

How does Work-Life Balance take shape in less regulated economies? A signaling theory perspective

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Disclosure statement

The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available because they contain information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

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Abstract

Though a seemingly simple term, there is no consensus on how to operationalize Work-Life Balance (WLB). Understanding of this crucial concept is also limited because research on how WLB is perceived or realized comes mainly from studies in North America or Europe. Consequently, we lack insight into how this phenomenon unfolds in less-regulated economies. We argue that it is precisely in these settings that the absence of a mature governance environment makes the study of WLB even more important. Drawing on signaling theory, which seeks to explain how messages are understood in ambiguous contexts, this paper examines employees' WLB in a context where formal regulations and policies are sparse. Operationalizing WLB using signaling theory helps to explain the partial success of managing employees' WLB in the organizations we study: large, Chinese Stated-Owned Enterprises (SOEs). Based on 312 survey responses and 23 supplementary interviews, we show how an emerging concept in the literature - organizational work-life culture - can support positive signaling. This has two important consequences. It may empower some line managers to facilitate employees' WLB and it can also embolden some employees to 'push back' on excessive workload demands. In a context where WLB policy is often ambiguous, we propose and find evidence for a sequential mediating path between organizational work-life culture and WLB. The findings contribute to our understanding of why and how to manage WLB in different contexts.

Keywords: Work-life balance, Work-life Culture, Managerial support, State-owned Enterprises (SOEs), China

Introduction

Managing work-life balance (WLB) has become a central topic in Human Resource Management (HRM). Two imperatives often taken as complementary frame this concern (Guest, 2017; Cooke, Dickmann, & Parry, 2020). First, effective management of WLB holds out the promise of advancing productivity. Second, WLB is seen as core to employees' well-being and as such ever more prominent in the movement for human-centred HRM. Digging into these assumptions extensively would mean revisiting mature debates about the Human Relations movement, the high and low roads to HRM, or even the gaps between HRM rhetoric and realities. These are out of scope here, but for our argument it is sufficient to claim that (i) WLB is a central concern for various stakeholders and that (ii) limitations in research on WLB to date indicate scope for significant theoretical contribution.

In practice, WLB management generally involves structural (formal policies and arrangement) and cultural (work-life culture and interpersonal support) dimensions at the workplace (Daverth, Hyde & Cassell, 2016; Kossek, Ollier-Malaterre, Lee, Pichler & Hall, 2016). Most extant research has focused on structural aspects, potentially because these are more tangible (de Menezes & Kelliher, 2017). However, there is a paucity of research into this cultural dimension, again which may be due to the challenges of operationalizing its effect on employees. With a focus on North America and Europe, extant empirical work has also excluded the majority of working populations and in settings such as Asia and Africa limited WLB regulations exist (e.g., Le, Newman, Menzies, Zheng, & Fermelis, 2020). Even in European countries where structural elements such as flexible working, and family-friendly policies exist, systematic reviews reveal that the effect of these on employees' WLB outcomes remains mixed (de Menezes & Kelliher, 2011; Kossek, Perrigino & Lautsch, 2022). In addition to, or perhaps even independent of policies, the 'context of support' (i.e., cultural dimension) is crucial when managing employees WLB (Daverth, et al., 2016). There is an interesting

theoretical question as to what the role of this dimension is in a setting where there are limited formal policies. Potentially, culture may hold the key to understanding WLB whether with or without formal and structural support (e.g., Daverth, et al, 2016; de Menezes & Kelliher, 2017). To examine this, we examine WLB management in China.

Two factors contribute to making the Chinese workplace a theoretically revealing and empirically important context. First, in terms of theory, Chinese organizations and managers have no tradition of regulatory guidance in relation to WLB and consequently they are not routinely able to mobilize resources to support their employees' WLB. This leaves cultural and informal support as the main channel for managers facilitate employees' WLB (Xiao & Cooke, 2012). This makes for a murkier and more ambiguous setting to understand WLB. Second, in terms of being empirically important, it is widely recognized that employees in China experience very demanding norms in relation to working hours. An example is the so-called '996' schedule which means working from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., 6 days a week. Additionally, the Chinese workplace is seen as hyper-competitive, for instance Neijuan - reflects a life of being overworked, stressed, anxious and feeling trapped as a result of living a very competitive working life (Mao, 2022). The legacy of the one child policy has placed numerous childcare and elderly caring demands on many employees. The urgency to understand how to manage employees' WLB to sustain organizational development is apparent.

This study draws on signaling theory to analyze WLB management. Signaling theory can capture signals/signs in an ambiguous situation to facilitate effective communication. A range of processes associated with HRM mean it can be seen as a complex communication system with various types of interactive participants (Guest, Sanders, Ricardo & Bergh, 2021; Bergh, Connelly, Kitchen & Shannon, 2014). Line managers play a crucial role in shaping employee outcomes and under signaling theory they are seen as the signaler and communicator as well as implementer of any HR initiatives. These include WLB practices which they may emphasize

or downplay by strengthening, weakening or distorting signals (Guest et al., 2021; Williams, Cathcart, & McDonald, 2021). Not only consider the role of line managers, but we also elaborate on signaling processes by highlighting employers as signal initiators, and both line managers and employees evaluate the signals and respond accordingly (Sayer, 2011), seeking to understand how these actors interact in an ambiguous setting.

