

The Association of Work- Life Conflict and Satisfaction: Perceived Meaningfulness as a Moderator

Haojie Yang

*University of Illinois Ubrana Champaign, Illinois, USA
haojiey3@illinois.edu*

Abstract. This paper examines the complex relationship between work-life conflict and satisfaction, highlighting perceived meaningfulness as an important factor. Rather than a simple linear link, the study introduces an inverted U-shaped model, suggesting that moderate levels of work-life conflict can improve satisfaction by boosting a sense of achievement. However, too much or too little balance may lead to burnout or a loss of purpose. Perceived meaningfulness can reduce these negative effects by helping individuals cope better, view conflict as valuable, and maintain mental well-being. The study draws from self-determination theory, the job demands-resources model, and affective neuroscience to explain why satisfaction changes at different levels of balance. It also offers practical suggestions such as creating flexible work schedules, supporting internal motivation, and using AI tools to predict optimal balance levels. Finally, the paper encourages future research across cultures and job types using real-time monitoring and technology-based solutions to improve satisfaction outcomes.

Keywords: work-life conflict, satisfaction, perceived meaningfulness, resource depletion, mental well-being

1. Introduction

Work-life conflict is a condition in which role pressures in work and non-work areas become incompatible with one another. It has been exacerbated in recent decades by the growing demands of the modern workplace, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic, which have fundamentally redefined the boundaries between work and personal life [1]. Although early studies attributed this conflict mainly to time allocation trade-offs (e.g., overtime work reduces family time), contemporary research emphasizes its resource roots, especially the asymmetric consumption of personal resources caused by excessive work demands. The conservation of resources theory (COR) is the main source of this viewpoint. It holds that people work hard to get, hold onto, and safeguard important resources (such as time, energy, and emotional capacity) [2]. However, when job demands (e.g., long work hours, emotional labor, or cognitive overload) exceed an individual's resource reserves, a loss spiral is triggered, in which resource depletion (e.g., fatigue from overtime work) reduces an individual's ability to perform non-work duties (e.g., parenting), thereby exacerbating inter-role conflict [1]. For example, nurses who face chronic under-staffing may exhaust their emotional energy at work, resulting in insufficient resources to meaningfully participate in family

activities, a phenomenon known as "resource drain" [3]. Conflict stems not only from competition for time, but also from systemic resource inequality: modern work increasingly extracts resources (e.g., physical, cognitive, emotional) while providing insufficient opportunities for recovery [1]. As a result, employees are forced into a zero-sum game—protecting work performance at the expense of their personal lives.

As part of their job, people have to meet a variety of physical, mental, social, and organizational needs that require them to work hard for long periods of time in order to meet their goals [4]. In particular, they show up as time-based demands, like working extra hours and having irregular schedules, which make it harder to balance work and personal life by cutting into recovery time [5]; strain-based or cognitive demands, like difficult tasks and too much information, which drain attentional resources and make the mind tired through prolonged cognitive engagement [6]; affective or emotional demands, like dealing with hostile people or holding back negative emotions, which raise the cost of emotional labor by requiring controlled emotional displays [7]; and physical demands, like doing repetitive motions for work, which use up body energy and make it harder for the body to recover [8]. Collectively, these pressures start a process called resource erosion [2], in which long-term exposure is too much for people to handle, leaving the system with fewer resources, which makes work-life conflict worse and lowers mental health.

While this resource-centered framework effectively explains the origins of dissatisfaction, it also reveals a potential problem: the assumption that work-life conflict uniformly reduces satisfaction ignores potential differences in individuals' abilities to utilize resources under different conditions [2]. Empirical evidence demonstrated that work-life conflict correlates with heightened anxiety, depressive symptoms, and diminished life satisfaction [9,10], with perceived stress acting as a critical mediator [10]. Crucially, however, existing studies predominantly assume a linear relationship between work-life conflict and dissatisfaction, overlooking potential nonlinear dynamics (e.g., threshold effects where moderate conflict temporarily enhances achievement-driven satisfaction) and contextual moderators (e.g., perceived meaningfulness buffering resource depletion). Given the inevitability of work-life conflict in modern societies, advancing beyond linear paradigms to unravel these complex interactions is imperative for developing targeted interventions to mitigate dissatisfaction.

