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# Leave or not to leave? The impact of managerial work-life support and work engagement on the outcomes of work-to-life conflict for China's new generation employees

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores how work engagement and managerial work-life support can influence the relationship between work-to-life conflict and turnover intention for China's new generation employees. Drawing on job demand-resources (JD-R) theory and time-lagged survey data, we developed a moderated mediation model which reveals the mediating effect of work engagement on the relationship between work-to-life conflict and turnover intention, and the moderation effect of managerial work-life support on the relationship between work-to-life conflict and work engagement. The findings show that work engagement serves as a personal resource for new generation employees to buffer the negative impact of work-life conflict on turnover intention, and managerial work-life support serves as a key job resource to influence the mediating effect of work engagement when work-life conflict occurs. Research contributions, implications, and limitations are discussed.

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## KEYWORDS

Work-life conflict; turnover intention; work engagement; managerial work-life support; China; new generation employees

## Introduction

Considerable interest has been generated in the mechanism and consequences of work-family/life conflict that has a significant impact on organizational success and development (e.g. Agarwala et al. 2014; Lu and Cooper 2015). Conflict between work and non-work life occurs when the work roles interfere with their family and personal roles and interests, leading to negative work outcomes such as work disengagement (Wang and Shi 2020) and turnover intention (Billing et al. 2014), which can be mitigated by additional resources generated from organizational and managerial support (Kossek et al. 2011). However, there has been limited research into the impact of work engagement on the relationship between work-to-life conflict and turnover intention, and the effect of managerial support on the relationship between work-to-life conflict and work engagement. Only a few existing studies have paid particular attention to the dynamics between employee attitudes and behaviour among new generation employees as a result of work-

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life conflict (Zhao 2018), while there has been inadequate work-life research in the context of Asia and emerging economies such as China, where work-life regulations are less developed (Xiao and Cooke 2012).

This paper bridges these significant gaps by investigating how the relationship between work-to-life conflict and turnover intention is influenced by two key factors, work engagement and managerial work-life support for China's new generation employees. These employees were born after the 1980s and grew up amid family planning rules, market-oriented economic reform and the emergence of new information technology (Zhu and Warner 2018). Two main reasons are behind such a focus. First, although the new generation has become a significant part of the labour market, there is a lack of understanding of these employees' unique work-life experience. Generational difference is evident in employee perceptions of HRM policies and practices, especially for new generation employees whose unique work-life experiences deserve a thorough examination (Huang et al. 2018; Zhao 2018). While facing severe work-life tensions resulting from high work demands and heavy family care responsibilities, the new generation has a stronger desire for flexibility and work-life balance compared to previous generations (Zhao 2018). However, so far little attention has been paid to exploring the implications of this generation's unique work-life experience, with few exceptions such as Liu (2021) and Takeda, Disegna and Yang (2019).

Second, although Chinese line managers often play a key role in looking after the young generation's work and family issues (Yu, Meng, and Zhou 2023), it is less known how managerial support can mitigate the negative impact of work-to-life conflict for these employees. To cope with irreconcilable work-life conflict and the subsequent work disengagement, the new generation would normally choose to either 'lying flat' (little effort-making or Tang-Ping in Chinese slang) or change jobs (Anderson et al. 2002; Chen 2022). Because China's workplace is generally based on personal relationships rather than rule-based (Danford and Zhao 2012) and there is no formal work-life balance regulation and policy (Xiao and Cooke 2012), seeking help from managers seems to be another way for these employees to respond to work-life conflict (Wu and Uen 2015). For new generation employees, managerial work-life support could be an effective method to mitigate the potential negative consequences of work disengagement and turnover intention due to work-to-life conflict, but the empirical proof is lacking.

We drew upon the job demands-resources (JD-R) model to evaluate these critical relationships involving competing work and personal life demands. JD-R has been used widely to explain the associations between job demands, job resources and employee outcomes, identify the complex interaction between work and personal demands and resources, and highlight the critical role of managers in supporting employee well-being (Bakker and Demerouti 2014). This model can help illustrate why work-to-life conflict as a stressor can lead to negative outcomes such as disengagement, burnout, and increased turnover intention (Demerouti et al. 2001). It can also explain how managerial work-life support, one of the key variables in the current study, can be a powerful job resource that provides support and flexibility to employees and helps them to balance their work and personal responsibilities (Wood et al. 2020). Drawing on time-lagged data containing questionnaire survey responses from 226 new-generation Chinese employees, we developed a moderated mediation model to test the relationships between work-to-life conflict, turnover intention, work engagement and managerial work-life support.

The study makes three key contributions to the work-life literature by delineating the critical relationships between work stressors, resources, attitudes, and behaviours of China's new generation employees. First, our finding deepens the understanding of why and how new generation employees are likely to quit their jobs as a result of work-to-life conflict. Existing propositions have emphasized the direct, positive relationship between work-life conflict and turnover intention (Spector et al. 2007; Zhang, Rasheed, and Luqman 2019). Our finding, in contrast, reveals that for China's new generation of employees, such a relationship is more complex due to the mediating effect of work engagement. Second, our finding enriches work-life literature by revealing how managerial work-life support adjusts the relationship between work-to-life conflict and work engagement. In validating the moderating effect of managerial work-life support, our study provides a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms by which personal and job resources can influence job stressors in a certain way. Third, by establishing a moderated mediation model, this study advances work-life literature by demonstrating the dynamic process in which managerial work-life support can moderate the mediation effect of work engagement on the relationship between work-to-life conflict and turnover intention. The study is a timely response to the calls for work-life research to be further contextualized (e.g. Shang, Chan and Liu 2021; Spector et al. 2007). By linking China's broader social and cultural contexts with the competing priorities between work and family, the study exemplifies how the new generation's work-life experiences are conceptualized through an appreciation of the fast-paced economic development and the growing pressure on job intensification, long working time and increasing family commitment (Le et al. 2020). Practically, these findings inform Chinese organizations and managers to be aware of the unique work-life experiences of the new generation and to adopt appropriate HRM policies and practices to support them.