This study aims to make the following contributions to the WLB and HRM literature. First, we shed light on why the cultural dimension is important to understanding WLB in an ambiguous setting, i.e., one lacking formal HR policies and practices (e.g., Daverth, et al., 2016; de Menezes & Kelliher, 2017). Second, we join a conversation on the role of signaling theory in implementing HRM (e.g., Guest, et al. 2021; Williams et al. 2021), by elaborating on the role of employers in creating a culture that can facilitate employees' WLB. Third, we answer calls for (i) more work-life studies in the Asian context (e.g., Lu & Cooper, 2015; Le, Newman, Menzies, Zheng, & Fermelis, 2020) and (ii) for greater insight into human-centred HRM in emerging economies (Cooke, et al, 2020).

Background: Work-life balance in China

WLB is concerned with the relationship between work and non-work aspects of individuals' lives. Some existing contributions to understanding of WLB frame it as a personal choice (Greenhaus & Allen, 2011). However, this downplays institutional and managerial factors that shape employees' WLB. Indeed, where there is a gap between intended and implemented WLB policies and practices and employees' experience of how these actually take shape, this has been mainly attributed to the attitudes and conduct of line managers (de Menezes & Kelliher, 2017). This suggests that WLB, though it may be underpinned by legal or contractual obligations, is socially constructed and that power dynamics have a role to play. The way that WLB unfolds may be harder to understand in settings that are comparatively more ambiguous,

i.e., where formal regulation and support is much more limited. Two other factors also make the context for this paper – Stated-Owned Enterprises (SoEs) in China – a theoretically interesting context in which to study WLB.

First, while WLB policies and practices are underdeveloped in most workplaces in China, political ideology and the Confucian social tradition encourages organizations to demonstrate WLB in the form of workplace 'harmony'. Organizations can experience normative pressures to internalize harmonious and paternalistic values in employment relations (Choi & Peng, 2015; Danford & Zhao, 2012). This is particularly so for SoEs, who are expected to be role models for other employers by manifesting these values. Given SoEs employ 56.33 million workers (Statista, 2022), insights into these organizations could have significant implications for how WLB is managed more widely. Nevertheless, to date, understanding of HRM at SoEs remains limited (Li & Ma, 2020).

Second, line managers' attitudes and support are crucial in accomplishing or failing to accomplish employees' WLB. In keeping with these wider institutional constraints, Chinese line managers are personally obliged to accomplish harmony in their workplaces (Xiao & Cooke, 2012), though they may have little to no designated resources to effect this. The degree to which managers express support for WLB is dependent on their perception of the organization's dedication and ability to advance this cause. Understandably, line managers act in their best interest by considering the benefits and disadvantages of supporting WLB, as they are evaluative beings (Sayer, 2011). If the organization or employer signals financial pressure or an emphasis on the 'ideal worker' norm, line managers would prioritize business and advocate work dedication over WLB. This tendency is particularly evident in situations that lack clear signals such as WLB policies and practices.

Theoretical framework and hypotheses development

We draw on signaling theory to understand how issues relating to WLB play out in these less formally regulated workplaces. Signaling theory has been identified as a sound theoretical framework to deal with situations characterized by the interplay of signalers (e.g., managers) and receivers (e.g. employees) (Bergh, et al., 2014; Williams, et al., 2021; Guest, et al., 2021). The signaler is understood as having valuable but not always tangible information that communicates to the receiver through subtle signs, hints or clues. The receiver decodes, interprets and transfers these signals and acts accordingly. Such interactions are context-dependent (Cañibano & Avgoustaki, 2022). Signaling theory has been used to explain how employees perceive HR practices and to account for gaps between intended and perceived HR practices based on interactions between organizational and managerial signalers and employees as receivers (Williams, et al., 2021; Masuda, Holtschlag & Nicklin, 2017). Among these studies, the role of the line manager as a signaler has been underscored because not only do WLB practices act as a signal, managerial attitudes and behaviours determine how HR practices are perceived and experienced by employees (Guest, et al., 2021).

A limitation in these studies however is that they take place in settings where HR practices are comparatively formalised. WLB policies and practices remain underdeveloped in certain contexts, such as developing economies (Le, et al., 2020) and small businesses (Lamane-Harim, Cegarra-Leiva & Sánchez-Vidal, 2022; Kitching & Marlow, 2013). We seek to extend insights from signaling theory by arguing that in more ambiguous contexts, i.e. those that lack formal HR practices as a concrete signal, both managers and employees are receivers. Each evaluates their work-life culture to try to decode their employer's commitment to WLB, and acts accordingly. They do this through *sensing*, *appreciating* and *learning* from signals which include material and non-material features of their workplace, environmental cues, and

acting in keeping with norms. A shorthand way to refer to these is the catch-all term “work-life culture”.