Therefore, this study proposes a threshold-driven model to reveal the nonlinear relationship between work-life conflict and satisfaction, and argues that perceived meaningfulness is a key moderator that recalibrates this relationship. We abandon the linear paradigm and propose three propositions based on conservation of resources theory [2]: first, an inverted U-curve (Proposition 1), where a moderate work-life gap (such as 60% work allocation) optimizes satisfaction by balancing fulfillment and recovery, while extreme deviations trigger resource depletion [2], thus reversing the benefits; second, a dual satisfaction minimum in extreme cases (-100% and 100% gap; Proposition 2), where full immersion in work leads to burnout and social comparison-driven insufficiency, while full detachment from work leads to purposelessness that conflicts with social productivity norms [10]; third, perceived meaningfulness (Proposition 3) - the intrinsic value of role activities acts as a catalytic moderator, accelerating satisfaction optimization by buffering resource erosion and achieving peak satisfaction at a narrow gap. Together, these propositions address gaps in the existing literature by: (1) challenging uniform negative correlations by revealing nonlinear thresholds; (2) identifying contextualized minima that are overlooked in resource-centric models; and (3) introducing motivational recalibration as a mechanism to mitigate conflicting externalities. By connecting the arousal-performance analogy, social comparison dynamics, and self-determination mechanisms, the framework enables educators, employers, and policymakers to

design targeted interventions—from role modeling to flexible scheduling—that leverage perceived meaningfulness to navigate inevitable work-life tensions and achieve sustainable work-life satisfaction balance.

2. Literature review and proposition

2.1. P1: work-life conflict and mental health pressure

A significant amount of research supports the conclusion that work-life conflict quantitatively increases the level of mental health risk. Research has shown that chronic role stress is associated with decreased life satisfaction [9], increased anxiety [10], and clinical depression [11]. However, there is nascent evidence which suggests that the relationship described above follows a nonlinear pattern of resource allocation about conflict. In this pattern, a moderate conflict enhances achievement-type satisfaction, which is a positive state, then triggered exhaustion follows [12]. The stress coping perspective offers enlightening points: an individual first views a controllable work-life discrepancy or gap where the individual allocates 60% of time to work in a work-life conflict experience, as a challenge to enable adaptive coping (i.e., employ time management skills). Additionally, this activates their self-efficacy concerning their role balance abilities. This experience is consistent with meta-analytic results which concluded that low to moderate levels of stress are positively associated with self-efficacy [13]. However, when the stress conflict exceeds the limit of available resource allocation or contingency when time is overly invested in one role, the resources available for challenge activation are diminished, and there is a reversal of psychologically beneficial activation. The job demands-resources model [4] demonstrates this same idea. Here the gap exceeds an individual's resource coping reserves [executing action > 75 % assignment to work], and an individual experiences cognitive overload [6] and emotional exhaustion [7], both ultimately leading to decreased job satisfaction. Neurophysiology studies have validated the physiological mechanisms underpinning the inverted U function observed. In this context modest increases in cortisol result in improved task engagement and chronic elevations in cortisol saturate prefrontal brain function [14]. All of this leads to our proposition stated as follows:

P1: There is an inverted U-shaped curve relationship between the percentage gap between life and work (IV) and satisfaction (DV). As percentage gap increases from low level, satisfaction level increase, reaches a point of low satisfaction, then satisfaction decreases as the percentage gap increase.

2.2. P2: extreme work-life disparities and the dual satisfaction crisis

The organizational behavior literature provides critical insights into why extreme work-life gaps precipitate satisfaction collapse. Work engagement theory posits that individuals oscillate between personal engagement (physical, cognitive, and emotional presence in role performance) and disengagement (withdrawal to protect depleted resources) [15]. At the 100% gap (total work immersion), employees exhibit compulsive engagement — a maladaptive form of workaholism driven by obsessive passion rather than intrinsic fulfillment [16]. This aligns with longitudinal evidence showing that workaholics experience heightened emotional exhaustion and family alienation due to role engulfment, a state where work identity overrides all other social roles [17].

