



Workforce flexibility and employee satisfaction: A conceptual framework integrating Job Demands–Resources, Self-Determination and Work–Family Border Theory

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Abstract

Workforce flexibility – discretion over when, where, and how work is performed – has become a central rather than peripheral determinant of the employment relationship, accelerated by post-pandemic hybrid-work norms. Yet the literature linking flexibility to employee satisfaction is theoretically fragmented: autonomy-, resource-, and boundary-based explanations are each tested in isolation, and a growing critical literature documents a “flexibility paradox” in which flexibility produces self-exploitation and diminished thriving rather than satisfaction. This conceptual paper integrates Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) theory, Self-Determination Theory (SDT), and Work/Family Border Theory into a single moderated-mediation framework in which workforce flexibility influences employee satisfaction through three parallel mechanisms – perceived autonomy, job resource adequacy, and work-nonwork boundary congruence – while flexibility stigma and supervisor support act as boundary conditions determining whether flexibility is enabling or exploitative. Drawing on a thematic synthesis of the literature and a structured gap analysis, the paper develops seven theory-derived propositions and an empirical validation agenda using PLS-SEM. It contributes theoretically by reframing contradictory flexibility-satisfaction findings as a moderated-mediation phenomenon rather than an empirical inconsistency, and practically by identifying the organisational conditions under which flexibility policies succeed or backfire.

Keywords: Workforce flexibility, employee satisfaction, Job Demands-Resources Theory, Self-Determination Theory, Work-Family Border Theory, flexibility paradox

Introduction

Work has undergone a structural shift toward flexibility in when, where, and how it is performed. Gallup's State of the Global Workplace: 2026^[11] Report finds global engagement at only 20% despite flexible/hybrid arrangements becoming the modal working pattern (Gallup, 2026), and its 2026^[11] Hybrid Work Indicator shows 52% of US remote-capable employees now work hybrid, 26–27% fully remote, and only 21–22% fully on-site – a near-total reversal of the pre-pandemic norm. The ILO's global study of working time finds over a third of workers regularly exceed 48 hours weekly, underscoring the uneven temporal control flexibility is meant to address (ILO, 2023)^[14]. Pew data show 46% of employees in remote-capable jobs would likely leave if remote options were withdrawn (cited in OfficeRnD, 2026), yet Gallup (2025)^[10] documents a “remote-work paradox”: fully remote employees report the highest engagement of any group but also lower “thriving” and higher loneliness than hybrid peers.

Academic interest has grown accordingly. Recent structural-equation studies report significant positive links between flexible work arrangements (FWAs) and job satisfaction, typically mediated by work-life balance (Indradewa & Prasetyo, 2023)^[14], reduced job stress (Gašić *et al.*, 2025), or supervisor support (Yadav & Sharma, 2023)^[19], and are variously explained via Self-Determination Theory (Deci, Olafsen, & Ryan, 2017)^[9], Job Demands–Resources theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017)^[5], or Work/Family Border Theory (Clark, 2000)^[8]. Yet closer reading reveals three limitations. First, flexibility is usually treated as a single undifferentiated variable, despite Atkinson's (1984)^[3]

foundational distinction between functional, numerical, and financial flexibility and Avgoustaki and Cañibano's (2024)^[4] distinction between formal and informal flexibility ideals. Second, mechanism studies test one mediator at a time, leaving unclear whether autonomy, resource adequacy, and boundary management are redundant or complementary explanations. Third, and most importantly, Chung's (2022)^[7] cross-national “flexibility paradox” evidence shows flexible working frequently produces self-exploitation and gendered penalties – directly contradicting the largely positive OB/HRM picture, with no shared model reconciling the two.

This is a genuine theoretical problem, not a shortage of studies: the field lacks an architecture explaining why the same construct – discretion over work – produces both the positive outcomes SDT/JD-R studies report and the exploitative outcomes the paradox literature documents. No single theory resolves this alone: SDT explains autonomy-driven benefits but not the cultural conditions under which nominal flexibility fails to produce felt autonomy; JD-R theory explains resource-buffering but not boundary-blurring costs; Border Theory explains boundary fit but not psychological need-satisfaction or resource dynamics. This paper addresses the gap by integrating all three theories into one framework in which flexibility's effect on satisfaction is carried through three parallel mechanisms, moderated by flexibility stigma (weakening) and supervisor support (strengthening) – reframing the field's contradiction as a boundary-condition problem rather than an empirical dispute.