Clearly there is debate on how to define and operationalize culture (Daverth, et al., 2016). Here we refer specifically to work-life culture as it relates to WLB, using this definition, “the shared assumptions, beliefs, and values regarding the extent to which an organization supports and values the integration of employees’ work and family lives” (Thompson et al., 1999, p. 394). Where work-life culture supports WLB, other things being equal, we might expect excessive workload demands to be reviewed, monitored and adjusted. Indeed, some research has found evidence for a positive association between a supportive work-life culture and reduced work-family conflict (Talukder, 2019), positive work attitudes (Beauregard & Henry, 2009) and improved employees retentions (Lamane-Harim, et al., 2022). In our context of Chinese SoEs, speaking in broad terms (and at the risk of seeming somewhat naïve), one could make an *a priori* argument that cultural norms associated with Confucianism might enable a supportive work-life culture. This *a priori* argument could be reinforced with reference to the government's policy of Harmonious Society Construction and of “humanized care” (Wei & Li, 2013). Both cultural norms and governmental advocacy offer a clear rationale for SoEs to promote work-life culture that supports employees' WLB. The extent to which these links may be rhetorical and not realized in practice is one motivation for this paper. We thus hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1: work-life culture is positively and significantly correlated with WLB.

Work-life culture, WLB, and the mediating role of managerial support

Line managers play a crucial role in delivering the value of work-life culture, which can influence how employees' WLB is perceived and achieved. They can offer emotional support (e.g., empathy) and instrumental support (such as allowing time off work) that may facilitate employees' WLB (Valcour et al., 2011). Managerial support may enable employees to raise

WLB queries and requests when needed. In contrast, with perceived low or no managerial support, employees may not or hesitate to seek support for fear of possible work and career consequences. In a setting that lacks formal policies and guidelines on WLB, practices can vary drastically within organizations and may be more subject to line manager's awareness and discretion. If strong signals indicate a supportive work-life culture (perhaps in terms of guidance from more senior levels of the organization), this might allow line managers more discretion in terms of implementing local practices that promote WLB. Conversely, an absence of policy or direction might encourage local exploitation. In each case, the line manager's attitudes and behaviours will affect subordinates' attitudes and behaviours towards WLB (Kossek, et al., 2022).

Chinese managers are sometimes regarded as having a key paternalistic role in fostering harmonious employee relations and mediating workplace conflicts (Zhang, Li & Harris, 2015). This is in keeping with social traditions such as paternalism, and *Guanxi* that refers to social connections that are defined by reciprocity, mutual obligation, a sense of goodwill and personal affection (Chen, et al., 2009; Liao & Hui, 2021). Managerial discretion, therefore, matters greatly in terms of both process and outcomes when it comes to employees' WLB. Line managers have the discretion to offer temporary coverage or financial subsidies to employees, while also exhibiting empathy in order to address work-life conflicts. Such actions serve as facilitators for improving employees' work-life balance as outcomes. (Xiao & Cooke, 2012). Moreover, since *Guanxi* plays such a key role in Chinese workplaces (Danford & Zhao, 2012); this compounds an already ambiguous situation where there is no clear formal policy guidance and process. Therefore, we propose,

Hypothesis 2: the relationship between work-life culture and work-life balance is mediated by managerial support.

Work-life culture, WLB and the mediating role of perceived workload

To understand the relationship between work-life culture and WLB, it is also important to keep in mind a related concept, workload. Integrating both quantity and pace of work, workload refers to “the cost incurred by an individual given their skills while performing a particular level of performance on a task with specific demands” (Arellano, et al., 2012, p.1790). Despite potential monetary gains and faster career progression that may accrue from voluntarily taking on a higher workload, its detrimental effect on personal life, physical and mental health have been well-recognized in China (e.g., Wen, et al., 2021; Lu & Cooper, 2015), consistent with work in the West on WLB (e.g., Goh, Ilies, & Wilson, 2015).

Increasing workloads as a result of business pressures, unpredictable client demands, and mismanagement, together with a strong work ethic, leads Chinese employees to routinely work overtime (Nie, Otterbach & Sousa-Poza, 2015). Accordingly, claims to pursue humanized care may often be lip service. This echoes Xiao & Cooke (2012)'s research that work intensification and workload would crush humanized care, leaving Chinese employees to resignedly accept work-life imbalance as ‘matter of fact’ (Xiao & Cooke, 2012). Accordingly, we propose:

Hypothesis 3: the relationship between work-life culture and work-life balance is mediated by perceived workload

Work life culture and WLB: a sequential mediating model

Following through the more specific implications of signaling theory, we propose a sequential, mediating pathway connecting work-life culture to WLB. Summarily this can represent as: work-life culture- > line manager support- > workload- >employee’s WLB. This is shown in **Error! Reference source not found..** The employer, as the signaler, can signal commitment to WLB throughout the organization; line managers appreciate the signal, being more or less

empowered to allocate and adjust workloads with employees' WLB in mind; employees not only receive this signal, but they also act as signalers themselves if they feel safe enough to seek managerial support and pursue alternative arrangements to cope with their work-life tensions. This pathway model shows factors that can influence employees' WLB through the following mechanisms.