### **The context: work-to-life conflict and China's new generation employees**

The issue of work-to-life conflict in China, like that in other East Asian societies, has increasingly become a prevalent challenge to improving the quality of work (Le et al. 2020). With its fast-developing labour market and unique political, economic and cultural features, China provides a favourable setting for refining and extending work-life research with potentially interesting findings (Powell, Francesco, and Ling 2009).

Since the early 1980s when China began its marketization reform, its rapid socio-economic progress has significantly amplified work and life demands (Cooke 2013). As a result of growing business competition, employees' work-life boundaries have been increasingly blurred due to the greater demand for workload and work intensification (Xiao and Cooke 2012; Zhang et al. 2019). Due to the lack of flexible working rights and institutionalized family-friendly policies (Xiao and Cooke 2012), and the weak enforcement of working time regulations and management's incomppliance (Kim and Chung 2016), Chinese employers tend to overlook the negative impact of a demanding environment on employees' well-being. Such a problem is accompanied by the country's collectivist tradition that encourages a strong dedication to work and sacrifices employees' personal lives in exchange for benefitting their collective community more than individuals (Yang et al. 2000). Spending extra time and energy at work is seen as a necessity to harmonize work relationships and gain career advancement (Liu et al. 2020), while at the

same time, the traditional Confucian culture still has a lasting impact on employees' perception of work-life issues (Shang, Chan and Liu 2021). With the combined influence of marketization pressure, institutional inefficacy and cultural influence, many Chinese employees do not question or resist work-life imbalance (Xiao and Cooke 2012).

It is within this context that the new generation has been experiencing competing expectations and realities at the workplace, with unique work-life issues different from previous generations. Unlike previous generations, the new generation experiences better economic and material conditions while facing a more challenging social environment (Zhu et al. 2015), hence having a more proactive attitude towards work – life balance, good pay and benefits, and opportunities for advancing careers (Huang et al. 2018). On the other hand, it is common for both new and older generations to suffer from work-life challenges due to similar reasons, such as limited job security and a weak social welfare system supporting their personal life (Liu et al. 2020). It is also normal for all employees to prioritize paid work and long working hours over private life, leisure, or self-enjoyment (Xiao and Cooke 2012). Nevertheless, new generation employees are more likely to embrace multi-values and have a more diversified and complex response to management (Wu, Tang, and Sun 2018), as they are relatively more unrestrained and emotionally more sensitive than the older generation (Hou, Li and Yuan 2018). Because new generation employees are more vocal about a better balance between work and life commitments (Xian, Atkinson, and Meng-Lewis 2022), they tend to have a higher turnover rate than previous generations (Zhao 2018).

While the new generation continues embracing traditional values such as Guanxi, i.e. personal networks and relations (Shang, Chan and Liu 2021; Wu and Uen 2015), they also face a myriad of challenges from the long working hours culture, which is still commonplace in China. In a country where the average working hours are up to 48.6 hours per week (CEIC Data 2021; in contrast, the OECD average is 37.2 hours (OECD Stats 2021)), young workers are said to 'have had enough' to work long hours (Tatum 2023). With China's one-child policy (abolished in 2016) and an ageing population, there is increased pressure on the new generation to care for their parents and young children (Takeda, Disegna, and Yang 2019). Facing higher demands and pressure of work while enduring heavier family care responsibilities (Xian, Atkinson, and Meng-Lewis 2022), new generation employees are in a unique position to respond to constant challenges derived from various time-, strain- and behaviour-based conflict.

## **Theoretical background and hypotheses**

Work-life conflict is an inter-role conflict arising from the incompatible role responsibilities between work and non-work domains. As a source of stress, both work-to-life and life-to-work conflict can impact work attitudes such as commitment (Agarwala et al. 2014) and lead to negative outcomes such as reduced performance, absenteeism, and illness (Brougham and Haar 2020). However, the current study focuses mainly on work-to-life conflict, and this is based on two considerations. First, meta-analysis has found that work-to-life conflict has a more significant impact on work-related outcomes, such as work engagement and turnover intention, compared to the life-to-work conflict that is more strongly associated with non-work-related outcomes (e.g. Amstad et al. 2011; Xu and Cao 2019). This finding supports our choice because the current study primarily targets work

outcomes rather than non-work outcomes mainly related to life-to-work conflict. Second, focussing on work-to-life conflict suits well with the context of this study, situated in China's workplaces where the main priorities are work intensification and work dedication instead of family responsibilities (Le et al. 2020). By examining the impact of work-to-life conflict on work outcomes, such as turnover intention, the study can offer more focused and rigorous findings about the unique work-life experiences of new generation employees.

One of the most widely used approaches to assessing the implications of work-life conflict is the job demands-resources (JD-R) theory, which has been extensively deployed to comprehend how job demands, job resources, and employee outcomes are interconnected (e.g. Bakker and Demerouti 2014; Demerouti et al. 2001). Job demands refer to the physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of a job that require sustained effort and are risk factors. In contrast, job resources are the work characteristics and social and organizational aspects of a job that are mitigating factors in helping achieve work goals and reducing job demands through support from managers, feedback and autonomy (Demerouti et al. 2001). Typical job demands include long working hours, high workload, and interpersonal conflict, while job resources, including personal resources, can buffer the negative effects of work-to-life conflict on employee outcomes (Xanthopoulou et al. 2007). With the JD-R model using job demands and resources analysis to make sense of employees' competing demands for work and personal life (Bakker and Demerouti 2007), it can effectively explain how employees respond to work-to-life conflict in a certain way and why managers play a crucial role in helping achieve a better work-life balance (Wood et al. 2020). The theory is particularly suitable when exploring how work demands can lead to negative outcomes such as disengagement and turnover, and how job resources such as social support can buffer the negative effects of stressors such as work-to-life conflict (Bakker and Demerouti 2007; Takahashi, Yokoya, and Higuchi 2022). In this respect, JD-R theory provides a useful framework for analysing these conflicting factors when studying work-life interface or work-to-life conflict, the latter of which is the scope of the current study.