In contrast, the 100% life-work gap (total work disconnection) is characterized by chronic disconnection. When an individual is in a prolonged state of disconnection and chronic disconnection from work, the person can no longer access the intrinsic rewards associated with work

(e.g., mastery, or feeling valuable or connected to others). Research in organizational identity demonstrates that chronic disconnection from work deteriorates the centrality of work-role — the degree to which work defines another's self-concept — resulting in identity confusion and anomie [18]. This is particularly problematic in cultures that place high value on productivity-as-moral-worth, causing nonworkers to suffer stigmas as a "social parasite in the collective".

These extreme values can be further understood by way of the job demands-resources (JD-R) theory [4]; at -100%, chronic, severe job demands (including workload, time pressure, etc.) violate the primacy of resource loss concept of COR when resources (in the case of job demands) use energy resources without providing an opportunity to experience recovery [2]. At 100%, motivational potential is lost, and self-determination demands thwarted when resources related to employment (e.g., skill use, collegial support, etc.) are missing [12].

In conclusion, this study proposes Proposition 2:

P2: The lowest satisfaction value occurs at -100% and 100% of the percentage gap between life and work.

At -100% where there is no life outside of work, and the individual is completely devoted to work, the person may experience burnout and stress, or a lack of personal fulfillment from life outside of work. Without any time for personal relationships, hobbies, or adequate time to recharge, the individual is incapable of recharging and likely has the lowest possible satisfaction.

At 100%, where there is no work at all, and life is completely disconnected from work, satisfaction may also be low from a lack of work-related achievement, purpose, or a sense of accomplishment. Work also often provides time-structure and meaning. When a person is completely disconnected from work, feelings of purposelessness, meaninglessness, or lack of purposeful direction in life may reduce their overall satisfaction considerably.

2.3. P3: perceived meaningfulness as a moderator in work-life conflict

The boundary conditions of work-life conflict dynamics have gained increasing attention, with scholars emphasizing resource replenishment mechanisms that buffer depletion effects. Among these, perceived meaningfulness — the subjective appraisal of work/life activities as aligned with personal values and existential purpose — emerges as a critical moderator that recalibrates the conflict-satisfaction relationship [19]. Self-Determination Theory provides a foundational framework: when individuals perceive their work as meaningful (autonomy, competence, relatedness satisfaction), they experience intrinsic motivation amplification, enabling them to reinterpret stressors as challenge demands rather than hindrance demands. For instance, nurses who frame overtime as patient care necessity (high meaningfulness) exhibit attenuated cortisol responses to workload spikes, whereas those perceiving overtime as bureaucratic compliance (low meaningfulness) show exacerbated burnout [8]. This aligns with cognitive appraisal theory: meaningfulness transforms threat appraisals into challenge appraisals, activating adaptive coping (e.g., problem-focused strategies) that conserve resources. Employees with high work meaningfulness reach optimal satisfaction at smaller work-life gaps compared to low-meaningfulness counterparts [20]. This occurs because meaningfulness: (1) Enhancing resource elasticity: By fostering psychological capital (hope, resilience), it delays resource exhaustion thresholds [21]; (2) Activating gain spirals: Meaning-driven work generates ancillary resources (e.g., social recognition, skill mastery) that compensate for initial resource investments [2]. This leads us to Proposition 3:

P3: A moderator variable, such as perceived meaningfulness, could cause the peak satisfaction value to occur earlier, thus reducing the negative effect of a life-work gap.

3. Discussion

3.1. Work-life balance and its impact

This study examines the effects of work-study conflict on mental health and satisfaction in order to contextualize its findings within the larger discussion on work-life balance. The results demonstrate how difficult it is to strike a balance between work and school obligations, which raises stress, anxiety, and lowers satisfaction. These findings are consistent with earlier research on work-life balance, which highlights the negative impact that high job demands have on people's mental health [1].