First, work-life culture can offer a kind of moral compass empowering line managers to use their discretion to support WLB initiatives. Where there are clear signals of valuing and supporting WLB in the workplace, this allows some line managers to embrace their duty of care consistent with wider traditions of Confucianism and paternalism (Kelliher, et al., 2019). Second, work-life culture enables line managers to leverage resources to support employees. When actions to support WLB are valued by their employer or senior staff, line managers tend to feel authorized and confident to mobilize support toward employees' WLB (Kossek et al., 2016). In addition, the integration of work-life culture and managerial support can enable employees' self-efficacy, supporting them to be proactive and more assertive in managing their work-life tensions. A supportive work-life culture may help to develop employees' psychological safety to manage heavy workloads and seek WLB solutions from line managers without fear of job loss or career penalty (Daverth, et al., 2016). We thus propose H4 below, and the conceptual model of the proposed relationships is presented in Figure 1.

Hypothesis 4: the relationship between work-life culture and WLB is sequentially mediated by managerial support and workload.

Insert Table 1 about here

Methods

The procedure is outlined in more detail below, summarily, we test the above hypotheses primarily using 312 valid survey responses and a supplementary pool of data from 23 in-depth semi-structured interviews. Adopting such a sequential mixed method, on the one hand, allows for a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the complex and multifaceted nature of work-family/life issues (e.g., Ollier-Malaterre & Foucreault, 2016); on the other, rather than only using survey method, insights from follow-up interviews plays a corroboratory role that offers the greater in-depth understanding that could not be captured in survey data. As Jaga & Guetterman (2021) argue, mixed methods offers a dual analytical lens that deepens and broadens our understanding of work-family/life issues in and across diverse national contexts, particularly those from emerging economies. Methodologically, using different data sources is one way to mitigate common method bias which is a potential issue in any single-method study (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003).

Survey study

Procedure

Data was collected from two large Chinese SoEs in the pharmaceutical sector, each with over 5,000 employees. These two organizations were chosen due to important commonalities: being the same size in the same industry and locality, they experience the same external economic, political and legal environment. Both organizations also have a sizable proportion of knowledge workers, which is a favourable context in which to study WLB issues. We also note some divergence: Company A was in the process of mixed ownership transformation and consequently experiencing slightly more turmoil. The survey link was distributed by both HR departments to 500 knowledge workers in each company. After excluding respondents with a missing value on survey items, a final 312 valid responses were compiled (31.2% response rate). These participants were relatively young (age range from 26 to 35 years old)

and highly educated (with a bachelor's degree or above). The majority (%) had family care responsibilities.

Measures

Work-life balance (WLB). 7-items were developed from extant studies (Brough et al., 2014; Carlson, et al., 2011; Gutek, Searle & Klepa, 1991) which concern WLB in terms of time, demand, stress, flexibility etc. (see the Appendix for more details).. The response options were 5-point Likert scales (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree). Factor analysis confirms this scale is unidimensional with factor loading >0.70 and Cronbach's alpha is 0.80, thus the average of these 7 items (mean=2.98, S. D=0.63) is used to measure WLB.

Perceived workload. PW was assessed with three items developed by Nystedt, Sjöberg, & Hägglund (1999). An example item was "I often have too much to do in my job." Cronbach's alpha for perceived workload was 0.79 (factor loading >0.78)

Organizational work-life culture includes 6-item developed from Dikkers et al. (2004)'s research. These items assessed the extent (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree) to which respondents perceived that the organization considers their personal affairs (general work-life culture), demands long days and availability all the time (Detailed sample items can be seen in the Appendix). The construct with a Cronbach's alpha 0.72 (factor loading >0.71).

Managerial support to WLB includes 3-item developed from Dikkers et al. (2004)'s research. These items assessed the extent (on a 5-point Likert-type scale, 1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree) to which managers offer instrumental (e.g., adjusting work mode, and working time) and emotional support when employees are stressed by personal and family issues. Detailed sample items can be seen in the Appendix. The construct has a Cronbach's alpha is 0.79 (with factor loading >0.77).

Controls. Informed by previous work-family/life research (e.g., Lu & Cooper, 2015), we have controlled for demographic characteristics including gender, age, years of schooling, job

tenure, marital status, number of children and care duty for the elderly at home (see Table 1) when empirically examining our proposed associations.

Quantitative data analyses

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to test the distinctiveness of the two four-factor measurement models (including work-life culture, managerial support, perceived workload, and WLB) using SPSS AMOS (version 27.0). Based on Bertler's (1990) goodness-of-fit measures ($\chi^2/df \leq 3.0$, $CFI \geq 0.85$, $TLI \geq 0.90$, $RMSEA \leq 0.10$), the results of the overall CFA in **Error! Reference source not found.** shows a goodness of fit ($\chi^2(309) = 878.56$, $\chi^2/df = 2.85$, $CFI = 0.87$, $TLI = 0.92$, $RMSEA = 0.08$ among alternative models. Overall, these results indicate that our constructs possessed sufficient reliability and validity. Given the potential bias of common method variance (CMV), Harman's one-factor test (1976) was carried out, all fit indices demonstrated a poorer fit for the following one-factor models with $\chi^2(295) = 1179.75$; $\chi^2/df = 5.61$, $CFI = 0.68$, $TLI = 0.69$, $RMSEA = 0.20$ than our original measurement models. Therefore, CMV is not a concern for the dataset.