### ***Work-to-life conflict and turnover intention***

The influence of work-life conflict on turnover intention in the Western context is well understood; however, this is not the case for China's new generation employees whose work-life experiences are well under-studied. Turnover intention refers to employees' attitudes to, thoughts about, or intentions to resign from the organization (Spector et al. 2007), which can be directly influenced by work-life conflict (Beauregard and Henry 2009). In Western societies with flexible working arrangements, employees might change jobs or try to find alternative employment that will enable them to minimize or eliminate the conflict (Spector et al. 2007). In contrast, research findings are inconclusive regarding the effect of work-to-life conflict on turnover intention in China. One strand of research found that conflict between work and life rarely caused Chinese employees to quit demanding, fast-paced and long-hours jobs because they tended to perceive work-to-life conflict as normative (e.g. Liu et al. 2020; Xiao and Cooke 2012). Another strand concluded that work-to-life conflict could significantly influence individuals' emotional and psychological well-being, causing the intention to resign among clerical workers in

Hong Kong (Hang-Yue, Foley, and Loi 2005) and nurses in mainland China (Zhang, Rasheed, and Luqman 2019).

The relationship between work-to-life conflict and turnover intention is illustrated by the JD-R model, which suggests that excessive work demands can create stressors such as work-to-life conflict and lead to negative outcomes including disengagement and burn-out which are critical predictors of turnover intention (Bakker and Demerouti 2014). The situation can be typical for Chinese new generation employees who, compared with previous generations, have a stronger desire for flexibility and would prioritize personal fulfilment and well-being alongside professional success (Zhu and Warner 2018). When confronted with excessive work demands that leave little room for personal self-development and family commitment, their dissatisfaction will likely drive them to seek alternative employment options that offer a better balance, rather than tolerating the situation by sacrificing personal life for work dedication like previous generations (Wu and Uen 2015). Since work-life balance has not been given enough attention by employers in China where there are fewer available resources like work-life policies to support employees, changing jobs seems a sensible option when new generation employees experience irreconcilable work-to-life conflict (Chen 2022; Coffey et al. 2009). Accordingly, we propose:

**Hypothesis 1:** Work-to-life conflict for China's new generation employees is positively related to their turnover intention.

### ***Mediating role of work engagement***

Work engagement is defined as 'a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigour, dedication, and absorption' (Schaufeli and Bakker 2004, 295). Studies have found that work engagement is positively linked with high levels of energy, strong identification with the organization, and positive attitudes towards work (e.g. Bakker and Demerouti 2014). An opposite concept is disengagement, which refers to individuals' physical, cognitive and emotional withdrawal from role performance (Kahn 1990).

Increasing research has studied the antecedents of work engagement, including work-to-life conflict which is one of the negative antecedents (Wang and Shi 2020; Wood et al. 2020). As the JD-R model puts it, both job demands and resources will influence employee attitude and response to work-life tensions (Demerouti et al. 2001). High demand and low resources can exhaust individuals' energies and cause disengagement and mental withdrawal (Schaufeli and Bakker 2004). Specifically, job demands (e.g. work-to-life conflict) can be seen as antecedents to work engagement (Wood et al. 2020). Prolonged working hours, heavy workloads, or conflicting job expectations can take up individuals' personal time and lead to psychological and emotional strain from divergent work-life role expectations. In response, employees need to spend additional time, energy and resources to deal with this strain and associated work-to-life conflict. Consequently, this extra use of resources will reduce the level of cognitive, emotional, and physical energy stock that would otherwise be essential to maintain a normal level of work engagement (Bakker and Demerouti 2014; Demerouti et al. 2001). On the other hand, employees



equipped with adequate resources such as autonomy, flexibility, and organizational policies and social support that foster work-life balance are in a better position to uphold their engagement levels (Bakker and Demerouti 2014). These resources can bolster individuals' capacity to manage the strain arising from work-to-life conflict, enabling them to maintain normal levels of engagement, dedication, enthusiasm, and absorption in their work. When these key job resources are absent or lacking, employees are more likely to experience disengagement or reduced engagement at work. Multiple empirical studies (e.g. Parkes and Langford 2008; Wang and Shi 2020) have found the evidence for such a association between work – life/family constructs and work engagement. In other words, such relationship manifests a continuous spiral of resource depletion (Demerouti et al. 2001), organizational commitment weakening, and turnover intention increase (LePine, Podsakoff, and LePine 2005). This causal relationship has been established in several studies, which demonstrate the negative linkage between work engagement and the intention to resign (e.g. Bhatnagar 2012; Schaufeli and Bakker 2004).

Without these positive job resources, in contrast, employees are likely to be less engaged or disengaged at work and will therefore easily become trapped in a constant spiral of resource loss (Demerouti et al. 2001), which will weaken individuals' organizational commitment and increase their turnover intention (LePine, Podsakoff, and LePine 2005). This causality has been established in several studies that demonstrate the negative association between work engagement and intention to resign (e.g. Bhatnagar 2012; Schaufeli and Bakker 2004).