Research Objectives

Objective	Statement
RO1	Critically synthesise the fragmented literature on workforce flexibility and satisfaction into coherent themes and identify unresolved contradictions.
RO2	Integrate JD-R theory, SDT, and Border Theory into one framework specifying the mechanisms linking flexibility to satisfaction.
RO3	Theorise the boundary conditions (flexibility stigma; supervisor support) under which this relationship strengthens, weakens, or reverses.
RO4	Develop theory-derived propositions and a PLS-SEM-based empirical validation agenda.

Thematic Literature Synthesis

Rather than an author-by-author review, six themes are synthesised critically.

1. Conceptualising workforce flexibility.

Atkinson's (1984) ^[3] flexible-firm model originated flexibility as an organisation-centric construct (functional, numerical, financial). Contemporary OB research reorients it toward employee-experienced control – temporal, locational, and functional/task flexibility – with Avgoustaki and Cañibano (2024) ^[4] further distinguishing formal (policy) from informal (individually negotiated) flexibility, which produce divergent wellbeing effects. The strategic-HRM (Atkinson) and OB/autonomy traditions remain largely unintegrated.

2. Employee satisfaction as outcome.

Following Locke (1976) ^[16], satisfaction is the positive affective-evaluative state from job appraisal, with intrinsic and extrinsic facets; Hackman and Oldham's (1976) ^[13] job characteristics model links autonomy directly to satisfaction. Most flexibility studies measure satisfaction globally rather than at the facet level, risking masked trade-offs (e.g., rising autonomy satisfaction alongside falling boundary satisfaction).

3. Autonomy/SDT mechanism.

SDT holds that satisfying autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs drives wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Deci, Olafsen & Ryan, 2017) ^[9, 18]. Applied studies find flexibility valued precisely for conferring “structured autonomy” (Andrade, Westover & Cunningham, 2023) ^[1]. This is among the best-established mechanisms but is rarely tested alongside resource- or boundary-based explanations.

4. Resource-based (JD-R) mechanism.

JD-R theory treats flexibility as a job resource that buffers demands and fuels engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) ^[5]; Bakker, Demerouti & Sanz-Vergel, 2023) ^[6]. Applied evidence links FWAs to reduced job stress via satisfaction (Gašić *et al.*, 2025), yet the demand × resource interaction central to JD-R theory – flexibility failing to buffer strain under very high demands – is rarely tested in flexibility-specific studies.

5. Boundary management mechanism.

Work/Family Border Theory (Clark, 2000) ^[8] and Boundary Theory (Ashforth, Kreiner & Fugate, 2000) ^[2] hold that wellbeing depends on fit between an individual's segmentation/integration preference and their actual boundary context, not on flexibility per se. Recent dyadic

evidence finds FWA availability shapes satisfaction with work-life flexibility in gendered, asymmetric ways across partners – foreshadowing the paradox literature below.

6. The flexibility paradox.

Chung's (2022) ^[7] cross-national study (30 European countries plus comparative US/Australia/China/India evidence) finds flexible working frequently produces self-exploitation and gendered penalties because flexibility is granted within cultures still valorising visible “ideal worker” behaviour (“flexibility stigma”). This is corroborated by Gallup's (2025) ^[10] remote-work paradox. This theme is largely disconnected from the positive-mechanism literature in Themes 3–5 – the central inconsistency this paper addresses.

Synthesis: the literature agrees flexibility is multidimensional and that autonomy, resource adequacy, and boundary congruence each carry independent support, but diverges sharply on whether these mechanisms reliably operate positively or are systematically undermined by culture and stigma. No study models both simultaneously – the task taken up next.

