermediary mechanism. As shown in Table 4, work-life balance partially mediated the task i-deals and work well-being relation ( $\beta = 0.304$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and fully mediated the career and incentives i-deals and work well-being relation ( $\beta = 0.492$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), supporting H4a and H4b. However,

the mediating effect of work-life balance on the relationship between flexibility i-deals and work well-being was not significant ( $p > 0.05$ ), thus rejecting H4c.

Insert Table 4 Here

We then conducted a multi-group analysis to check the difference in the structural model and path between males ( $N = 350$ ) and females ( $N = 292$ ). The model fit index of the unconstrained model was acceptable:  $\chi^2 = 1,634.757$ ,  $df = 908$ ,  $IFI = 0.948$ ,  $TLI = 0.943$ ,  $CFI = 0.948$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.035$ . Table 5 presents the results of the invariance tests. Although not all of the  $p$ -values of  $\Delta\chi^2_{(0.05, \Delta df)}$  were greater than 0.05, the  $\Delta IFI$ ,  $\Delta TLI$ ,  $\Delta CFI$ , and  $\Delta RMSEA$  values were smaller than 0.05, confirming the invariance between the unconstrained model and constrained models. Further, as all of the  $p$ -values for moderating effect paths were greater than 0.05, the moderating effects of gender were statistically insignificant at the 0.05 level, thus rejecting H5a, H5b, and H5c. However, as Table 6 shows, career and incentives i-deals have slightly stronger effect on work-life balance for males ( $\beta = 0.738$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) than for females ( $\beta = 0.516$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), a difference that was significant at the 0.1 level ( $p = 0.08$ ).

Insert Table 5-6 Here

#### *4.4 Results of interviews*

According to the results of interviews, we find that, first, respondents mostly tended to nominate career and incentives i-deals when answering the questions of the most helpful i-deal type for their work-life balance and work well-being. Most respondents (90.9% of males and 77.8% of females) stated that career and incentives i-deals, including personalized compensation, career training, career development opportunities, welfare, and continuing education, were more helpful for their work-life balance and work well-being, because these work arrangements satisfy their needs for work achievement, wealth, reputation, and family

prosperity, which is consistent with our statistical results and other relevant studies (Redding, 1990; Tang and Hornung, 2015).

Second, task i-deals were nominated as the second-most popular and helpful type of i-deal by the respondents (72.7% of males and 66.7% of females) because personalizing job tasks according to the personal strengths, talents, interests, and motivation of individual employees enabled them to work more efficiently, leaving more energy and time for their family and other activities. Also, they tended to believe that task i-deals reflected the affirmation, trust, and authorization given by hotels to employees, which is consistent with findings of prior research (Liu *et al.*, 2013).

Third, only 6 respondents obtained flexible arrangements on taking working days off and only 5 respondents are allowed to do a portion of work outside the main office, indicating that flexibility i-deals were difficult to popularize and provided limited benefits to work-life balance and work well-being in Chinese hotels, which is consistent with the findings of this study and with previous investigations (Chandra, 2012; Cooke, 2009; Sun *et al.*, 2020). 14 respondents said that they were used to the on-call hours and long working hours required by hotels and regarded them as an obligation or commitment, making them concerned about leaving an impression of rebelliousness, unsociability, or laziness on their supervisors and colleagues if they asked for schedule and location flexibility (63.6% of males and 55.6% of females). This supports the findings of relevant hospitality research (Cain *et al.*, 2018; Zhao *et al.*, 2011). In fact, several flexibility i-dealers were still required to use electronic devices (e.g., mobile phones and laptops) to work and maintain contact with the hotels during non-working hours. This blurred their work-life boundary and led to extra tasks that were difficult to evaluate and reward in the personal performance appraisals. This is consistent with the findings of several studies on the flexible work arrangements and work-family conflict relation, shadow work, and work-related smartphone use at home (Allen *et al.*, 2013; Derks *et al.*, 2014; Lambert, 2015; Ragsdale and Hoover, 2016). For this reason, most male and female respondents commented that they would rather complete their tasks or work overtime at the hotel than do unpaid extra tasks or use their telephones for work-related matters at home, supporting our statistical results of the insignificant moderating effect of gender on the relation between flexibility i-deals on work-life balance.