Work engagement has been found to have mediation effects (e.g. Bhatnagar 2012; Saks 2006; Schaufeli and Bakker 2004), including mediating the relationships between job resources and turnover intention (Schaufeli and Bakker 2004), and between job resources and job performance (Takahashi, Yokoya, and Higuchi 2022). An under-researched effect is the mediating effect of work engagement on the relationship between work-to-life conflict and turnover intention, which can be reflected in the JD-R theory as it can effectively explain the relationships between key work-life variables (Bakker and Demerouti 2014). According to the JD-R model, work-to-life conflict is directly linked to personal resource which is part of job resources (Xanthopoulou et al. 2007), and the level of job resources can directly lead to work engagement or disengagement (Demerouti et al. 2001). JD-R theory has also suggested that work engagement will influence employees' turnover intention depending on the level of job resources gained or lost (Bhatnagar 2012; Schaufeli and Bakker 2004). Since work-to-life conflict affects turnover intention mainly through work engagement, we can assume the existence of a mediating effect of work engagement. This mechanism applies to the case of the new generation in China where work-to-life conflict is a key antecedent of work engagement (Wang and Shi 2020), and these employees are more likely to resign due to work disengagement because they tend to value work-life balance more than previous generations (Zhu and Warner 2018). We propose, therefore:

**Hypothesis 2:** Work engagement mediates the positive relationship between work-to-life conflict and turnover intention for China's new generation employees.

### ***Managerial work-life support as a moderator***

Managerial work-life support refers to the actions and practices implemented by managers that help resolve employees' family and personal related problems or improve their ability to facilitate positive well-being (Kossek et al. 2011; Liao and Hui 2021). Another commonly used phrase referring to narrower work-life components, family-specific supervisor support is said to embody four dimensions e.g. emotional support, instrumental support, role modelling behaviours, and creative way of work-family support (Hammer et al. 2009). However, the notion of 'family specific' seems to mainly concern the support aimed at balancing paid work and childcare activities for a specific population (Kelliher, Richardson, and Boiarintseva 2019), overlooking other life course statuses such as single or outside work commitments, hobby development and volunteering.

A supportive manager is willing to demonstrate understanding and empathy towards employees' work-life challenges and to provide solutions and resources that address individual concerns (Hsu 2011). In response, employees tend to reciprocate such support by maintaining and improving motivation and reinvesting in resources such as their energy and commitment to work, and these responses will benefit work engagement. Increasing research has also validated this reasoning that employees' work engagement can be improved when work-life supportive managers offer reasonable work adjustments to balance the needs of both employees and the organization (e.g. Kossek et al. 2011; Yu, Meng, and Zhou 2023).

As a key job resource, managerial work-life support is a potential buffer against the impact of job demands on employees' attitudes, notably work engagement (Hsu 2011). Following the JD-R model that job resources can mitigate the negative impact of job demands on employee outcomes, managers' positive action and empathy can offset job strain (e.g. disengagement) caused by stressors (e.g. work-to-life conflict) (Bakker and Demerouti 2014). Since perceived organizational support moderates the relationships between family interfering with work and organizational commitment (Casper et al. 2002), managerial work-life support may create a supportive work environment that will enhance employees' sense of control and autonomy, ultimately alleviating employees' disengagement caused by conflicting work-life demands. This is because, with such support, employees are more likely to perceive their work-to-life conflict as manageable, fostering a sense of trust, support, and psychological safety (Caesens and Stinglhamber 2014).

JD-R theory also posits that job resources could moderate the effects of job demand (Bakker and Demerouti 2007), suggesting the potential moderating effect of managerial support which is a source of additional job resources (Hsu 2011). Since new generation employees prefer high relationship-oriented leadership (Ren et al. 2018), they, like previous generations, also have high expectations for their managers to provide both tangible support (e.g. temporary work adjustments to accommodate employees' personal needs) and intangible or moral support (Xiao and Cooke 2012). This position has been verified by Wayne, Lemmon and Wilson (2013) who suggested that managerial support can weaken the negative impact of work-family conflict on work engagement, and by Fiksenbaum (2014) who stated that a supportive work environment can create a positive work atmosphere, reduce stress and promote work engagement. Since managerial support can moderate the relationship between work – life conflict and employee

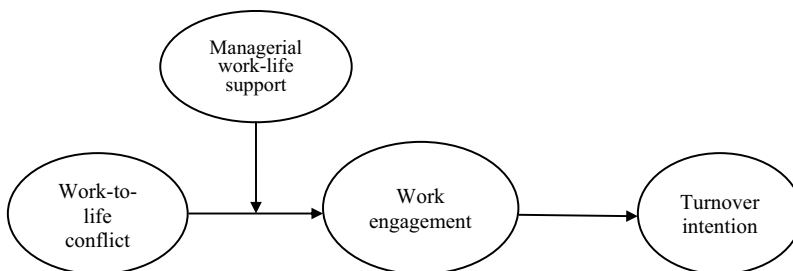
commitment (Casper et al. 2007; Mukanzi and Senaji 2017), and commitment is closely related to work engagement (Saks 2006), it is likely that managerial work-life support can moderate the impact of work-to-life conflict on work engagement. Based on these discussions, we propose:

**Hypothesis 3:** Managerial work-life support moderates the negative relationship between work-to-life conflict and work engagement for China's new generation employees, such that this relationship is weaker when managerial work-life support is stronger.

The above discussions and hypotheses also suggest the likelihood of a moderated mediation effect among these variables. Following Hypothesis 2 that work engagement may mediate the impact of work-to-life conflict on turnover intention, and Hypothesis 3 that managerial work-life support may moderate the relationship between work-to-life conflict and work engagement, we can further posit that the indirect effect of work-to-life conflict on turnover intention, via work engagement, will be weaker when managerial work-life support is stronger. In other words, a higher level of managerial work-life support will adjust the mediation effect of work engagement by alleviating individuals' intention to resign. Following the JD-R model (Bakker and Demerouti 2007), managerial support can provide employees with additional resources that are linked with a higher level of work engagement, which can result in a lower level of intention to resign; therefore, such support can effectively mitigate the negative impact of work-life balance on turnover intention. In contrast, with a lower level of managerial work-life support, employees will have fewer resources to deal with stressors such as work-to-life conflict, thus leading to reduced engagement at work and a stronger intention to resign. Hence, we propose:

**Hypothesis 4:** Managerial work-life support moderates the mediating effect of work engagement on the relationship between work-to-life conflict and turnover intention for China's new generation employees, such that the mediating effect is greater when the level of managerial work-life support is higher.

