The Role of Prevention Focus and Segmentation Preference in the Relationship Between Workplace Anxiety and Work-Life Balance

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Abstract: This study investigates the relationship between workplace anxiety and work-life balance, proposing a motivational pathway through the lens of Regulatory Focus Theory. We argue that workplace anxiety triggers a state-level prevention focus—a vigilant, loss-avoidant regulatory strategy. While adaptive in the short term, this focus creates a mismatch with the flexible demands of managing personal life, thereby depleting energy and harming work-life balance. Furthermore, we hypothesize that this detrimental process is contingent upon managerial boundary preferences. Using a two-wave, time-lagged survey of 329 Chinese employees, results support a moderated mediation model. Workplace anxiety indirectly impairs work-life balance by increasing prevention focus. Crucially, this negative indirect effect is significant only when managers prefer work-life integration, but is buffered when they prefer segmentation. The findings reveal that the erosion of work-life balance by anxiety is a motivated process, which can be mitigated by leadership that fosters clear boundaries.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In today's knowledge-driven environment, where digital access is common and work expectations are high, keeping a healthy work-life balance (WLB) is very important for both workers and companies. But, this balance is being threatened by things that cause stress at work. Workplace anxiety, which involves constant worry about job-related dangers and bad results, drains mental energy (McCarthy et al., 2016). There's lots of research showing that anxiety is linked to poor WLB. But, we still need to understand how this happens and what makes it better or worse. Just looking at the immediate connection isn't enough to guide us, so we need to examine the reasons and situations behind this.

This paper says that Regulatory Focus Theory (Higgins, 1997) is a helpful way to understand this. We think that workplace anxiety hurts WLB not just because of stress, but because it changes how people control themselves. When people are constantly anxious at work, they tend to focus on avoiding mistakes and fulfilling duties. focuses on avoiding mistakes and fulfilling duties. While helpful for dealing with threats, this takes up a lot of energy because it requires people to be constantly alert and unable to relax from work (Lanaj et al., 2012). As a result, workers have less mental energy for

things outside of work, which hurts their WLB. This idea goes beyond simply noting a connection and instead points to a specific reason.

Still, how this change affects people isn't straightforward. Using Regulatory Fit Theory (Higgins, 2000), we also say that the effects of focusing on avoiding mistakes depends on the manager's style. If a manager prefers that workers either mix or separate their work and personal lives, this creates a certain environment for employees. Managers who prefer integration want employees to constantly connect and see the advantages of this, while managers who prefer segmentation want employees to follow rules to avoid problems like burnout (Kark & Van Dijk, 2007). We believe that if an employee who focuses on avoiding mistakes works for a manager who prefers integration, the negative effects on WLB will be stronger because the employee will find it harder to disconnect from work. But, if that employee works for a manager who prefers segmentation, the negative impact will be less because the manager's clear rules will help the employee manage their energy.

Combining these ideas, this study tests a detailed model. We think that the negative effect of workplace anxiety on WLB, which happens because people focus more on avoiding

mistakes, depends on the manager's preference. The whole negative process will be strongest when managers prefer integration and weakest when they prefer segmentation.

By testing this model, this research helps in a few ways. First, it helps us understand how work stress affects WLB by pointing to a key reason why anxiety hurts WLB, instead of just looking at direct connections. Second, it uses Regulatory Focus Theory to understand the connection between work and personal life and shows how a manager's style affects the results. Third, it gives practical advice by identifying how to help (reducing the shift from anxiety to focusing on avoiding mistakes) and what to consider (training managers to understand how their preferences affect employees). Overall, this paper gives a more complete, well-supported story of how workplace stress affects life outside of work and how companies can help.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Regulatory Focus Theory, proposed by the American psychologist E. Tory Higgins in 1997, encompasses concepts drawn from self-discrepancy theory, promotion focus, and prevention focus.

Regulatory focus theory posits that these two focus represent distinct motivational and behavioral strategies people use in pursuing goals, influencing how individuals set goals, face challenges, and respond to success and failure. The two focus differ in several aspects, such as goal-setting, strategy selection, and emotional experience. Individuals with a promotion focus are more concerned with improving their current situation and attaining positive outcomes. When facing challenges, they tend to adopt proactive problem-solving strategies, view failure as an opportunity for learning and improvement, and feel strong satisfaction and pride upon success. In contrast, individuals with a prevention focus are more concerned with safety and avoiding losses. When confronted with challenges, they may adopt defensive strategies, feel anxiety and self-blame when failing, and experience relief or pleasant surprise when succeeding.