## **5. Conclusions and discussion**

## 5.1 Conclusions

This study establishes a moderated mediation model for the relationship between ex post i-deals, work-life balance, and work well-being among male and female managers. The results indicate that task i-deals as well as career and incentives i-deals are positively associated with work-life balance. This finding supports the view that having access to informal organizational family support (e.g., job autonomy and career impact) significantly predicts employees' attitudes to work and their perceptions of work-family conflict (Behson, 2005). The finding also gives further support to the idea that Eastern employees pursue welfare and entertainment to achieve work-life balance (Chandra, 2012; Cooke, 2009). It is also consistent with prior findings (Fiksenbaum, 2014; Leineweber *et al.*, 2013) that work-life balance positively influences work well-being. Our results also indicate that work-life balance partially mediates the task i-deals and work well-being relation and completely mediates the career and incentives i-deals and work well-being relation.

It is surprising that flexibility i-deals have a non-significant effect on the work-life balance and work well-being of hotel managers. This result is not consistent with investigations in other industry contexts (Bayazit and Bayazit, 2017; Hornung *et al.*, 2008, 2009). There are several possible reasons for this difference. First, hotel managers may regard work roles as their central identities, and this may include being able to satisfy hotels' demands regarding on-call hours and long working hours (Cain *et al.*, 2018; Sun *et al.*, 2021; Zhao *et al.*, 2011). If this is the case, the ability of flexibility i-deals to decrease work-life conflict may be affected (Wang *et al.*, 2019). Second, Chinese hoteliers may view negotiating flexibility i-deals as showing characteristics of rebelliousness or cowardice, seeing these deals as breaches of personal commitments or obligations to work long hours in the workplace (Chandra, 2012). Third, the combination of flexibility i-deals and on-call hours may increase unpaid shadow work that consumes non-work hours and blurs work-life boundaries (Lambert, 2015; Ragsdale and Hoover, 2016), therefore diminishing personal work-life balance and work well-being. A recent research also offers support to this explanation by verifying the work-life boundary enactment's negative effect on work-life balance and positive effect on exhaustion through recovery activities (Wepfer *et al.*, 2018).

Another interesting finding is the gender difference in the effect of various ex post i-deals on work-life balance is not as big as expected. Both male and female managers recognize career

and incentives i-deals and task i-deals as better work arrangements for improving their work-life balance. Furthermore, career and incentives i-deals have slightly stronger effect on work-life balance for males than on work-life balance for females ( $p < 0.1$ ). The main explanation for this may be that an increase in dual-career couples leads to an increase in the career aspirations and lifestyle pursuits of women (Mishra and Bhatnagar, 2019). Specifically, female managers are becoming both homemakers and breadwinners in Chinese hotels and thereby prioritize career and incentives i-deals. This suggest that China, which is traditionally regarded as an Asian country with lower gender egalitarian culture (Lyness and Judiesch, 2014), is facing a change in its gender egalitarian culture because of the change in gender roles. In fact, many researchers have reminded hotel employers to actively take measures to ensure the gender equality in terms of employees' empowerment, career development, and compensation (Gebbels *et al.*, 2020; Segovia-Perez *et al.*, 2019).

## 5.2 Theoretical contributions

This study mainly makes three theoretical contributions. First, we provide novel insights into the distinct influences of various ex post i-deals on work-life balance for managers by considering the particularities of the hospitality industry context. We not only provide explanations for the non-significant impact of flexibility i-deals on work-life balance but also offer initial evidence that work-life balance can be promoted by achieving needs-supplies fit or demand-abilities fit through other types of hospitality i-deals, in turn, enriches the literature of person-environment fit theory and talent management in the hospitality industry.