These hypotheses interrogate the relationships between job demands, job resources, work engagement and turnover intention for new generation employees in China. A diagram of all hypothesized relations is shown in Figure 1. The model includes three independent variables: 1) work-to-life conflict as a job demand, 2) managerial work-life



**Figure 1.** Proposed research model.

support as a job resource, and 3) work engagement as a mediator to adjust the relationship between work-to-life conflict and turnover intention. Given China's workplaces equipped with inadequate work-life support policies, and the new generation expecting high relationship-oriented leadership, managerial work-life support is regarded as a moderator to mitigate the disengagement effect caused by work-to-life conflict.

## **Method**

### ***Procedures and samples***

To test the above hypotheses, a questionnaire survey was conducted to explore the work-life experiences of China's new generation employees. Prior to the survey, pilot interviews with three potential participants were conducted to help probe the appropriateness of the survey questions and the suitability of the proposed scales for measuring employees' perceptions of work-to-life conflict. The findings of the pilot study indicated that the measurement scales were clear and suitable for this research, and only a few very minor changes needed to be made to the questionnaire.

We contacted 500 new generation employees through the snowballing method, as our samples were in five Chinese cities – Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Changsha and Kunming. One main selection criterion is that these employees should be born after 1980 to represent the younger generation of employees in the labour market (Zhu and Warner 2018). We collected data in two waves to minimize potential common method bias (CMB). In the first-wave survey, 279 out of 500 participants responded to questions on work-to-life conflict and managerial work-life support. In the second-wave survey conducted one month later, questions were asked to examine these 279 participants' perceptions of work engagement and turnover intention. To safeguard privacy and confidentiality, strict ethical protocols were followed throughout the data collection and data analysis periods, with all questionnaires being directly distributed to individual participants by email. The completed questionnaires were sent directly to the research team. Each questionnaire was accompanied by a cover letter, an information sheet, and a consent form. A total of 226 usable questionnaires were obtained after the two-wave survey, representing a response rate. Female respondents accounted for 52% of the sample, and 48% were male. 71% of the respondents were aged between 20 and 30 years old. The majority – 95% – of the respondents had undergraduate or higher degrees.

### ***Measures***

All constructs were measured using previously validated scales. Responses were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

#### ***Work-to-life conflict***

4-item scales (Gutek, Searle, and Klepa 1991) were used to measure work-to-life conflict. One sample item is 'After work, I come home and feel too tired to do some of the things I'd like to do'. The composite coefficient  $\alpha$  was estimated at .81.

### **Turnover intention**

Turnover intention was measured with a 3-item scale selected from the Michigan Organizational Assessment Questionnaire (Cammann et al. 1979) with the coefficient  $\alpha$  being .78. One sample question is 'How likely will you actively look for a new job within a year?'

### **Work engagement**

Work engagement was measured using a 9-item scale based on the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale – Short Form (Schaufeli, Bakker, and Salanova 2006). This 9-item scale consists of subscales including vigour (a sample item being 'at my work, I feel that I am bursting with energy'), dedication (e.g. 'I am proud of the work that I do'), and absorption (e.g. 'I am immersed in my work'). The composite coefficient  $\alpha$  of the 9-item scale is .89.

### **Managerial work-life support**

To measure perceived managerial work-life support, we used a 6-item scale selected from an 18-item multidimensional scale (Hammer et al. 2009). The reliability estimate for the total scores was .94. One of the sample items is 'My line manager is willing to listen to my problems in juggling work and non-work life'.

### **Controls**

Informed by previous work-family/life research (e.g. Lu and Cooper 2015), we controlled for demographic factors including gender, age, education, marital status, number of dependents at home and tenure.

## **Results**

### **Descriptive statistics**

Table 1 presents the scale reliabilities, means, standard deviations for each scale, and correlations. As can be seen in the table, work-to-life conflict is positively correlated with turnover intention ( $r = 0.14, p < 0.01$ ), but negatively correlated with work engagement ( $r = -0.24, p < 0.01$ ). Work engagement has a positive association with managerial work-life support ( $r = 0.46, p < 0.001$ ), and a negative association with turnover intention ( $r = -0.41, p < 0.001$ ).

### **Measurement models**

To evaluate the fitness of the measures in our study, we performed a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). We adopted goodness-of-fit indices including chi-square to df ( $\chi^2/df$ ), the comparative fit index (CFI), the incremental fit index (IFI), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). Based on Bentler's (1990) goodness-of-fit measures ( $\chi^2/df \leq 3.0$ ,  $GFI \geq 0.85$ ,  $CFI \geq 0.90$ ,  $RMSEA \leq 0.10$ ), the results of the overall CFA (Table 2) and the goodness-of-fit statistics for the five-factor model showed that a good fit with the data was achieved ( $\chi^2(223) = 613.03$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 2.75$ ,  $CFI = .90$ ,  $TLI = .91$ ,  $RMSEA = .07$ ). The result further confirmed this as all alternative models showed a significantly poor fit. These

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics.