Individuals chronically or situationally adopt one of two primary regulatory focus (Higgins, 1997):

- A promotion focus is concerned with ideals, accomplishments, and the pursuit of gains. It is characterized by eagerness and a sensitivity to the presence or absence of positive outcomes.
- A prevention focus is concerned with duties, obligations, safety, and the avoidance of losses. It is characterized by vigilance and a sensitivity to the presence or absence of negative outcomes.

Critically, these focus are not confined to the workplace. Research demonstrates that regulatory focus shapes behavior, cognition, and affect across life domains (Lanaj, Chang, & Johnson, 2012; Gorman et al., 2012). A prevention-focused individual, for example, is motivated to avoid failures and fulfill responsibilities as a worker, a partner, and a parent. This cross-domain application of a regulatory strategy is central to our model.

III. HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Based on this theoretical framework, we propose the following five hypotheses.

A. The initial pathway: workplace anxiety and prevention focus

Regulatory fit theory posits that individuals experience heightened motivational intensity when their regulatory orientation aligns with the strategic means demanded by their environment. A prevention focus is fundamentally concerned with fulfilling duties, avoiding losses, and maintaining safety—a constellation of goals activated by the presence of threat (Higgins, 1997). Workplace anxiety, arising from perceptions of job insecurity, fear of negative evaluation, or overwhelming responsibilities, signals a high-stakes environment where errors have costly consequences (Mccarthy, Trougakos, & Cheng, 2016). This anxious state creates a powerful situational demand for vigilant, cautious, and avoidance-focused strategies—the very strategic means that define a prevention focus (Lanaj, Chang, & Johnson, 2012).

Empirical evidence supports this alignment. Research by Brockner and Higgins (2001) demonstrated that negative affect and anxiety are more closely associated with a prevention focus, as this orientation is geared toward resolving such states by addressing threats. While individuals may exhibit varying chronic regulatory profiles (Chen, Wen, & Ye, 2017), situational cues like anxiety can temporarily dominate and intensify a state-level prevention focus, even for those with a mixed or promotion-leaning chronic disposition. Similarly, workplace studies indicate that stressors which highlight potential loss (e.g., performance pressure, role ambiguity) shift employees' cognitive and behavioral patterns toward risk aversion and error prevention, hallmarks of a prevention-focused state (Wallace & Chen, 2006). This occurs because adopting a prevention focus in an anxiety-provoking context provides a form of functional regulatory fit. The employee's regulatory approach (prevention) fits the strategic imperative of the situation (avoid losses), thereby intensifying engagement with that regulatory mindset, even if it is stressful (Higgins, 2006).

Therefore, we do not merely posit a correlation between two negative states. Instead, we argue that workplace anxiety constitutes an environmental cue that makes prevention-focused self-regulation the most subjectively "fitting" and functionally relevant mode of engagement. The anxious context increases the salience of security and obligation goals, prompting employees to adopt the regulatory toolkit designed to meet those goals. This adaptive process results in a stronger, more pronounced state prevention focus. Thus, we hypothesize:

H1: Workplace anxiety is positively related to prevention focus.

B. The Core Detrimental Effect: Prevention Focus and Work -Life Balance

Juggling work and personal life well involves skillfully managing different duties to lessen conflict and boost satisfaction in both areas (Greenhaus &Allen, 2011). Yet, individuals who are keen on avoiding issues often spot duties and possible setbacks everywhere. This makes it tough for them to disconnect from work, as they're always checking for uncompleted jobs or mistakes in their lives (Sonnentag, 2012). This ongoing worry about work-related problems spills over into their free time, stopping them from relaxing and investing energy in family and hobbies (ten Brummelhuis &Bakker, 2012).

Regulatory fit theory posits that when a person's method fits the task, they feel more engaged and value it more (Higgins, 2006). The reverse holds true too: a mismatch cuts their well-being. Getting work-life balance needs flexibility, mixing good experiences, and being open to growth in all life areas (Chen, Wen &Ye, 2017). A prevention focus, with its tight focus on duty and avoidance, doesn't suit these needs well. This mismatch means that the methods people use to handle duties (like constant checks or over-preparing) actually make it tougher to get balance. This shifts carefulness into a source of conflict and drains their energy (Lanaj, Chang &Johnson, 2012).