Second, we answer the recent call to investigate the intermediary mechanism that may transmit the effects of ex post i-deals to work well-being (Sun *et al.*, 2021). On the basis of job demands-resources model and person-environment fit theory, we elaborate the intermediary mechanism between ex post i-deals and work well-being from the work-life balance perspective. The findings provide evidence that one underlying reason for the ability of ex post i-deals to enhance work well-being is their contribution to work-life balance. This also offers empirical support for integrating job demands-resources model and person-environment fit theory to study the influential mechanism of i-deals.

Third, we expand the moderating mechanism between ex post i-deals and work-life balance. To the best of our knowledge, this study is unique in terms of the moderating effect of gender on the relationship between ex post i-deals and work-life balance, which is inspired by the

gender egalitarianism theory. The findings demonstrate that the impact of career and incentives i-deals on work-life balance for males is slightly stronger than that on work-life balance for females, in turn, support the gender egalitarianism theory regarding gender differences in priorities of work and family roles in low gender egalitarianism countries.

### *5.3 Practical implications*

This study offers practical insights into the using various ex post i-deals in talent management in hotels. First, hotel employers should actively understand and meet work-related needs of talents through one-on-one communication and negotiation in the post-COVID-19 era (Giousmpasoglou *et al.*, 2021; Kravariti *et al.*, 2022; Liu-Lastres *et al.*, 2022). Given the difficulty of extending flexibility i-deals and their non-significant effects on work-life balance in most hotels, we suggest that hotel employers focus more on outstanding hotel managers' personalized needs for career development opportunities, compensation, welfare, tasks, and autonomy and that these employers engage in more task-, career-, and incentives-related i-deal negotiations. Such measures may be especially effective for Eastern managers, who regard a successful career as the best way to meet their need for personal achievement in the work role but also their need for glory and prosperity in the family role (Redding, 1990; Tang and Hornung, 2015).

Second, as career and incentives i-deals are the most beneficial for the work-life balance and work well-being of hotel managers, hotel employers should prioritize the following arrangements (Sun *et al.*, 2020): personalized career management (e.g., flexible career training, continuing education, external study or visits, career development plans, career promotion or advancement, career options, and internal exchanges), compensation (e.g., performance-related pay, bonuses, allowances, flexible compensation adjustments, and stock-based incentives), and welfare (e.g., birthday parties and gifts, tourism packages, group or family activities, and the use of hotel facilities). This would help employees achieve work-life balance and work well-being. In those low gender egalitarianism countries, this practice is especially effective for male managers, who shoulder more responsibilities for achieving family glory and prosperity (Andersen *et al.*, 2013; Bayazit and Bayazit, 2017; Tang and Hornung, 2015).

Third, if there are time, financial, or other constraints on using career and incentives i-deals, it is also suggested that hotel employers provide some managers with extra autonomy, empowerment, or authority and job tasks that fit their talents, interests, specializations, or

motivation according to their responsibilities, job types, or experience. Task i-deals not only show efficiency in promoting hotel managers' work-life balance and work well-being, but also have a relatively lower cost than career and incentives i-deals (Sun *et al.*, 2020; Wang *et al.*, 2019).

Fourth, considering the increase in the career aspirations and lifestyle pursuits of women (Mishra and Bhatnagar, 2019), the government and society should call hotel employers to eliminate societal gender stereotypes and meet females' personalized needs on their work arrangements. Specifically, hotel employers should offer equal policies and opportunities for ex post i-deals described above to females. Furthermore, hospitality educators should civilize students to eliminate societal gender stereotypes and respect gender equality by organizing gender equality-, women development-, and female leadership-related courses, workshops, debates, case studies, and community activities (Segovia-Perez et al., 2019).