Insert Table 1 about here

Insert Table 2 about here

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations (S.D.)) as well as correlations among the main variables. The mean of actual weekly working hours is 47.6 hours per week, which is over the legal limit of 44 hours per week issued in the Labour Law in

China¹, and echoes Cooke's (2013) finding that standard working hours (e.g., 40 hours per week) do not exist in the workplace in China.

Quantitative results

We used Hayes' (2018) SPSS PROCESS macro to test our hypotheses. Figure 2 shows empirical results among variables. Work-life culture is positively and significantly associated with WLB ($\beta = 0.24$, $p < 0.001$). This provides empirical evidence to support hypothesis 1.

Insert Figure 2 about here

PROCESS (model 4) was used to test the mediating effects in Hypotheses 2 and 3. When testing the mediating effect of managerial support on work-life culture and WLB, results in Table show that 95% confidence interval for indirect effects of work-life culture on WLB via managerial support include zero CI [-0.38,0.01], indicating the proposed mediating effect does not exist (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Therefore, the empirical evidence rejects the mediating role of managerial support on the relationship between work-life culture and WLB, Hypothesis 2 is not supported. Hypothesis 3 states the relationship between work-life culture and WLB is mediated by perceived workload, the indirect effect path: work-life culture $\rightarrow$ perceived workload $\rightarrow$ WLB, is found to be significant ($\beta = 0.10$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.05]) shown in Table 3. This provides empirical evidence to support Hypothesis 3.

Insert Table 3 about here

¹ The State shall practice a working hour system wherein labourers shall work for no more than eight hours a day and no more than 44 hours a week on average (Article 36, China Labour Law, 2008).

Hypothesis 4 states a sequentially mediating path on the association between work-life culture and WLB through managerial support and perceived workload. PROCESS (model 6) was employed to test the sequential mediation. The results in Table 3 show a significant indirect effect ($\beta = -0.04$, 95% CI $[(-0.10, -0.07)]$), and this support a sequential mediating path, thus Hypothesis 4 is supported.

Interview study

We collected and analyzed qualitative data through semi-structured interviews to complement the hypotheses and provide deeper insights into WLB in the Chinese context. After three pilot interviews, 23 face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with employees from both SoEs through generic purposive sampling, in such a way that we maximized heterogeneity of department and length of service in the organizations and obtained a gender-balanced sample. This plurality of views gained from employees and all levels of management provided rigorous evidence to inform HR/WLB policymaking and the management of Chinese enterprise reform (Danford & Zhao, 2012).

These interviews were conducted in Chinese for approximately 45-90 minutes and averaged 75 minutes in length in offices. All the interviews were digitally audio-recorded, and professionally transcribed and translated. Questions include topics like views and experiences of WLB, workload and its impact on WLB, organizational work-life culture and managerial support to WLB. The interview samples included employees and managers at different career stages who were highly educated (with a bachelor's degree or above) and 78% of them have childcare and elderly responsibilities.

Qualitative data analyses and results

We employed thematic analysis to interpret the interview data following the linear and hierarchical approach suggested by Creswell (2014). The analysis process involved coding the transcripts and then identifying themes by gathering relevant codes thus producing the following key themes.

Heavy workload wins over the humanized care advocacy

“Despite the call for humanized care...heavy, unpredictable and on-call workload pressurize WLB significantly” (Employee 8). Most participants shared this similar view, which further validated our H2. More interestingly, participants still reckon a WLB in terms of psychological satisfaction despite the high level of workload. This could be derived from the positive impact of workload as to bring “workplace rewards”, “recognition”, “career development and cultural identity”. Such 'no pain no gain' (Employees 12) is considered to offset the personal and family sacrifice, thus reaching a psychologically satisfactory balance. The other interpretation could be that heavy workload has been normalized in the workplace as a result, employees are insensitive and helpless to its negative impact on WLB (Xiao & Cooke, 2012), as managers 7 said,

“well, nobody shouts this out, we are used to it (high workload), so you don't resent...it's just helpless”.

Manager's signal: “The helping spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak”

Interviewees revealed the main reason that managerial support does not mediate the negative effects of workload on WLB (H3) is the lack of resources for line managers to leverage and deploy. As line manager participant 7 expressed below, they felt placed in a dilemma: their willingness to support employees' WLB was often thwarted by authoritarian workplace regimes and business pressure. Line managers are forced to yield to business

pressure and power relations through marginalizing (or neglecting) employees' WLB (de Menezes & Kelliher, 2011). Advocating and supporting WLB is stigmatized; if managers deliver such “goodwill”, it is widely reckoned that employees' work effort and commitment will be weakened, thus resulting in negative performance outcomes. Some managers will lead the ideal worker norm as an example to the employees that demonstrate work centrality by sacrificing their own personal time to work (Russel & Ross, 2008). Such idealism of paid work can further normalize work centrality, which inhibits the legitimacy of 'harmonized' culture. In addition, employee 9's quote below indicates the concern that employees are worried more about the unfair accessibility of workplace resources and benefits. Employees who do not perceive fairness in the implementation of WLB resources and support can feel resentful and consequently leading to 'counterproductive' work attitudes and behaviours (Beauregard, 2014; Daverth, et al., 2016).