We think a prevention focus isn't just tied to poor balance but harms it through a cycle of mismatch. The tools that prevention-focused people pick aren't suited for the tasks of mixing and bettering different life areas, which results in less energy and more conflict.

So, our idea is: H2: A prevention focus is negatively tied to work-life balance.

C. The mediating mechanism

Regulatory fit theory posits that situations influence outcomes by shaping how individuals regulate themselves, guiding aim pursuit across different contexts (Higgins, 2005). As stated in H1, workplace anxiety, signaling danger and potential loss, pushes individuals toward a prevention focus, aligning with the need to manage a risky setting (Brockner & Higgins, 2001). This focus is an active state marked by vigilance and a sense of obligation (Lanaj et al., 2012).

This prevention-focused state then yields negative effects outside work, as explained in H2. Individuals in a prevention mode may use cautious, loss-avoiding strategies to deal with the boundary between work and personal life. This shift from fitting the situation to misfit across areas is crucial. While a prevention focus may suit workplace threats, it poses a problem for work-life balance achievement, needing flexibility and a focus on gains instead of losses (Chen et al., 2017). Workers focused on prevention, unable to let go of work's demands, keep dwelling on issues and can't fully disconnect mentally (Sonnentag, 2012), carrying work anxiety's stress into their home lives.

Studies linking stress to regulatory focus and well-being support this motivational path. Research shows that job stressors cause prevention-focused coping, predicting higher work-family conflict and lower life satisfaction (Wallace & Chen, 2006; Zhang, Zhang, Ng &Lam, 2019). This aligns with regulatory fit, stating that how people engage affects results in related areas. Specifically, Zhang et al. (2019) that regulatory focus acts as a factor in how views of work turn into work-family outcomes, while Wallace and Chen (2006) found that a prevention focus links work stressors to strain related to performance. Anxiety itself doesn't directly cross over; it changes self-regulation, leading to a problem-avoiding, obligation-meeting mindset that hinders boundary management.

Thus, we think that: H3: Prevention focus affects the negative between work anxiety and work-life balance.

D. Boundary Condition: Management Preference for Segmentation

When managers favor segmentation, they set up firm divides between work and home. This setup really helps people who are driven by a sense of duty and avoiding mistakes. Segmentation lets these workers focus on their job while they're at work because they know their personal lives are separate. This balance keeps them from worrying too much and lets them relax, as Kreiner noted in 2006. This setup makes their work style feel better and less tiring, which softens the connection between a prevention focus and a bad work-life balance.

On the other hand, when managers like integration, the lines get blurry, and people feel like they always need to be on call. This can feel wrong for someone who's prevention-focused. Integration turns their whole life into one big area of possible duties and problems. Their constant watchfulness never turns off; work worries can pop up anytime, and personal responsibilities cut into work time. This friction adds to the stress of a prevention focus, as Higgins pointed out in 2006, because they're trying to use a focused approach in a world without limits. As a result, prevention focus hurts work-life balance even more.

Studies back the idea that managing boundaries can change stress levels. Even though it's not always tested with regulatory focus, research shows that integration makes work stress worse, while boundary control can ease it, as seen in Park, Fritz, & Jex's 2011 study. Our idea uses regulatory fit theory to guess that this easing effect will be strongest for prevention-focused workers when managers prefer segmentation because it fits what they need.

Thus, we hypothesize:

H4: Management preference for segmentation versus integration moderates the negative relationship between prevention focus and work-life balance. The relationship is weaker (less negative) under segmentation preference (high fit) and stronger (more negative) under integration preference (high misfit).