Theoretical Foundation and Integration

Four theories anchor the framework. JD-R theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) ^[5] explains job resource adequacy but is flexibility-agnostic and omits boundary-blurring costs; this paper specifies flexibility as a resource and reserves JD-R's buffering logic for demand-intensity boundary conditions. SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Deci, Olafsen & Ryan, 2017) ^[9, 18] explains autonomy/need-satisfaction but not why nominal discretion sometimes fails to produce felt autonomy; this paper links SDT's need-satisfaction logic to the flexibility-stigma moderator. Work/Family Border Theory (Clark, 2000 ^[8]; Ashforth, Kreiner & Fugate, 2000) ^[2] explains boundary fit but omits motivational and resource dynamics; this paper repositions boundary congruence as a formal mediator rather than a terminal outcome. Atkinson's (1984) ^[3] flexible-firm model anchors the multidimensional IV definitionally rather than predicting satisfaction directly. Integration is justified because each theory operates at a different level (individual need, job design, work-nonwork interface) with no redundancy, and because the field's central contradiction – positive main effects versus paradox findings – requires simultaneously modelling parallel positive mechanisms and a cultural moderator, which no single theory supplies alone.

Theory	Key Source(s)	Core Constructs	Role in Framework
JD-R Theory	Bakker & Demerouti (2017); Bakker <i>et al.</i> (2023) ^[5, 6]	Demands, resources, strain, engagement	Grounds job resource adequacy mediator
Self-Determination Theory	Ryan & Deci (2000); Deci <i>et al.</i> (2017) ^[9, 18]	Autonomy, competence, relatedness	Grounds perceived-autonomy mediator
Border/Boundary Theory	Clark (2000); Ashforth <i>et al.</i> (2000) ^[2, 8]	Border permeability; segmentation-integration fit	Grounds boundary-congruence mediator
Atkinson's Flexible-Firm Model	Atkinson (1984) ^[3]	Functional/numerical/financial flexibility	Anchors IV definition

4. Conceptual and Research Gap Analysis

Table 1: synthesises the studies most directly relevant to the framework; “NR” indicates a detail not reported/applicable in the source.

Author/Year	Context	Theory	Major Findings	Limitation/Gap	Relevance
Atkinson (1984) ^[3]	UK firms	Flexible-firm model	FWA → satisfaction	Organisation-centric; no employee outcome	Anchors IV taxonomy
Clark (2000); Ashforth <i>et al.</i> (2000) ^[2, 8]	Conceptual	Border/Boundary theory	No need-satisfaction link	Not integrated with motivation theory	Grounds boundary mediator
Ryan & Deci (2000); Deci <i>et al.</i> (2017) ^[9, 18]	Conceptual/review	SDT	Need satisfaction → wellbeing	Not flexibility-specific	Grounds autonomy mediator
Bakker & Demerouti (2017); Bakker <i>et al.</i> (2023) ^[5, 6]	Cross-occupational	JD-R theory	Resources buffer demands, drive engagement	Demand×resource interaction untested for flexibility	Grounds resource mediator
Indradewa & Prasetyo (2023) ^[14]	Indonesia (n=229)	WLB framing	FWA → satisfaction & WLB (PLS-SEM)	Single-country; single mediator	Empirical anchor, WLB path
Gašić <i>et al.</i> (2025)	Serbia (n=448)	NR	FWA → satisfaction → lower stress	Single-country; no cultural moderator	Supports mediation logic
Yadav & Sharma (2023) ^[19]	India	Social exchange	Supervisor support → satisfaction via WFC	Support treated as antecedent, not moderator	Grounds supervisor-support moderator
Avgoustaki & Cañibano (2024) ^[4]	Europe	Formal/informal FWA	Divergent wellbeing effects by FWA type	Not linked to mediating mechanisms	Refines IV dimensionality
Chung (2022) ^[7]	30 Europe + US/Aus/China/India	Flexibility stigma	Flexibility → self-exploitation, gendered penalty	Not integrated with OB/HRM mediator models	Grounds stigma moderator
Gallup (2025, 2026) ^[10, 11]	Global	NR	Remote-work paradox: high engagement, lower thriving	Descriptive; no formal mediation test	Empirical anchor for paradox rationale

Table 2: Conceptual gap matrix (condensed; 10 of 18 sources reviewed – full 18-source matrix available in the extended version).