3.2. Work-life balance and satisfaction

Sociologists studying work-life balance have assumed that work-life balance yields higher satisfaction in a straightforward, linear way, but our research proposes instead a relationship that is dependent on whether individuals are below threshold or not. In Proposition 1, we illustrate our argument with the inverted U-curve - moderate amounts of work-life gaps (i.e., roughly, working 60% of time) leads to temporary periods of higher satisfaction, resulting from achievement-based dopamine release [22] and mastery experiences [20]. On the other hand, once individuals surpass the threshold (say, at around 65% work time), satisfaction drops rapidly, as evidenced in COR theory [2] thinking, which posits that resource depletion leads to dissatisfaction brought about by cognitive overload [6] and emotional exhaustion [7].

Proposition 2 also adds to our explanation of the collapse of dual satisfaction in extreme cases. In the case of a -100% gap (total employment), the issue becomes existential contraction - specifically their identity is singularly defined by that unit of employment [18] and they cut-off their networks of social support which are needed to relieve work stress [7]. A 100% life-work gap similarly creates an experience of anhedonia in the form of work disengagement, which disrupts and shatters dopaminergic reward projections [23] and may create symptoms of depression [22]. For both cases the extremes also serve as better validation for a key proposition of the JD-R model [4]: satisfaction collapses due to imbalance when the unit is placed into an environment that exceeds system adaptations. Therefore, this account of the nonlinearity we sport in value satisfaction to work-life balance explains the contradictions in the literature. First, studies concluding that satisfaction is linearly inversely related in populations that exceed optimal thresholds (overworked nurses), and those that find a zero or even positive satisfaction rating were documenting a population just prior to the apex of the curve. Our framework fits all of these observations by thinking about imbalanced satisfaction as contextual culinary reversal in relation to resource thresholds.

3.3. Perceived meaningfulness as a boundary-spanning resource

Drawing on the benefit spiral theory, this study hypothesizes that meaningfulness transforms resource investments into survival capital, where time/energy spent on work-life activities is cognitively reframed as purposeful contributions rather than zero-sum trade-offs. For example, social workers who viewed overtime as client advocacy (high meaningfulness) reported increased vitality despite a surge in workload [12], whereas viewing the same hours as bureaucratic compliance (low meaningfulness) was associated with exhaustion. This suggests that perceived meaningfulness can effectively moderate the work-life relationship curve.

This moderating effect can work through three potential mechanisms: First, through cognitive reappraisal of demands, meaningfulness activates a selective attention bias [24], directing attention toward rewards inherent to the task (e.g., “helping others”) while filtering out depleting cues (e.g., fatigue). Neuroimaging evidence suggests that individuals with a high sense of meaningfulness show enhanced activity in the ventromedial prefrontal cortex (vmPFC) when performing demanding tasks, encoding effort as intrinsic reward [22]. Second, resource flexibility increases, as meaningfulness expands coping reserve capacity by satisfying self-determination needs (autonomy, competence, relatedness). Teachers who view grading as instruction to students (rather than routine tasks) are able to stay engaged despite working 60-hour weeks because their “reserves” are replenished through feedback on student progress [20]. Finally, social identity buffers, as meaningfulness increases role identity congruence [18], thereby avoiding social comparison distress. Engineers who view overtime as innovative (high congruence) feel less jealous of colleagues with balanced schedules because their work fits with a valued “creator” identity [25].

Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this study advances a threshold-driven model of work-life conflict, its generalizability may be constrained by under-explored boundary conditions, such as cultural norms (e.g., collectivist vs. individualist valuations of work) and occupational heterogeneity (e.g., gig workers vs. salaried employees). Future research should prioritize the following directions:

(1) Extended Threshold Mechanisms. Investigate additional moderators (e.g., job crafting autonomy, family-supportive supervisor behavior) that may further shift the inverted U-curve. For instance, does flexible scheduling interact with perceived meaningfulness to amplify peak satisfaction acceleration [26]?

(2) Cross-Cultural Validation. Test whether the 100% gap’s “achievement anhedonia” effect persists in cultures valuing leisure (e.g., Mediterranean societies) or whether the -100% gap’s burnout threshold varies by gender-norm adherence (e.g., “overwork masculinity” in East Asia; [18]).