H5: Integrating H3 and H4, we propose a first-stage moderated mediation model. This hypothesis extends the regulatory fit logic to the entire indirect pathway. The indirect effect of workplace anxiety on work-life balance via

prevention focus is not universal; its strength is contingent on the same contextual fit established by management's boundary preference.
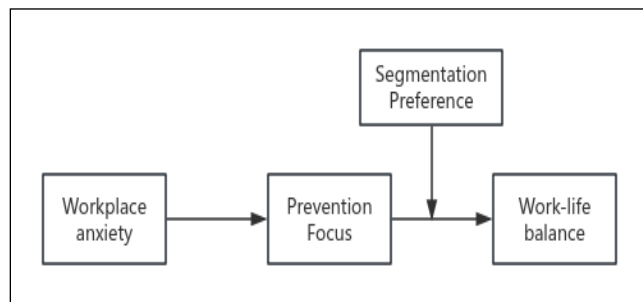

Fig 1 Research Model

IV. RESULTS

A. Measurement

➢ *Work-Family Balance Scale*

This study adopted the Work-Family Balance Scale developed by Brough (2014), consisting of 4 items. All variables were measured using a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 represents "Strongly Disagree" and 5 represents "Strongly Agree" (Cronbach's α 0.818).

➢ *Workplace Anxiety Scale*

This study adopted the Workplace Anxiety Scale developed by McCarthy et al. (2016), consisting of 4 items. All variables were measured using a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 represents "Strongly Disagree" and 5 represents "Strongly Agree"(Cronbach's α 0.893)

➢ *Defensive Work Focus Scale*

This study adopted the Defensive Work Focus Scale developed by Wallace et al. (2009), consisting of 6 items. All variables were measured using a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 represents "Never" and 5 represents "Always"(Cronbach's α 0.884).

➢ *Segmentation Preference Scale*

This study adopted the Segmentation Preference Scale developed by Kreiner et al. (2006), consisting of 4 items. All variables were measured using a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 represents "Never" and 5 represents "Always" (Cronbach's α 0.884).

Control variables are gender, age, education level, marital status, number of children and tenure.

B. Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis was used to examine the factor structure and verify the proposed theoretical model. The four-factor model, treating workplace anxiety, defensive work focus, work-life balance, and segmentation preference as four distinct latent variables, demonstrated the most optimal model fit: χ^2/df = 1.346, NFI = 0.925, IFI = 0.980, TLI = 0.977, CFI = 0.979, RMSEA = 0.032. All indices met or exceeded recommended thresholds, indicating an excellent goodness-of-fit for the four-factor structure. The results are presented in table 2.

To evaluate potential common method variance, we conducted Harman's single-factor test. A total of 4 common factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 were extracted. The variance explained by the first common factor was 26.794%, which did not exceed the empirical threshold of 40%. This result indicates that no single factor accounted for the majority of variance in the sample data, suggesting the absence of significant common method bias in the measurement results of this study.

C. Population and Sample

The target population for this study comprised full-time employees working in organizations within the dynamic and often high-pressure environments of the manufacturing and service industries in China. These sectors were selected due to their significant economic footprint and their well-documented prevalence of workplace stressors (production deadlines, quality control pressures, and direct customer interactions) which are conducive to the experience of workplace anxiety central to our model .

To strengthen causal inference and mitigate the risk of common method bias, a two-wave, time-lagged survey design was employed (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012). At Time 1, participants completed measures of workplace anxiety, prevention focus, and demographic variables. Approximately one week later (Time 2), the same participants were contacted again to report on their perceived work-life balance and their management's preference for segmentation versus integration.

Data were collected via a structured online questionnaire distributed through professional networks and industry associations. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. A total of 329 usable responses were obtained, meeting the minimum sample size requirement for conducting complex statistical analyses, including moderated mediation (Fritz & MacKinnon, 2007). Key demographic characteristics of the final sample are presented in Table 1.

D. Hypotheisis Testing

The means, standard deviations, and correlations among the key variables are presented in Table 3. The correlation matrix provides preliminary support for the hypothesized relationships. As predicted, workplace anxiety (WA) showed a significant positive correlation with prevention focus (r = 0.128, p < 0.05). Furthermore, prevention focus was significantly and negatively correlated with work-life balance (WLB) (r = -0.227, p < 0.01). The significant negative correlation between workplace anxiety and work-life balance (r = -0.300, p < 0.01) established the foundational relationship for the proposed mediation model. These initial bivariate correlations align with the proposed theoretical framework and justify proceeding with formal hypothesis testing via regression analysis.

Table 4 presents the test results for the mediating effect of prevention focus on the relationship between workplace anxiety and work-life balance, while controlling for variables such as gender, age, education level, marital status, number of children, and tenure.

In the direct effect model without the mediator (first column), workplace anxiety had a significant negative impact on work-life balance (β = -0.182, p < 0.01). This indicates that after controlling for demographic and occupational characteristics, higher levels of workplace anxiety are associated with lower levels of work-life balance.