	Mean	S.D.	Coeff $\alpha$	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Gender	.48	.50	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
2. Age	24.60	1.70	–	–.12	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
3. Marital Status	.14	.35	–	.12	.17*	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
4. Number of people financially support	1.42	.61	–	–.11	.09	–.03	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
5. Education attainment	1.90	.46	–	–.06	–.06	.13*	–.10	–	–	–	–	–	–
6. Tenure	1.49	.87	–	.05	.43**	.08	.03	–.09	–	–	–	–	–
7. Work engagement (WE)	3.15	.64	.89	–.05	–.07	–.06	.13*	.26**	–.07	(.89)	–	–	–
8. Turnover intention (TI)	1.73	.93	.78	.19**	.05	.05	–.03	–.12	–.04	–.41***	(.82)	–	–
9. Managerial work-life support (MWLS)	4.43	1.36	.94	–.05	–.09	.04	.06	.19**	.04	.46***	–.36***	(.91)	–
10. Work-to-life conflict (WLC)	2.67	.59	.81	.09	–.13*	–.08	–.06	–.02	.19**	–.24**	.14**	–.07	(.78)

N = 226; \*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001.

**Table 2.** Results confirmatory factor analysis.

Model	$\chi^2$	df	$\chi^2/df$	CFI	TLI	RMSEA
Full measurement model, four factors (factor 1: WLC), (factor 2: WE), (factor 3: TI), (factor 4: MWLS)	613.03	223	2.75	0.90	0.91	0.07
Three-factor model (factor 1: WLC), (factor 2: WE), (factor 3: TI and MWLS)	682.33	217	3.16	0.82	0.82	0.09
Two-factor model (factor 1: WLC), (factor 2: WE, TI and MWLS)	802.25	207	3.59	0.75	0.74	0.11
One-factor model (one common factor: WLC, WE, TI and MWLS)	889.93	202	3.99	0.64	0.70	0.13

*N* = 226. WLC = work-to-life conflict; WE = work engagement; TI = turnover intention; MWLS = managerial work-life support.

results indicate that our constructs possessed sufficient reliability and validity. Since the data were self-reported and the result only indicates partial covariances among the items, we assessed an additional latent common method factor of the measurement model to test the impact of CMB on data validity. The result showed that this factor explained insignificant variance in the indicator variables (21.16%), which is much smaller than the average method variance (18%–32%) (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, and Podsakoff 2012). The test result suggests that CMB does not pose a significant threat to this study.

### **Test of hypotheses**

To test the hypothesized model, we conducted hierarchical regression and bootstrapping tests. By integrating mediation and moderation, these tests helped us assess the conditional nature of indirect effects (as recommended by Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes (2007) while mitigating the low statistical power that existed in the process. We then used 5000 bootstrapping to examine the moderated effect proposed by Hypothesis 3 while controlling for gender, age, marital status, number of people with financial support, education, and tenure.

Table 3 shows the results of the multiple regression analyses that predict work engagement and turnover intention, providing the test outcomes of all Hypotheses. In supporting Hypothesis 1, model 2 shows that work-to-life conflict had a positive, direct relationship with turnover intention ( $\beta = .26, p < .01$ ). To test Hypothesis 2 which proposed that work engagement mediates the relationship between work-to-life conflict and turnover intention, we used the bootstrapping method developed by Preacher et al. (2007) via SPSS Process macro. This procedure generated confidence intervals (CIs) for indirect effects, so it avoided the risk of statistical power problems if the sampling distributions of the effects were asymmetric and non-normal. The CI for the indirect effect of work-to-life conflict on turnover intention through work engagement did not include 0 (−.06, −.01), indicating the presence of mediation. Thus, Hypothesis 2 is supported.

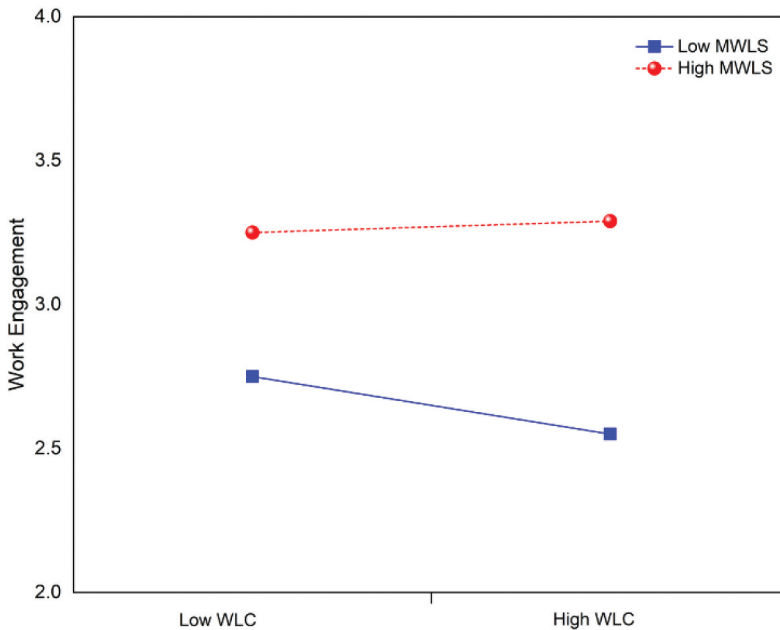
We followed Aiken's, West, and Reno (1991) recommendation to detect the moderating effect of managerial work-life support. We centred the controls and main predictors (i.e. work-to-life conflict and managerial work-life support) and their interaction terms. Model 3 featured the interaction term, work-to-life conflict  $\times$  managerial work-life support, to predict work engagement. The positive and significant interaction term ( $\beta = .18, p < .05$ ) provided evidence of a buffering role in managerial work-life support. A simple slope analysis was then conducted to further assess the moderating effect of managerial work-life support. We put one standard deviation above or below the mean to indicate