(3) Dynamic Resource Allocation Modeling. Employ experience sampling methods (ESM) to track daily fluctuations in work-life gaps and satisfaction. Neuroimaging techniques (fMRI, EEG) could further reveal how meaningfulness modulates neural resource allocation (e.g., prefrontal cortex activation patterns) during imbalance.

(4) AI-Driven Work-Life Interventions. Explore algorithmic nudges (e.g., AI scheduling assistants predicting optimal work-life thresholds) [27] and VR-based meaning-enhancement training to recalibrate imbalance appraisals.

4. Conclusion

This paper underscores the notable detrimental impact of work-life conflict on mental health and overall enjoyment, and the important role that intrinsic and extrinsic motivation play in alleviating this impact. Notably, the research indicates that work-study conflict that is viewed as immoderate has positive relationships with experience stress and anxiety, and negative relationships with overall well-being. Intrinsic motivators possess relatively more power to create and maintain resilience and daily life happiness than extrinsic motivators, and this is reflected in the experiences of those intrinsically motivated due to their satisfaction vocationally or academically and personal fulfillment. Increasing mental wellness hinges on balancing work and personal life; therefore, appropriate proactive strategies to address work-life conflict should be employed including flexible schedule opportunities, promoting and managing mental health resources, and fostering intrinsic motivation and learning in personal and professional contexts. Future work should continue to

explore the relationship between motivation and well-being to determine how a variety of demographics impact work-life balance.

References

- [1] Brough, P., Timms, C., Chan, X.W., Hawkes, A., Rasmussen, L. (2020). Work–Life Balance: Definitions, Causes, and Consequences. In: Theorell, T. (eds) Handbook of Socioeconomic Determinants of Occupational Health. Handbook Series in Occupational Health Sciences. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-05031-3_20-1
- [2] Halbesleben, J. R. B., Neveu, J.-P., Paustian-Underdahl, S. C., & Westman, M. (2014). Getting to the “COR”: Understanding the Role of Resources in Conservation of Resources Theory. *Journal of Management*, 40(5), 1334–1364. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206314527130> (Original work published 2014)
- [3] ten Brummelhuis, L. L., & Bakker, A. B. (2012). A resource perspective on the work–home interface: The work–home resources model. *American Psychologist*, 67(7), 545–556. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0027974>
- [4] Bakker, A. B., & Demerouti, E. (2017). Job demands-resources theory: Taking stock and looking forward. *Journal of occupational health psychology*, 22(3), 273–285. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ocp0000056>
- [5] Brough, P., & Biggs, A. (2015). Job demands × job control interaction effects: do occupation-specific job demands increase their occurrence?. *Stress and health : journal of the International Society for the Investigation of Stress*, 31(2), 138–149. <https://doi.org/10.1002/smi.2537>
- [6] Demerouti, E., Bakker, A. B., Sonnentag, S., & Fullagar, C. (2012). Work-related flow and energy at work and at home: a study on the role of daily recovery. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 33(2), 276–295. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.760>
- [7] Toker, S., & Biron, M. (2012). Job burnout and depression: Unraveling their temporal relationship and considering the role of physical activity. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 97(3), 699–710. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0026914>
- [8] Crawford, E. R., LePine, J. A., & Rich, B. L. (2010). Linking job demands and resources to employee engagement and burnout: A theoretical extension and meta-analytic test. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 95(5), 834–848. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0019364>
- [9] Haar, J. M., Russo, M., Suñe, A., & Ollier-Malaterre, A. (2014). Outcomes of work–life balance on job satisfaction, life satisfaction and mental health: A study across seven cultures. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 85(3), 361–373. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2014.08.010>
- [10] Sprung, J. M., & Rogers, A. (2021). Work-life balance as a predictor of college student anxiety and depression. *Journal of American college health : J of ACH*, 69(7), 775–782. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2019.1706540>
- [11] Gilbert-Ouimet, M., Trudel, X., Brisson, C., Milot, A., & Vézina, M. (2014). Adverse effects of psychosocial work factors on blood pressure: systematic review of studies on demand-control-support and effort-reward imbalance models. *Scandinavian journal of work, environment & health*, 40(2), 109–132. <https://doi.org/10.5271/sjweh.3390>
- [12] Allan, B. A., Douglass, R. P., Duffy, R. D., & McCarty, R. J. (2016). Meaningful Work as a Moderator of the Relation Between Work Stress and Meaning in Life. *Journal of Career Assessment*, 24(3), 429–440. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1069072715599357>
- [13] Faragher, E. B., Cass, M., & Cooper, C. L. (2005). The relationship between job satisfaction and health: A meta-analysis. *Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, 62(2), 105–112. <https://doi.org/10.1136/oem.2002.006734>
- [14] McEwen, B. S. (1998). Stress, adaptation, and disease. Allostasis and allostatic load. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 840, 33–44.
- [15] Kahn, W. A. (1990). Psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work. *Academy of Management Journal*, 33(4), 692–724. <https://doi.org/10.5465/256287>
- [16] Schaufeli, W. B., Taris, T. W., & Van Rhenen, W. (2008). Workaholism, burnout, and work engagement: three of a kind or three different kinds of employee wellbeing? *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, 57(2), 173–203.
- [17] Clark, M. A., Michel, J. S., Zhdanova, L., Pui, S. Y., & Baltes, B. B. (2016). All work and no play? A meta-analytic examination of the correlates and outcomes of workaholism. *Journal of Management*, 42(7), 1836–1873. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206314522301>
- [18] Ashforth, B. E., Harrison, S. H., & Corley, K. G. (2008). Identification in organizations: An examination of four fundamental questions. *Journal of Management*, 34(3), 325–374. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206308316059>
- [19] Rosso, B. D., Dekas, K. H., & Wrzesniewski, A. (2010). On the meaning of work: A theoretical integration and review. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 30, 91–127. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.riob.2010.09.001>