In the mediator model (second column), workplace anxiety had a significant positive effect on prevention focus (β = 0.112, p < 0.05). This suggests that workplace anxiety significantly strengthens an individual's tendency toward a prevention focus, providing support for Hypothesis 1 (H1).

In the full model (third column), which includes both workplace anxiety and prevention focus, prevention focus continued to exhibit a significant negative impact on work-life balance (β = -0.126, p < 0.01), supporting Hypothesis 2 (H2). At the same time, the direct effect of workplace anxiety on work-life balance remained significant, though its coefficient decreased (from -0.182 to -0.168).

In summary, these results demonstrate that prevention focus plays a partial mediating role in the relationship between workplace anxiety and work-life balance. Specifically, workplace anxiety not only directly impairs work-life balance but also indirectly reduces it by reinforcing a prevention focus. Thus, Hypothesis 3 (H3) is supported.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics

Name	Option	Frequency	Percentage(%)
Gender	0	138	41.95%
	1	191	58.05%
Age	Under 25 years old	132	40.12%
	26-40 years old	158	48.02%
	41-51 years old	23	6.99%
	Over 51years old	16	4.86%
Education	Associate degree or below	36	10.94%
	Bachelor	244	74.16%
	Master degree or above	49	14.89%
Number of children	0	112	34.04%
	1	214	65.05%
	2	3	0.91%
Industry	Manufacturing	181	55.02%
	Service	148	44.98%
Marital status	0	110	33.23%
	1	218	65.86%
	2	3	0.91%

Table 2 Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) and Discriminant Validity

Model	CMMIN/df	NFI	IFI	TLI	CFI	RMSEA
4 factor	1.346	0.925	0.980	0.977	0.979	0.032
3 factor	6.067	0.658	0.697	0.658	0.695	0.124
2 factor	7.896	0.551	0.584	0.535	0.581	0.145
Single factor	11.080	0.367	0.389	0.320	0.385	0.175

Table 3 Correlation Analysis

	Gender	Age	Edu	Marri	Child	teture	WA	Preve	WLB	SP
Gender	1									
Age	-0.068	1								
Edu	0.005	-0.076	1							
Marri	-0.015	0.555**	-0.013	1						
Child	0.015	-0.459**	-0.002	-0.689**	1					
teture	-0.067	0.696**	-0.016	0.443**	-0.410**	1				
WA	-0.053	-0.065	-0.169**	-0.221**	0.259**	-0.029	1			
Preve	0.079	-0.001	-0.073	-0.035	0.050	-0.024	0.128*	1		

WLB	-0.040	0.058	0.011	0.125*	-0.175**	0.120*	-0.300**	-0.227**	1	
SP	0.063	-0.056	-0.018	-0.166**	0.134*	-0.075	0.134*	0.453**	0.035	1

* p<0.05 ** p<0.01
Edu= education, Marri= marital status, Child= number of children, WA= workplace anxiety, Preve= prevention focus, WLB= work-life balance, SP= segmentation preference

Table 4 Test Results for the Mediating Effect of Prevention Focus

	WLB	Preve	WLB
Constant	4.965** (20.730)	3.551** (9.544)	5.412** (20.301)
Gender	-0.065 (-0.979)	0.160 (1.549)	-0.045 (-0.686)
Age	-0.009 (-1.358)	0.006 (0.564)	-0.009 (-1.270)
Edu	-0.050 (-0.819)	-0.084 (-0.896)	-0.060 (-1.011)
Marri	-0.016 (-0.159)	-0.004 (-0.026)	-0.017 (-0.167)
Child	-0.122 (-1.293)	0.040 (0.271)	-0.117 (-1.262)
teture	0.021* (1.996)	-0.008 (-0.502)	0.020 (1.932)
WA	-0.182** (-5.211)	0.112* (2.056)	-0.168** (-4.864)
Preve			-0.126** (-3.562)
Sample size	329	329	329
R 2	0.115	0.028	0.149
Adjusted R 2	0.096	0.007	0.128
F value	F (7,321)=5.975,p=0.000	F (7,321)=1.313,p=0.243	F (8,320)=7.005,p=0.000

* p<0.05 ** p<0.01 t-values are in parentheses.
Edu= education, Marri= marital status, Child= number of children, WA= workplace anxiety, Preve= prevention focus, WLB= work-life balance, SP= segmentation preference

Table 5 presents the test results for the moderating effect of segmentation preference on the relationship between prevention focus and work-life balance, while controlling for variables such as gender, age, education level, marital status, number of children, and tenure.