**Table 3.** Multiple regression results for work engagement and turnover intention.

Variables	Work Engagement			Turnover Intention		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
<b>Control variables</b>						
Gender (1 = female)	-.08	-.07	-.05	-.23*	-.19	-.20
Age	-.07	-.06	-.06	.07	.05	.05
Marital Status (1 = married)	-.06	-.06	-.08	.07	.04	.05
Number of people financially support	.12*	.20*	.13	-.03	-.04	-.05
Education attainment	.26*	.22	.23	-.10	-.10	-.09
Tenure	-.04	-.06	-.07	-.06	-.07	-.04
<b>Independent variables</b>						
Work-to-life conflict		-.26**	-.25**		.25**	.16
<b>Moderator</b>						
Managerial work-life support		.48***	.45***		.26	.18
<b>Interaction</b>						
WLC*MWLS			.16*			.14**
<b>Mediator</b>						
Work engagement						-.22**
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	.04	.18	.20	.05	.06	.09
<b>ΔR<sup>2</sup></b>		.18**	.22**		.14	.10**

*N* = 226; except for Total R2 and ΔR2 rows, entries are unstandardized regression coefficients.  
 \**p* < .05; \*\**p* < .01; \*\*\**p* < .001.

a high or low level of managerial work-life support. As Figure 2 depicts, when managerial work-life support is high, the negative relationship between work-to-life conflict and work engagement is weakened. Therefore, Hypothesis 3 is supported.



**Figure 2.** The moderating effect of managerial work-life support (MWLS) on the relationship between work-to-life conflict (WLC) and work engagement (H4).



**Table 4.** Moderated mediation effect (H4).

	Moderator	Effect size (r)	Standard error	95% confidence intervals	
				Lower	Ceiling
Direct effect	Work-to-life conflict – turnover intention	.26**	.04	.13	.29
Indirect effect	High MWLS	.29**	.04	.17	.33
	Low MWLS	.23**	.04	.15	.31
Different effect		.01	.02	.03	.06

N = 226; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

The support of H3 enabled us to further test the moderated mediation effect proposed in H4, with the results being presented in Table 4. According to Preacher et al.'s (2007) procedure via Process macro, we used bootstrapping approach to generate bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals (CI) for the magnitude of the indirect effects at different values of managerial work-life support. As hypothesized, the indirect effect of work-to-life conflict on turnover intention is stronger under high managerial work-life support (indirect effect = 0.29, CI = 0.17, 0.33) than low managerial work-life support (indirect effect = 0.23, CI = 0.15, 0.31). Additionally, the index of moderated mediation was significant (index = .01, CI = 0.03, 0.06), which shows that the indirect paths from work-to-life conflict to turnover intention differed significantly between high and low levels of managerial work-life support. Therefore, Hypothesis 4 and the overall theoretical framework are supported.

## Discussion

Our findings reveal a more complicated relationship between work-to-life conflict and turnover intention for China's new generation employees than the existing literature has noted (Liu et al. 2020; Wu and Uen 2015). The results demonstrate that such a relationship is not straightforward; instead, it fluctuates due to the influence of key variables including managerial work-life support and work engagement. The revelation of the relationships between job resources, work-to-life conflict, and outcomes was achieved by adopting the JD-R framework. We then established a moderated mediation model to allow us to conduct a concurrent test of the moderating effect of managerial support and the mediation effect of work engagement. The results indicate that work engagement, as a personal psychological resource, mediates the positive influence of work-to-life conflict on turnover intention, while this indirect effect is moderated by the degree of managerial work-life support: new generation employees in China with greater managerial work-life support are less likely to disengage from work due to work-to-life conflict than those with weaker support.

This study is among the first to interrogate the work-life experiences of China's new generation employees who have been missing from much of the prior work-life research, despite the significant presence of this generation within the world's largest workforce (Zhao 2018). The results reveal that new generation employees can benefit from managerial support in dealing with the pressure of work-to-life conflict. This finding aligns with the notion that the Chinese workplace is relationship-based rather than rule-based (Danford and Zhao 2012). It highlights that the new generation prefers solid interpersonal connections with managers (Ren et al. 2018). Meanwhile, contrary to the suggestion that

the link between work-to-life conflict and turnover intention is weak in collectivistic societies such as China (Liu et al. 2020), our findings show that the link is strong for China's young generation. This is because new generation employees tend to pay more attention to work-life balance, hence being more inclined to resign when work-to-life conflict escalates due to mental exhaustion (Coffey et al. 2009; Hang-Yue, Foley, and Loi 2005). These findings enable a more nuanced understanding of time-based, strain-based, and behaviour-based work-to-life conflict experienced by the new generation, helping make sense of their particular work-life experiences such as 'Tang-Ping' or 'lying down' attitude towards turnover (Chen 2022) and the resistance against long working hours (B.B. C., 2018). The study is a timely response to the calls for further contextualization in work-life research (e.g. Shang, Chan and Liu 2021; Spector et al. 2007), underscoring the significance of contextualization in contemporary work-life research, especially in non-western environments (Liu et al. 2020; Zhu and Warner 2019).

### ***Theoretical implications***

The study makes several important theoretical contributions. First, our findings provide new empirical evidence for the relationship between work-to-life conflict and its work outcomes for China's new generation employees. Existing studies have stated that the relationship between work-to-life conflict and turnover intention is primarily straightforward (Beauregard and Henry 2009; Coffey et al. 2009; Zhang, Rasheed, and Luqman 2019). The current study indicates that this is instead an indirect relationship that can be mediated by work engagement. Unlike the common proposition that work engagement is seen as a work-related outcome (e.g. Wang and Shi 2020), we show that it can act as a personal psychological resource that helps alleviate the negative effect of work-to-life conflict, thereby reducing the likelihood of turnover intention. This finding, drawing on the JD-R theory about the relationship between job demands and resources (Schaufeli and Bakker 2004), complements the substantial body of literature on the impact of work-life conflict on work outcomes. It corroborates the suggestions that for China's new generation employees, work-to-life conflict is a key antecedent of work engagement (Wang and Shi 2020) because they tend to value work-life balance more than previous generations (Zhu and Warner 2018).