Gap Type	Evidence/Limitation	Proposed Response
Theoretical gap	SDT, JD-R, Border Theory applied individually, never combined.	Integrate into one moderated-mediation framework (Section 5).
Conceptual gap	Flexibility treated as unidimensional despite Atkinson (1984) ^[3] and Avgoustaki & Cañibano (2024) ^[4] .	Specify flexibility as 3-dimensional (temporal/locational/functional) construct (Section 6).
Empirical gap	No study tests all three mediators in parallel within one model.	Propose parallel mediation as testable propositions (Section 7).
Contextual gap	Evidence concentrated in Indonesia/Serbia/US/India, IT-sector-heavy.	Recommend cross-national/sectoral validation (Section 9).
Moderation/integration gap	Stigma (Chung, 2022) ^[7] and supervisor support (Yadav & Sharma, 2023) ^[19] studied separately.	Model both as joint moderators (P5–P6).
Measurement gap	Satisfaction usually measured globally, not at facet level.	Recommend facet-level (intrinsic/extrinsic) measurement (Section 10).

5. Construct Identification

Table 3: Research-gap matrix.

Construct	Definition	Theoretical Origin	Dimensions
Workforce Flexibility (IV)	Discretion over temporal, locational, functional parameters of work	Atkinson (1984) ^[3]	Temporal; Locational; Functional
Perceived Autonomy/Need Satisfaction (M1)	Felt volition, competence, relatedness from flexible-work discretion	SDT	Autonomy; Competence; Relatedness
Job Resource Adequacy (M2)	Degree flexibility functions as a resource	JD-R theory	Resource sufficiency;

	meeting goals/buffering Demands		Demand-buffering
Work-Nonwork Boundary Congruence (M3)	Fit between preferred and actual segmentation/integration of domains	Border/Boundary Theory	Preference fit; Border permeability
Flexibility Stigma (Moderator, -)	Norm penalising flexibility users as less committed	Chung (2022) ^[7]	Career-penalty perception; Presenteeism norms
Supervisor Support (Moderator, +)	Manager's active enabling/trust of flexible-work use	Social exchange/JD-R	Trust; Accommodation
Employee Satisfaction (DV)	Positive affective-evaluative appraisal of one's job	Locke (1976) ^[16]	Intrinsic; Extrinsic

Conceptual Model

The model follows an Antecedents → Mechanisms → Outcome architecture (Figure 1). Workforce flexibility (three dimensions) feeds into three parallel mechanisms – perceived autonomy (SDT), job resource adequacy (JD-R), and boundary congruence (Border Theory) – which

converge on employee satisfaction. No direct arrow is drawn from flexibility to satisfaction: the framework's central claim is that the effect is fully carried through the three mechanisms (Proposition 7). Flexibility stigma weakens, and supervisor support strengthens, these pathways as joint boundary conditions.