“I do wish that all my staff have a WLB. However, I am constrained...only if the company policy and budgets allow...Otherwise, sorry, I only can show my empathy in words” (Manager 7).

“Still, some managers take a dim view of it (WLB), claiming offering work-life care would damage employees' career, leaving a less committed impression” (Manager 1).

“What tortures us is the unequal distribution of support rather than the scarcity.”
(Employee 9)

Organizational work-life culture signalizes and enables managerial support

A strong organizational commitment to humanized care can be the key signal to enable managerial support and facilitate employees to perceive better WLB, as we hypothesized in H1 and H4. The typical quotes below resonate with Xiao & Cooke (2012)'s finding that humanized care remains a management aesthetic in the Chinese workplace; the delivery of humanized care is periphery to the influential Confucian values – hardship, self-sacrifice, and work dedication, particularly in the Chinese SOEs (Lu & Cooper, 2015). However, as Wang (2020) points out,

these values may be used to exploit employees and limit the motivational effect of humanized care.

“no doubt that organizational work-life value does help (WLB)... but more like a slogan, lacking substantial stuff internalizes the ‘humanized care’ into our working life.”
(Employee 17)

“we morally teach our employees to work hard and cherish their current work position and opportunities ...such work dedication is also our Confucian legacy”. (Manager 1)

Nevertheless, Manager 6 noted when organizations prioritize work-life balance, managers are more likely to feel empowered and motivated to support their employees with their work-life needs, and employees are more comfortable seeking support without fear of negative career consequences. This is because in Chinese society, there is a strong sense of hierarchy and social status, as noted by Cooke (2013). The Chinese employer-employee nexus embodies paternalism, characterized by authority, hierarchy, care, obedience and loyalty. If organizations and managers provide humanized care, employees are likely to respond in kind with reciprocal attitudes and behaviors, Manager 6 noted this as a potential outcome.

“Fundamentally, the organization should take the lead to take some substantial actions to care staff’s WLB needs, so we are able to support employees without fear of being ‘out of control’... employees would be able to take up the real benefit and pay back.”
(Manager 6)

Discussions

This paper investigated employees’ WLB experience in China drawing on signaling theory. In a comparatively more ambiguous context with few formal WLB regulations and policies in place. We validated a sequential mediating path elaborating on how work-life culture affects employees’ WLB via managerial work-life support and workload. We found that work-life culture instils and empowers the line manager to support employees seeking WLB. These findings contribute to theory by expanding our understanding of the work-family/life interface.

Our study also raises important implications for policymakers, managers and HR practitioners in China, and potentially more broadly.

Theoretical implications

First, we underscore the importance of the cultural dimension in WLB/HR management (e.g., Daverth, et al., 2016; de Menezes & Kelliher, 2017). In an ambiguous situation lacking clear structural mechanisms, e.g., formal HR policies and practices, both line managers and employees interpret signals about their organizational context in relation to WLB. Managers decide whether and to what extent to exercise their discretion to support employees' WLB, employees assesses whether they are comfortable pushing back on work overload and seeking WLB. Therefore, work-life culture can reduce perceived workload, offering a mediating path to attain WLB, rather than acting as a moderator (Cegarra-Leiva, et al., 2012; Kar & Misra, 2013). Our research thus makes a novel contribution to debate on WLB in terms of the interactions between workplace culture, managerial capacity and employees' attitudes.

Second, our research extends conversations on signaling theory in HRM by highlighting the role of the employer as the signal initiator. These findings align with recent studies that highlight the crucial role of line managers as signalers (Guest et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2021), but we argue additionally that it is work-life culture that instils and drives managerial support. Line managers' attitudes and behaviours are based on their evaluation of the workplace culture, this is especially important in an ambiguous setting, where no or little formal policy is in place. Even if some line managers are inclined to care about employees' WLB, they can be pressurized to prioritize performance/profitability, marginalizing the commitment to humanized care and making commitment to wider social traditions relating to workplace harmony simply rhetorical.

Third, having responded to the research call for delving into work-life issues in the Asian context (e.g., Lu & Cooper, 2015; Le, et al., 2020) and Human-centred HRM in emerging economies (Cooke, et al., 2020), an implication of our signaling theory perspective is to highlight the importance of establishing formal HR policies and practices. These can concretize signals relating to WLB in the Chinese context. Without formalized policies and practices organizations may drift towards a market-led work-life culture that compromises WLB.

Practical implications

This research unpacks the cultural dimension of WLB management, showing this is key to facilitating employees' WLB in an ambiguous setting. An important and practical implication is that effective HRM including WLB management is unlikely to succeed without support from the top. Only when the employer demonstrates their commitment to employees' wellbeing and value of WLB, will line managers be empowered to offer WLB arrangements and promote a genuine employee-friendly workplace culture. Having perceived such a positive signal, employees are more likely to feel able and comfortable in sharing their WLB needs and taking up managerial support with less fear for their pay and career (Siu, 2015). Given enduring inequalities in terms of employment standards, and because legislation related to WLB rights in many parts of the world is unlikely to be established soon, our findings have broader implications.