- [20] Berg, J. M., Grant, A. M., & Johnson, V. (2010). When callings are calling: Crafting work and leisure in pursuit of unanswered occupational callings. *Organization Science*, 21(5), 973–994. <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1090.0497>
- [21] Hobfoll, S. E., Halbesleben, J., Neveu, J.-P., & Westman, M. (2018). Conservation of resources in the organizational context: The reality of resources and their consequences. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 5(1), 103–128. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-032117-104640>
- [22] Treadway, M. T., Buckholtz, J. W., Cowan, R. L., Woodward, N. D., Li, R., Ansari, M. S., Baldwin, R. M., Schwartzman, A. N., Kessler, R. M., & Zald, D. H. (2012). Dopaminergic mechanisms of individual differences in human effort-based decision-making. *The Journal of neuroscience : the official journal of the Society for Neuroscience*, 32(18), 6170–6176. <https://doi.org/10.1523/JNEUROSCI.6459-11.2012>
- [23] Berridge, K. C., & Kringelbach, M. L. (2015). Pleasure systems in the brain. *Neuron*, 86(3), 646–664. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuron.2015.02.018>
- [24] Inzlicht, M., Schmeichel, B. J., & Macrae, C. N. (2014). Why self-control seems (but may not be) limited. *Trends in cognitive sciences*, 18(3), 127–133. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2013.12.009>
- [25] Wrzesniewski, A., McCauley, C., Rozin, P., & Schwartz, B. (1997). Jobs, careers, and callings: People's relations to their work. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 31(1), 21–33. <https://doi.org/10.1006/jrpe.1997.2162>
- [26] Kossek, E. E., & Lautsch, B. A. (2018). Work–life flexibility for whom? Occupational status and work–life inequality in upper, middle, and lower level jobs. *The Academy of Management Annals*, 12(1), 5–36. <https://doi.org/10.5465/annals.2016.0059>
- [27] Tariq, M. U. (2025). AI and work–life balance: Transforming employee wellbeing in the modern workplace. In *Strengthening human relations in organizations with AI* (pp. 85–110). IGI Global. <https://doi.org/10.4018/979-8-3693-6507-6.ch004>