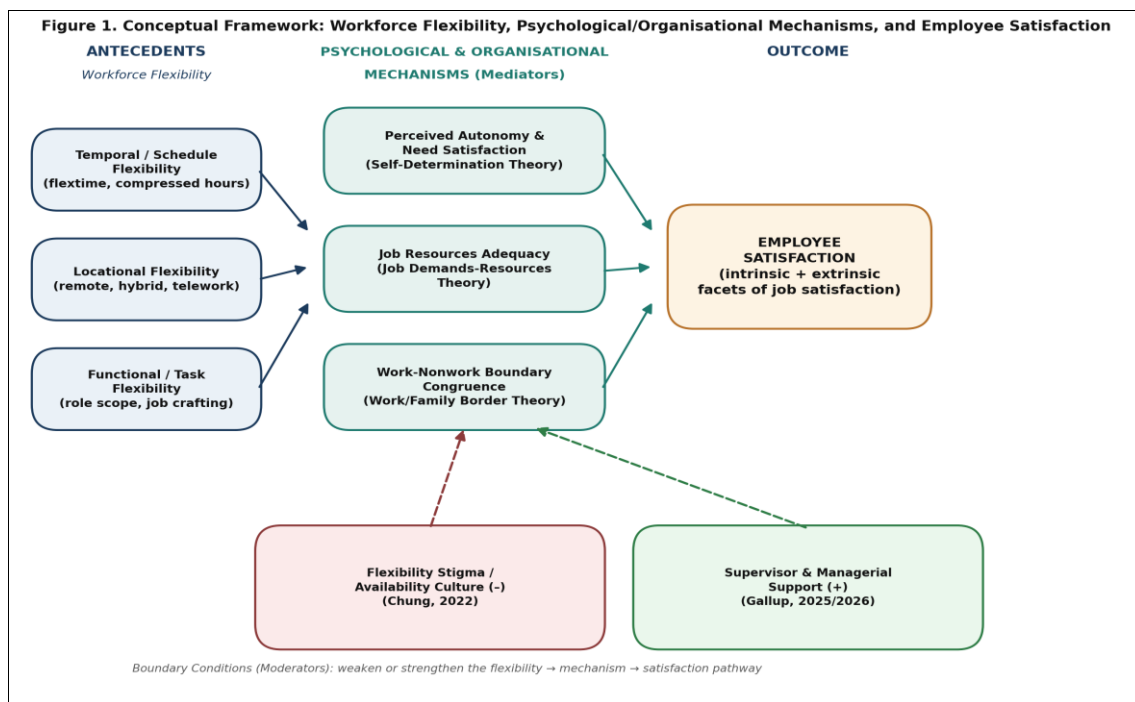


Fig 1: Conceptual framework: workforce flexibility, mechanisms, and employee satisfaction, with two boundary-condition moderators.

Novelty: the autonomy, resource, and boundary constructs are borrowed unmodified from their originating theories; their simultaneous, parallel modelling within one framework is integrated in a combination not previously assembled; boundary congruence as a formal mediator (rather than an outcome synonymous with balance) is newly conceptualised; and Chung's (2022)^[7] sociological stigma construct is extended into a quantitatively testable OB/HRM moderator linked explicitly to SDT and Border Theory logic.

Propositions

Seven propositions follow from the theoretical logic and evidence in Sections 2–3; each states the relationship, its rationale, and any qualifying evidence.

P1: Discretion over timing/location of work satisfies SDT's autonomy need (Ryan & Deci, 2000)^[18]; applied evidence confirms employees value flexibility for conferring “structured autonomy” (Andrade *et al.*, 2023), though Chung (2022)^[1, 7] shows formal discretion does not guarantee felt autonomy under stigma – addressed via P5 rather than treated as a competing main effect.

Workforce flexibility is positively associated with employees' perceived autonomy and psychological need satisfaction.

P2: Flexibility functions as a job resource that is instrumental to goals and buffers demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017)^[5]; FWAs reduce job stress via satisfaction (Gašić *et al.*, 2025), though JD-R theory predicts this buffering weakens under very high demand intensity, reserved here as a future boundary condition for parsimony.

Workforce flexibility is positively associated with perceived job resource adequacy.

P3: Border Theory (Clark, 2000)^[8] predicts congruence only when border configuration matches individual preference; dyadic evidence supports this for employees preferring integration, but the relationship is preference-contingent rather than universally positive – a nuance largely absent from applied flexibility-satisfaction studies. Workforce flexibility is positively associated with work-nonwork boundary congruence for employees whose

boundary preference aligns with the integration opportunities flexibility affords.

P4: Each mechanism has an independent theoretical pathway to satisfaction and empirical support (Indradewa & Prasetyo, 2023 ^[14]; Gašić *et al.*, 2025), but no study has tested all three simultaneously, leaving their relative strength and potential overlap an open empirical question. Perceived autonomy, job resource adequacy, and boundary congruence are each positively associated with employee satisfaction, as parallel (non-competing) mediators of the flexibility–satisfaction relationship.

P5: Chung’s (2022) ^[7] cross-national evidence shows stigma undermines felt autonomy and boundary enactment even where formal flexibility exists; studies without reference to stigma report straightforwardly positive effects (Indradewa & Prasetyo, 2023) ^[14], suggesting stigma strength itself varies by context and explains, rather than contradicts, the paradox literature. Flexibility stigma/availability culture negatively moderates the relationship between workforce flexibility and the three mediating mechanisms, attenuating or reversing flexibility’s positive effects under high-stigma conditions.