#### *5.4 Limitation and future studies*

The major limitations of this study are threefold. First, the hypotheses were tested based on cross-sectional data because of the difficulty and high cost of collecting time-series data of managers from upscale hotels, which led to potential common method bias. Future studies could attempt to examine the hypotheses of this or an extended conceptual model by using time-series data. Second, this survey was carried out in an Eastern country. Future studies could involve a cross-cultural survey to examine the universality of our hypotheses in different cultural settings. Finally, participants were only recruited from upscale hotels. In future studies, the target population could be expanded to the service industry more generally.

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**Table 1. Profile of interviewees**

Respondents	Hotel brand	Star level of the hotel	Gender	Work experience in the current hotel	Position
<b>Senior Managers</b>					
1	International	Five-star	Male	10 years	General manager
2	International	Five-star	Male	4 years	General manager
3	International	Five-star	Male	5 years	HR director
4	International	Five-star	Female	2 years	Sales and marketing director
5	International	Five-star	Female	10 years	HR director
6	Domestic	Five-star	Female	11 years	General manager
7	Domestic	Four-star	Male	20 years	General manager
8	Domestic	Five-star	Male	13 years	General manager
9	Domestic	Five-star	Female	12 years	HR director
10	Domestic	Five-star	Female	10 years	Sales & Marketing director
<b>Middle Managers</b>					
11	International	Five-star	Female	10 years	HR manager
12	International	Five-star	Male	5 years	Front office manager
13	International	Five-star	Male	5 years	Food and beverages manager
14	International	Four-star	Male	5 years	Front office manager
15	International	Five-star	Female	8 years	Sales and marketing manager
16	Domestic	Five-star	Female	3 years	HR manager
17	Domestic	Five-star	Female	7 years	Financial manager
18	Domestic	Five-star	Male	1.5 years	Engineering manager
19	Domestic	Five-star	Male	5 years	HR manager
20	Domestic	Five-star	Male	7 years	Housekeeping manager

**Table 2. Correlations (squared correlations), CR, AVE, and descriptive statistics**

	<i>Task</i>	<i>Career</i>	<i>Flexibility</i>	<i>Balance</i>	<i>Well-Being</i>
<i>Task</i>	1.00				
<i>Career</i>	0.714** (0.510)	1.00			
<i>Flexibility</i>	0.622** (0.438)	0.721** (0.520)	1.00		
<i>Balance</i>	0.642** (0.412)	0.707** (0.500)	0.530** (0.281)	1.00	
<i>Well-Being</i>	0.683** (0.467)	0.739** (0.546)	0.556** (0.309)	0.729** (0.531)	1.00
CR	0.861	0.948	0.864	0.794	0.957
AVE	0.609	0.547	0.560	0.562	0.847
Mean	5.644	5.565	5.378	5.745	5.772
SD	0.940	0.861	0.989	0.850	0.698

Notes: \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

**Table 3. Results of direct effects**

Hypothesis/Path	Standardized Coefficient	C.R.	Result
<i>H1a: Task → Balance</i>	0.374***	5.750	Supported
<i>H1b: Career → Balance</i>	0.604***	7.958	Supported
<i>H1c: Flexibility → Balance</i>	-0.113	-1.765	Not supported
<i>H2a: Task → Well-Being</i>	0.113*	2.000	Supported
<i>H2b: Career → Well-Being</i>	0.102	1.450	Not supported
<i>H2c: Flexibility → Well-Being</i>	-0.020	-0.400	Not supported
<i>H3: Balance → Well-Being</i>	0.814***	9.333	Supported
Control Variables			
<i>Age → Balance</i>	-0.112***	-3.600	
<i>Marital status → Balance</i>	0.052	1.138	
<i>Children → Balance</i>	0.005	0.107	
<i>Department type → Balance</i>	-0.003	-0.100	
<i>City tier → Balance</i>	-0.008	-0.248	
<i>Hotel size (star-level) → Balance</i>	0.000	-0.010	
<i>Age → Well-Being</i>	0.043	1.718	
<i>Marital status → Well-Being</i>	0.035	0.998	
<i>Children → Well-Being</i>	0.011	0.321	
<i>Department type → Well-Being</i>	-0.011	-0.467	
<i>City tier → Well-Being</i>	0.008	0.327	
<i>Hotel size (star-level) → Well-Being</i>	0.030	1.302	