Model 1 introduced only prevention focus as the independent variable. The results showed that prevention focus had a significant negative effect on work-life balance (β = -0.145, $p < 0.01$), indicating that after controlling for relevant background variables, higher levels of prevention focus are associated with lower levels of work-life balance.

Model 2 added segmentation preference to Model 1. The results revealed that segmentation preference had a significant positive effect on work-life balance (β = 0.126, $p < 0.01$), while the negative effect of prevention focus remained significant.

Model 3 further introduced the interaction term between prevention focus and segmentation preference. The results showed that the coefficient for the interaction term was significant and positive (β = 0.200, $p < 0.01$), indicating that segmentation preference significantly moderates the relationship between prevention focus and work-life balance.

Specifically, as an individual's level of segmentation preference increases, the negative impact of prevention focus on work-life balance is significantly weakened. In other words, segmentation preference plays a buffering role in this relationship. This result validates Hypothesis H4, suggesting that while prevention focus is generally detrimental to work-life balance, for individuals with higher segmentation preference, this adverse effect is mitigated to some extent.

Figure 2 shows the results of simple slope analysis for the relationship between prevention focus and work-life balance at different levels of segmentation preference. The results indicate that under conditions of low segmentation preference, as the level of prevention focus increases, work-life balance shows a slight upward trend, and the relationship between the two is relatively flat. In contrast, under conditions of high segmentation preference, there is a clear negative relationship between prevention focus and work-life balance; that is, the higher the level of prevention focus, the lower the level of work-life balance. A comparison of the two slopes reveals that the slope under high segmentation

preference is significantly steeper than that under low segmentation preference, demonstrating that segmentation preference significantly moderates both the direction and strength of the effect of prevention focus on work-life balance.

This result further indicates that segmentation preference plays a crucial contextual moderating role in the relationship between prevention focus and work-life balance, providing intuitive graphical support for Hypothesis H4.

Table 5 Test Results for the Moderating Effect of Segmentation Preference

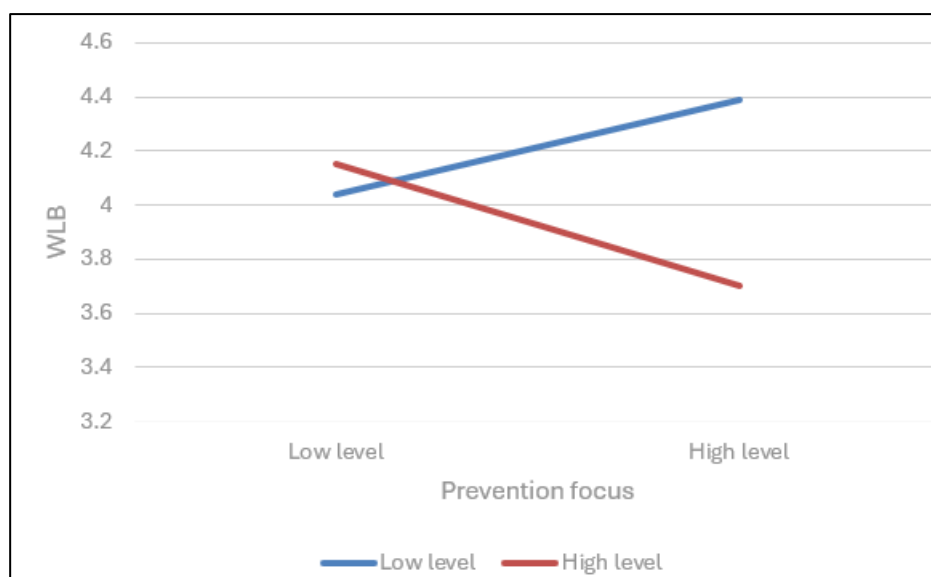|	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant	4.437** (19.942)	4.448** (20.337)	4.442** (21.399)
Gender	-0.025 (-0.374)	-0.032 (-0.487)	-0.012 (-0.190)
Age	-0.009 (-1.294)	-0.010 (-1.481)	-0.010 (-1.595)
Edu	-0.012 (-0.199)	-0.016 (-0.269)	-0.041 (-0.730)
Marri	0.027 (0.260)	0.070 (0.684)	0.014 (0.144)
Child	-0.191* (-2.016)	-0.196* (-2.108)	-0.234** (-2.643)
teture	0.016 (1.526)	0.017 (1.628)	0.017 (1.699)
Preve	-0.145** (-4.005)	-0.208** (-5.208)	-0.027 (-0.558)
SP		0.126** (3.488)	0.161** (4.638)
Preve*SP			0.200** (6.028)
Sample size	329	329	329
R 2	0.086	0.120	0.210
Adjusted R 2	0.066	0.098	0.187
F value	F (7,321)=4.320,p=0.000	F (8,320)=5.432,p=0.000	F (9,319)=9.399,p=0.000
ΔR 2	0.086	0.033	0.090
ΔF value	F (7,321)=4.320,p=0.000	F (1,320)=12.164,p=0.001	F (1,319)=36.333,p=0.000
* p<0.05 ** p<0.01 t-values are in parentheses. Edu= education, Marri= marital status, Child= number of children, WA= workplace anxiety, Preve= prevention focus, WLB= work-life balance, SP= segmentation preference			