P6: Supervisors act as border-keepers and resource-legitimising agents; Yadav and Sharma (2023) ^[19] find supervisor support raises satisfaction via reduced work-family conflict, though Gallup (2025) ^[10] finds few hybrid managers receive formal training – support is theoretically vital but empirically inconsistent, positioning it as the positive counterpart to stigma (P5).

Supervisor and managerial support positively moderate the relationship between workforce flexibility and the three mediating mechanisms, strengthening flexibility’s positive effects when support is high.

P7: No reviewed theory specifies a mechanism-independent path from flexibility to satisfaction; some applied models retain a residual direct effect once mediators are included, so full mediation is proposed as the theoretical default, with the empirical agenda (Section 10) recommending an explicit test for a residual direct effect. workforce flexibility and employee satisfaction is fully mediated by autonomy, resource adequacy, and boundary congruence, net of the moderating effects in P5–P6. The relationship between

Supporting Statistics

Global engagement stood at 20% in 2025 ^[10] despite flexible/hybrid work becoming normative (Gallup, 2026) ^[11]; 52% of US remote-capable employees now work hybrid, 26–27% fully remote, and 21–22% fully on-site (Gallup, 2026) ^[11], while fully remote workers report the highest engagement but lower “thriving” than hybrid peers (Gallup, 2025) ^[10] – the empirical anchor for this paper’s central puzzle. The ILO (2023) ^[14] finds over a third of the global workforce regularly works beyond 48 hours weekly, and 46% of US remote-capable employees say they would likely leave if remote options were withdrawn (Pew, cited in OfficeRnD, 2026), underscoring flexibility’s retention significance.

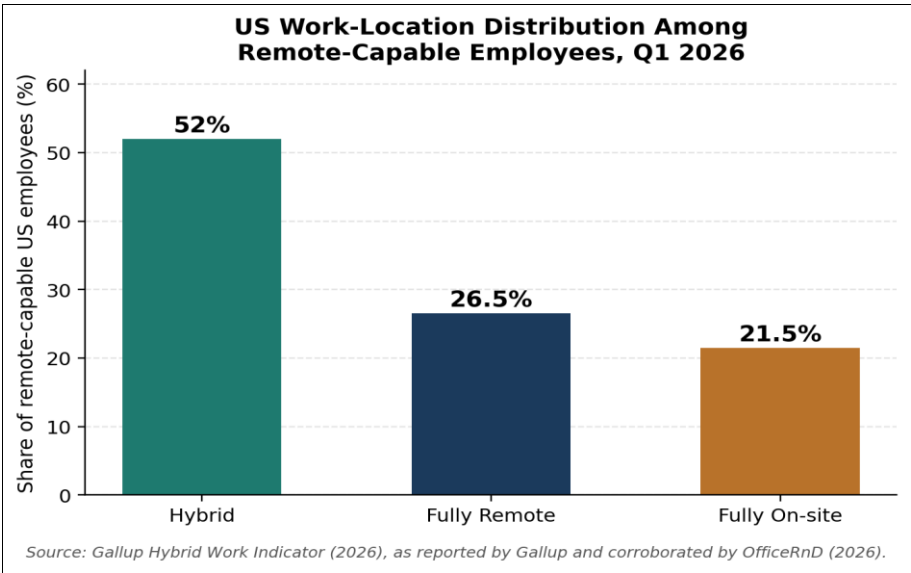


Fig 2: US work-location distribution among remote-capable employees, Q1 2026 (Gallup, 2026) ^[11].

Contribution and Implications

- 1. Theoretical, Conceptual, and Managerial Contribution
 - **Theoretical:** extends the literature by integrating JD-R, SDT, and Border Theory into one moderated-mediation architecture, explaining rather than merely describing why flexibility-satisfaction findings diverge.
 - **Conceptual:** repositions boundary congruence as a formal mediator (not a balance synonym) and formally couples flexibility stigma and supervisor support as

- oppositely signed joint moderators – a combination not previously assembled.
- **Methodological:** enables a parallel-mediation, moderated-mediation PLS-SEM design (Section 10) capable of adjudicating competing explanations within one dataset.
- **Managerial:** identifies two specific, actionable levers – reducing flexibility stigma (auditing “always-

on”/visibility norms, not just publishing policy) and strengthening supervisor training – as the conditions determining whether flexibility investment improves or undermines satisfaction.