Notes: \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

**Table 4. The mediating effect of work-life balance**

Hypothesis/Path	Standardized Coefficient	<i>P</i>	Monte Carlo 95% CI		Result
			Low end	High end	
H4a: <i>Task</i> → <i>Balance</i> → <i>Well-Being</i>	0.304***	0.000	0.089	0.568	Supported
H4b: <i>Career</i> → <i>Balance</i> → <i>Well-Being</i>	0.492***	0.000	0.273	0.753	Supported
H4c: <i>Flexibility</i> → <i>Balance</i> → <i>Well-Being</i>	-0.092	0.083	-0.250	0.054	Not supported

Notes: \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

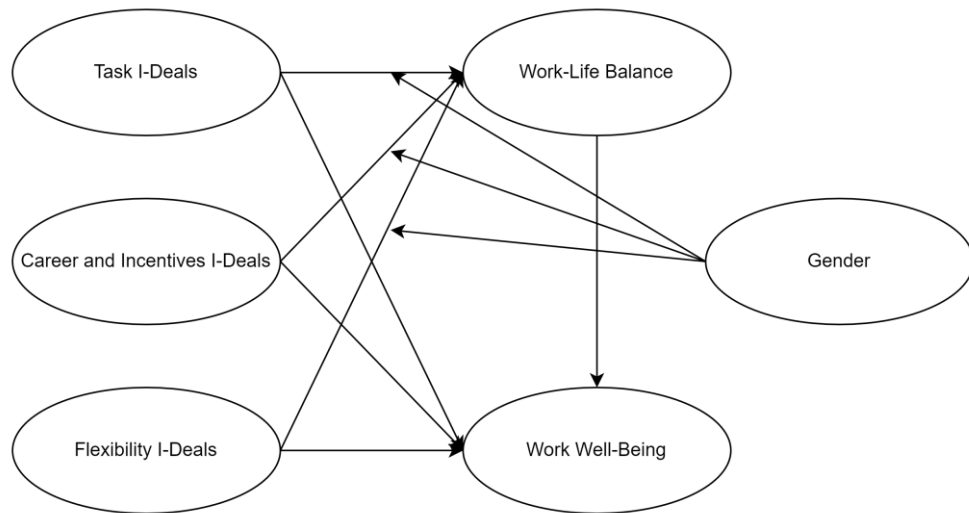
**Table 5. Invariance tests**

Model	$\Delta\chi^2$	$\Delta df$	<i>P</i>	$\Delta IFI$	$\Delta TLI$	$\Delta CFI$	$\Delta RMSEA$
Measurement weights	24.764	27	0.588	0	0.002	0	0
Structural weights	32.267	34	0.553	0	0.002	0	0
Structural covariances	59.806	40	0.023	-0.001	0.001	-0.001	0
Structural residuals	65.243	42	0.012	-0.002	0.001	-0.002	0
Measurement residuals	168.267	74	0.000	-0.007	-0.002	-0.007	0.001

**Table 6. Moderating effect of gender**

Hypothesis/Path	Male (N = 350)		Female (N = 292)		<i>P</i>
	Standardized Coefficient	C.R.	Standardized Coefficient	C.R.	
H5a: <i>Task</i> → <i>Balance</i>	0.324**	3.015	0.376***	4.592	0.677
H5b: <i>Career</i> → <i>Balance</i>	0.738***	6.171	0.516***	5.368	0.084
H5c: <i>Flexibility</i> → <i>Balance</i>	-0.164	-1.891	-0.064	-0.687	0.403

Notes: \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .



**Figure 1. Conceptual model**