For organizations where there is no or limited formal WLB support, or the support depends on ad hoc managerial practices, structural and formal mechanisms can provide clear signals. Formal HR practices could potentially infuse humanized values acting as a mediator between broader social traditions and the workplace. Clear and consistent HR policies related to WLB could be part of institutionalizing workplace cultures, such as remote working, flexible schedules, and additional paid leave. In assisting employees' workload management, organizations could provide resources and access to counselling services, stress management

programs, and training on time management and workload prioritization. This would send a strong signal in empowering line managers to commit the support to facilitate employees' WLB. Even in a situation where financial and time capacity is scarce, management could model a healthy work-life balance by taking time off, avoiding excessive overtime, and not expecting employees to work outside of normal hours. In turn, employees could feel more enabled to advocate for their own WLB and attain desirable work outcomes accordingly (Guest, et al., 2021).

Limitations and research recommendations

We make a strong case for the theoretical importance of analyzing Chinese SoEs. However, this does also limit the generalizability of our contributions. For example, small and medium-sized companies make up more than 80% of the Chinese labour force (Xinhua News Agency, 2019). Employment regulations and protections are rather less generous in such firms than in SoEs; although flexible work arrangements often feature, especially after covid (Cai, Rowley & Xu, 2022). At the other end of the spectrum, as a vector for Foreign Direct Investment, mixed western-Chinese employment practices are common to foreign-owned corporations, where WLB is more formalized (Xiao & Cooke, 2012). One promising direction for future inquiry might include simultaneous attention to both structural and cultural dimensions of WLB management in these different settings.

Another potential area of interest for future research is more systemic inquiry into how workplace culture affects the commitment and capacity of managers directly tasked with WLB management. Our research unveils culture has complex interactions, for example a broader tradition of humanized care may falter in the face of local competitive work pressures. Therefore, we encourage scholars to consider cultural configurations in debate on WLB. That is, to look at multiple levels of analysis and the interaction of different components of culture on the experiences of individuals and employers (Tsui et al., 2007). In addition, while this

research mainly focuses on the cultural dimension, combining analysis of both culture and structure can enable polycontextualization of work-life research (Ollier-Malaterre & Foucreault, 2016; Darth et al., 2016)..

Conclusion

This paper made the case for studying work-life culture as it relates to WLB management in a setting where formal regulations and policies are lacking. Using two SoEs in China as a case study, based on signaling theory, we proposed a number of hypotheses including a pathway model that highlights the crucial role of organizational work-life culture in WLB. We substantiated this pathway model by empirically testing the proposed mechanism with mixed-method research data. The study reveals that organizational work-life culture plays a key role in explaining WLB outcomes in this more ambiguous setting. The findings also enable us to extend conversations on the application of signaling theory in HRM.

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Figures

Figure 1. Path estimates of the hypothesized model

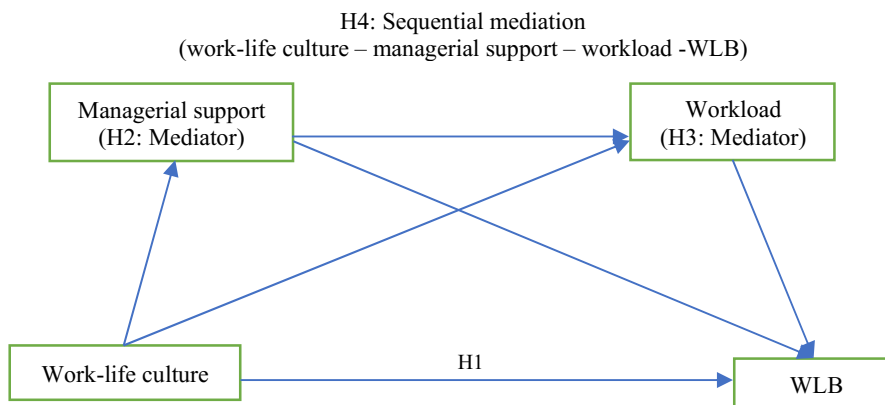
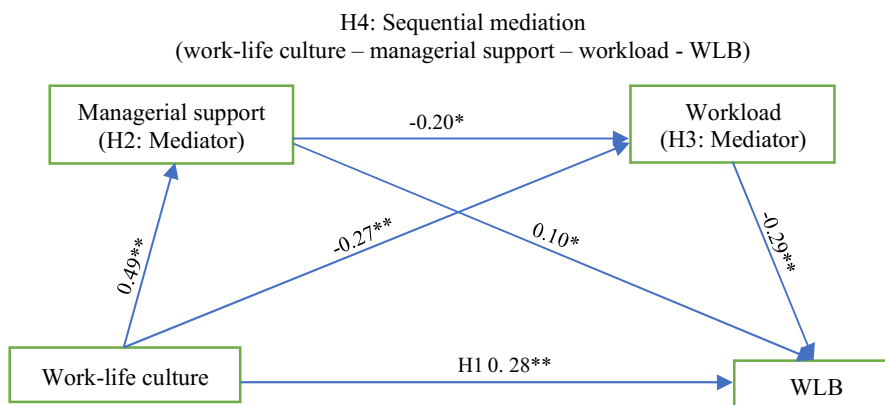


Figure 2. Result of testing hypothesis



Note: control variables: gender, age, years of schooling, job tenure, marital status, number of children and elderlies cared for home were included as control variables. All of the path coefficients are standardised; * $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.001$, n.s. means no significance shown by the dash line.