Fig 2 Simple Slope Analysis

To examine the indirect effect of workplace anxiety on work-life balance through prevention focus and its potential moderation, a moderated mediation analysis was conducted using the Bootstrap resampling method. Specifically, Model 14 from the PROCESS macro was employed, with the number of Bootstrap samples set to 5,000 to construct 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals (CIs). An indirect or moderated mediation effect is considered statistically significant if its Bootstrap confidence interval does not contain zero.

Table 6 reports the conditional indirect effects of workplace anxiety on work-life balance via prevention focus at different levels of segmentation preference.

➢ *Under Low Segmentation Preference (SP = 2.25):*
The analysis revealed a significant negative indirect effect (Effect = -0.0335, 95% Bootstrap CI [-0.0647, -0.0067]). This indicates that in contexts characterized by a **low preference for segmentation (i.e., a high tendency for work-life integration), workplace anxiety is more likely to intensify an individual's prevention focus, which subsequently leads to a significant decrease in their work-life balance.

➢ *Under Moderate (SP = 4.00) and High (SP = 4.50) Segmentation Preference:*
In contrast, under both moderate and high levels of segmentation preference, the aforementioned indirect effects were not statistically significant, as their respective Bootstrap confidence intervals both included zero.

Table 7 further reports the test result for the index of moderated mediation. The index value for segmentation preference is 0.0189, and its 95% Bootstrap confidence interval is [0.0032, 0.0451], which does not include zero. This indicates that the moderated mediation effect is statistically significant. In other words, an individual's segmentation preference significantly moderates the strength of the indirect effect by which workplace anxiety influences work-life balance through prevention focus.

Taken together with the conditional indirect effects reported in Table 6, the results demonstrate a clear pattern: Higher levels of segmentation preference weaken the negative indirect effect of workplace anxiety on work-life balance via prevention focus. Conversely, in contexts of low segmentation preference (i.e., high integration tendency), this negative indirect effect is stronger and statistically significant.

These findings robustly support Hypothesis H5, confirming that segmentation preference serves as a crucial boundary condition that buffers the harmful indirect pathway from workplace anxiety to impaired work-life balance.

Table 6 Conditional Indirect Effects of Workplace Anxiety on Work-Life Balance via Prevention Focus at Different Levels of Segmentation Preference

Level of segmentation preference	Conditional indirect effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Low （16th percentile，SP=2.25）	−0.0335	0.0145	−0.0647	−0.0067
Moderate （50th percentile，SP=4.00）	−0.0004	0.0118	−0.0172	0.0311
High （84th percentile，SP=4.50）	0.009	0.0157	−0.0095	0.0518

Table 7 Index of Moderated Mediation Test Result

Moderator	Index	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI	Conclusion
Segmentation preference	0.0189	0.0107	0.0032	0.0451	Significant

This study aimed to investigate the mechanisms and boundary conditions linking workplace anxiety to employees' work-life balance. Grounded in regulatory focus theory, we proposed and tested a moderated mediation model. The findings confirm that prevention focus serves as a mediating mechanism, while segmentation preference acts as a critical boundary condition that buffers both the direct and indirect detrimental effects.