Second, our study contributes to the work-life literature by revealing the moderation role of managerial support in the relationship between work-to-life conflict and wage engagement. The revelation validates the reasoning that employees' work engagement can be improved when managers offer reasonable work adjustments to balance the needs of both employees and the organization (e.g. Kossek et al. 2011; Yu, Meng, and Zhou 2023). Following the proposition that management's positive intervention can offset the effect of job stressors on job strain (Bakker and Demerouti 2014), our study further clarifies the mechanism in which managerial work-life support is able to alleviate the negative impact of work-to-life conflict on work engagement. This important finding offers a novel pathway to deepen the understanding of management's response towards the tensions between job demands and resources in China where, due to limited formal work-life balance policies (Xiao and Cooke 2012), managers' informal, ad hoc support can be an effective way dealing with the outcomes of work-to-life conflict.

Third, our study advances the work-life literature by proposing and validating a moderated mediated connection between managerial work-life support, work-to-life conflict, work engagement and turnover intention. Such a moderated mediation model was rarely observed by previous investigations which mainly focused on the mechanism that managerial work-life support can mitigate the negative impact of work-life conflict (Agarwala et al. 2014; Hammer et al. 2009). Following the proposition that managerial work-life support can mitigate the negative impact of work-life conflict (Kossek et al. 2011), the current study went further by revealing that managerial work-life support can moderate the mediation effect of work engagement on the relationship between work-to-life conflict and turnover intention. By establishing this moderated mediation model, this study helps advance our understanding of the dynamic process in which managerial support not only attenuates job stressor (e.g. work-to-life conflict), but also reduces employees' turnover intention.

### ***Practical implications***

The findings of this study provide a new way of thinking for organizations and individuals to cope with work-life challenges, in particular for new-generation employees who have emerged as a leading force shaping the social and economic dynamics (Howe and Strauss 2009). While this generation has gradually redefined the way in which employees respond to work-life pressures, organizations need to understand this unique generational change and react appropriately to the expectations and needs of the new generation. Considering that many Chinese companies lack an effective mechanism to manage and empower new-generation employees (Zhao 2018), organizations need to be creative when providing flexible arrangements, additional leave and family-related support to engage with new-generation employees. More specifically, line managers should be aware of and responsive to the new generation's diverse needs, values and concerns by offering both tangible support (e.g. additional financial subsidies) and intangible support (e.g. showing empathy and moral encouragement) (Xiao and Cooke 2012). At the individual level, our findings offer further opportunities for Chinese employees, particularly the new generation, to understand the value of engagement and managerial support at work in mitigating the negative impact of work-life challenges on performance and turnover (Lu and Cooper 2015).

Another practical implication concerns the generational matters observed in our findings. Despite the strong generational features such as self-centred and less cooperative individualism among new generation employees, generational stereotyping should be avoided (Parry and Urwin 2021) because this new generation is also influenced by collectivism and the leader-subordinate Guanxi tradition. Therefore, organizations and managers should maintain a more pragmatic, flexible, and inclusive mindset on the ways of responding to and supporting new generation employees' work-life balance needs.

### ***Limitations and future research directions***

Several limitations have emerged from this study and therefore offer future research opportunities. First, this research is constrained by the cross-sectional design and self-reported measures that may limit casual relationships and external validity, although cross-sectional surveys can help capture the current state of the researched phenomenon

(Aasland et al. 2009) and self-reporting is a commonly used method for measuring work-life constructs that are mainly perceptual variables (Kalliath and Brough 2008). To address this concern, we conducted a pseudo-longitudinal study that collected two-wave data to strengthen the causal relationships between the key variables (Richter, Näswall, and Sverke 2010). We also used an additional latent common method factor in the measurement model to test the impact of common method bias (CMB), showing that the level of CMB is insignificant. Future research will benefit from bigger survey samples from more sectors and geographic locations of China, and multi-source data such as interviews and longitudinal design. The former would offer an in-depth understanding of social and cultural values in shaping the new generation's work-life experience that survey data could not easily capture; the latter will enable the building of longitudinal evidence that can deepen the understanding of contextual changes over time (Parry and Urwin 2021).

Second, our sample size could be bigger, and the sample distribution could avoid being skewed towards those born after the 1990s. As Zhang et al. (2014) suggested, there are subtle differences in work-life values between employees born in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. We did ask participant candidates from all these sub-groups, but the returned samples were mainly skewed to those born after the 1990s. Further research could have a larger sample size and include participants from the other two sub-groups to improve sample's representativeness. In addition, future research needs to include information about participants' job positions and work sectors. Third, this study did not particularly integrate Chinese cultural perspectives, for example *guanxi* and collectivism, into the discussion of the theoretical framework and the measurement of work-life experiences. Incorporating a cultural perspective would be an interesting future research angle because the demands for and experiences of the work-life interface tend to be culturally sensitive (Powell, Francesco, and Ling 2009), and the evolving cultural value in generations at the workplace will have a continuous impact on employees' work-life attitudes and behaviours.

## Conclusion

Drawing on the JD-R model and survey data, we conducted a moderated mediation analysis which reveals that for China's new generation employees, work engagement mediates the positive association between work-to-life conflict and turnover intention, and managerial work-life support can adjust the impact of work-to-life conflict on work engagement and thus indirectly affect turnover intention. The findings offer new empirical evidence about the unique work-life dynamics experienced by new generation employees, adding to the literature on the interplays between job demands, personal and job resources, and work-life outcomes. The study highlights the need for contextualized investigation when conducting work-life research, particularly in non-western environments.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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