Tables

Table 1. Mean values, standard deviations, Cronbach's alphas (α) and bivariate correlations between study variables

	Mean	S.D.	Cronbach's α	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Gender	1.53	.50	-	-										
2. Age	32 y/o	.74	-	-.12*	-									
3.Years of schooling	19years	.66	-	.04	-.15**	-								
4. Job tenure	8 years	1.19	-	-.19*	.79**	-.26**	-							
5.Marital status	1.53	.50	-	-.09	.54**	-.18**	.64**	-						
6. Number of children	1.46	.57	-	-.12*	.51**	-.16**	.61**	.76**	-					
7. Number of elderlies	1.96	.80	-	-.06	.30**	-.05	.42**	.52**	.48**	-				
8.Actual working hours	47.6 hr/w	.83	-	-.09	-.08	-.01	.00	.01	.04	.14*	-			
9. Work-life culture	2.88	.61	.72	.04	-.01	-.08	-.80	-.05	-.05	-.10	-.22**	-		
10. managerial support to WLB	3.39	.79	.79	.05	-.12*	.09	-.11*	-.03	-.08	.01	-.03	.34**	-	
11.Perceived workload	2.60	.59	.79	.07	.10	-.03	.16**	.09	.14*	.15**	-.36**	-.28**	-.19**	-
12. WLB	2.98	.63	.80	.09	.04	.08	.01	-.01	-.02	-.10	-.23**	.29**	.13*	-.28*

Note: * $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.001$

Table 2. Results of confirmatory factor analysis

Model	χ^2	df	χ^2 / df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA
Four-factor model	878.56	309	2.85	0.87	0.92	0.08
Three-factor model	967.29	304	3.27	0.80	0.85	0.12
Two-factor model	1129.07	299	4.12	0.75	0.78	0.13
One-factor model	1179.75	295	5.61	0.68	0.69	0.20

N=312.

Table 3. The total, direct, and indirect effect of Work-life culture on WLB

Predictor	Mediator(s)	Outcome	Total effect	Direct effect	Indirect effect	Mediation supported
H2: Work-life culture	-> Managerial support	-> WLB	0.28**	0.46**	-0.18 (-0.38,0.01)	No
H3: Work-life culture	-> Perceived workload	-> WLB	0.28**	0.18**	0.10** (0.20, 0.50)	Yes
H4: Work-life culture	-> Managerial support -> Perceived workload	-> WLB	0.28**	0.34**	-0.04** (-0.10, -0.07)	Yes

Note: upper rows give estimates of standardized effects, lower rows with bracket give estimates of 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals.

Note: *p < 0.01; **p < 0.001

Appendix

Work-life balance (Brough et al., 2014; Carlson, Ferguson, Kacmar, Grzywacz & Whitten, 2011; Gutek, Searle & Klepa, 1991)

Statement (1= strongly agree; 5=strongly disagree)
Time balance: I currently have a good balance between the time I spend at work and the time I have available for non-work activities (Brough et al., 2014)
Demand balance: I feel that the balance between my work demands and non-work activities is currently about right (Brough et al., 2014)
Work-to-life stress: Due to all the pressures at work, sometimes when I come home, I am too stressed to do the things I enjoy. (Gutek, 1991) (R)
Life-to-work stress: Tension and anxiety from my personal life often weaken my ability to do my job (Gutek, 1991) (R)
Work flexibility: I am able to negotiate and accomplish what is expected of me at work (Carlson et al., 2009)
Life flexibility: I am able to negotiate and accomplish what is expected of me in my family (Carlson et al., 2009)
Objective (relatively) view of your WLB: People who are close to me would say that I do a good job of balancing work and family. (Carlson et al., 2009)

Perceived workload (Nystedt, Sjöberg & Hägglund, 1999)

Statement (1= strongly agree; 5=strongly disagree)
It fairly often happens that I have to work under heavy time pressure.
I often have too much to do in my job.
I feel physically exhausted after a day's work

Organisational work-life culture and managerial support (Dikker et al., 2004)

Statement (1= strongly agree; 5=strongly disagree)
In general, my company is considerate towards employees' private affairs.
My company is supportive of employees who want to switch to fewer demanding jobs for personal affair.
If necessary, employees within this company are expected to prioritize their work over their personal affairs. (R)
In order to be taken seriously in this company, employees should work long days and be available all the time. (R)
In this company, employees who (temporarily) reduce their working hours for personal reasons are considered less committed. (R)
Employees who turn down a promotion because of personal circumstances will suffer career consequences within this company. (R)
My line manager is considerate towards employees' work-life balance.
My line manager supports employees who want to switch to a less demanding job because of their personal circumstance.
My line manager supports employees who (temporarily) want to reduce their working hours for personal reasons.