- **Policy:** clarifies that “right to request” flexible-work legislation (e.g., Singapore's Tripartite Guidelines, effective December 2024) is necessary but insufficient without complementary culture-level measures (e.g., gender-disaggregated flexible-work usage reporting), since P5 implies formal access alone does not guarantee the intended wellbeing outcome – a directional hypothesis for policy research, not an established finding.

These contributions are offered in cautious terms (“extends,” “integrates,” “conceptualises”) rather than claims of absolute novelty, consistent with the paper's status as a theoretical integration of established constructs.

Research Agenda and Proposed Empirical Validation

Given the model's parallel mediators, joint moderators, and mixed formative/reflective measurement, PLS-SEM is the recommended primary method, with CB-SEM as a robustness check once measurement adequacy is established. Recommended designs, in order of priority: (1) cross-sectional survey PLS-SEM for initial validation; (2) longitudinal/panel research to test whether mechanisms operate with different time lags; (3) quasi-experimental designs around organisational policy changes to strengthen causal identification of the stigma/support moderators; and (4) mixed-methods work pairing PLS-SEM with qualitative interviews on stigma, since Chung's (2022) ^[7] foundational evidence is itself substantially qualitative. Contextual extensions should prioritise non-IT sectors, Gulf/Southeast Asian/African labour markets, caregiving and gender-disaggregated samples, and public- versus private-sector comparisons. Theoretical extensions could incorporate Conservation of Resources theory (demand-loss spirals), Signalling Theory (flexibility as a recruitment signal), and Social Exchange Theory (formalising supervisor-support reciprocity).

Table 4: Proposed directions for empirical validation (conceptual only – no primary data collected).

Design Element	Proposed Approach
Population/Unit	Full-time employees with access to ≥1 formal flexible-work arrangement; individual as unit of analysis.
Sampling/Sample size	Stratified purposive sampling across sectors/policy types; PLS-SEM benchmark of ~200–300 respondents, confirmed via a priori power analysis.
Measures	Adapted validated scales: workplace-autonomy (tripartite: method/schedule/criteria), SDT need-satisfaction, JD-R resource-adequacy, boundary-preference/enactment, Chung-based stigma items, leader-support scales, and a facet-level (intrinsic/extrinsic) satisfaction measure.
Reliability/Validity	Composite reliability/ $\alpha \geq .70$; AVE $\geq .50$; discriminant validity via HTMT.
CMB	Procedural separation of predictor/outcome measurement plus full collinearity VIF test.
Mediation/Moderation	Bootstrapped indirect effects (5,000 resamples, bias-corrected CIs) for P1–P4; two-stage/product-indicator moderated-mediation tests for P5–P6.
Robustness	IPMA for managerial prioritisation; PLS-MGA across contextual extensions; Gaussian-copula endogeneity check.

Limitations and Conclusion

As a conceptual paper, this study depends on secondary literature; the seven propositions are theoretically derived but empirically untested pending the validation agenda above. The synthesis, while thematically structured, is not a formal PRISMA-protocol systematic review. The framework prioritises two evidentially strong moderators (stigma, supervisor support) over other plausible ones (organisational size, national culture, tenure) to preserve parsimony, and assumes flexibility is at least partly employee-chosen, an assumption that may not hold for organisationally imposed or gig-economy (numerical) flexibility. None of these limitations undermines the paper's central contribution; each defines a specific direction for future work.

This paper addressed a genuine theoretical problem: the coexistence of robust evidence that flexibility enhances satisfaction and equally robust evidence that it produces self-exploitation and diminished thriving. Rather than treating this as an empirical inconsistency, the paper has argued it reflects a missing theoretical architecture, and has supplied one by integrating JD-R theory, SDT, and Work/Family Border Theory into a framework where flexibility's effect on satisfaction operates through three parallel mechanisms, conditioned by flexibility stigma and supervisor support as oppositely signed boundary

conditions. This offers managers, HR practitioners, and policymakers a more actionable basis for decision-making than either the purely positive or purely critical literatures provide alone, and sets out a clear PLS-SEM-based agenda – the necessary next step – for establishing the framework's explanatory power.

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