V. THEORETICAL IMPLICATION

This study makes contributions in a few key areas. First, it extends Regulatory Focus Theory (RFT) to the intersection of work and personal life. RFT has been used to study performance and decision-making, but its ability to explain well-being outcomes, such as work-life balance, has not been examined as much. By using prevention focus as a way to connect workplace emotions to how people handle different parts of their lives, we show how RFT can explain how work-related psychology impacts personal life. By using RFT's core principles with its Regulatory Fit extension, we offer a model that explains how a regulatory focus is activated in certain situations and how the context affects the results.

Second, we connect research on stress, motivation, and leadership. The model goes beyond seeing work-life conflict as just a result of job demands or time pressure. It places the issue within a motivational context, showing that the specific regulatory strategy (prevention focus) caused by anxiety is what causes harm. At the same time, we respond to requests for more specific models of how leadership affects work-life dynamics. We pinpoint a specific managerial behavior,

establishing a segmentation versus integration environment, as a key factor that affects the situation.

Third, this research improves our understanding of prevention focus in real-world situations. Our results suggest that prevention focus is not just a stable trait but also a changing state that is sensitive to threats in the environment. This is in line with the regulatory coping idea (Zhang et al., 2019) and implies that efforts to reduce threatening work conditions could lessen the consistent activation of a damaging prevention approach.

VI. PRACTICAL IMPLICATION

These results give practical advice for groups that want to protect how their employees feel and their work-life balance.

➤ Train and grow managers: Groups should train managers to know how strong their choices about handling boundaries are on how their team feels. Leaders should understand that a never-ending always-on way of mixing work and life, while sometimes meant to show dedication, can hurt employees who tend to worry and focus on avoiding problems. Training should give managers the skills to create and honor team-level rules about separating work and life. This includes setting clear rules for talking after work, showing respect for boundaries, and discouraging a culture of always being there, mainly in demanding jobs.

➤ Lessen worry and stress: Because worry at work starts the harmful motivation process, groups must actively deal with what causes it (like unclear roles, punishing mistake cultures, and too much work). Steps like stress management training, workshops to clarify roles, and encouraging supportive feedback can lower what starts the focus on avoiding problems.

➤ Give personal support and resources: HR actions could be changed based on what the job is like. For jobs that are naturally high in threat and uncertainty (like following rules or managing very important clients), which are likely to start a focus on avoiding problems, it's especially important to assign managers who can create clear team settings that separate work and life. Programs to help employees could also have parts that help people spot when they are too focused on avoiding problems and create plans to mentally disconnect.

VII. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This work offers valuable insights, but some limitations suggest areas for future studies. First, the design limits how we can draw firm conclusions about cause and effect. Even if our model is based on solid theory, studies over time or experiments are needed to confirm the cause-and-effect relationship. A diary study, for example, could follow daily variations in anxiety, state prevention focus, and boundary violations to capture the dynamic process.

Second, while we looked at the supervisor as the source of the boundary management climate, future studies should consider a broader view. Factors like organizational culture, national culture, and family needs could also play a role in this model. For instance, does a strong organizational segmentation policy strengthen or weaken the influence of a manager's integration preference?

Third, we concentrated only on the prevention-focused path. Later studies should examine the possible role of promotion focus. Does workplace anxiety also suppress promotion focus? Could a strong promotion focus, perhaps in an integrative environment, be linked to better work-life balance through a sense of fulfillment and gains across domains? Looking at both regulatory focus would give a more complete view.

Finally, the data are self-reported, which raises the chance of common method bias. But the clear interaction effect is less subject to this bias, and our measures are well-validated. Future studies could gain from data from many sources, like getting peer or supervisor ratings of an employee's work-life balance.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that the erosion of work-life balance by workplace anxiety is a motivated process, channeled through the activation of a prevention-focused regulatory state. Crucially, this process is not a foregone conclusion; it is powerfully moderated by managerial behavior. A manager's preference for segmentation can act as a protective shield, buffering employees from the full depleting force of their own anxiety-induced vigilance. These findings offer a hopeful message for organizations: by cultivating leadership that values and enforces healthy boundaries, they can disrupt a key pathway through which workplace stress invades and diminishes personal life. In doing so, they can foster not only greater employee well-being but also a more sustainable and humane workplace.

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