

Work-Life Balance from Middle Managers perspective

How is work-life balance perceived and what are influencing factors?

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Abstract

This study explores how middle managers perceive and experience work-life balance, emphasizing their dual role as both facilitators and recipients of work-life practices. In today's demanding work environment, balancing professional and personal life is increasingly complex—especially for middle managers navigating organizational expectations and employee well-being.

Based on twelve in-depth interviews with European middle managers across industries, the findings reveal that work-life balance is a fluid, individualized experience shaped by factors such as autonomy, digital connectivity, emotional labour, and cultural expectations. While gender norms were noted, personality and organizational culture played a more decisive role.

Participants acknowledged the importance of modelling healthy work-life practices but faced internal pressures, role conflict, and blurred boundaries. A key insight was the gap between the perceived and lived experience of work-life balance, driven by evolving workplace norms and persistent systemic challenges.

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of managerial well-being and underscores the need for leadership models that support work-life balance in both policy and practice.

Keywords: work-life balance, middle managers, boundary theory, job demands–resources model, emotional labour, organizational culture, flexible work, leadership behaviour, gender

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1. Introduction

In this section, the broader organizational landscape surrounding work-life balance will be introduced, the study's objectives will be outlined, key gaps in the existing literature will be identified, and the limitations and the scope of the thesis will be described.

1.1 Background

Work-life balance is commonly defined as the ability to allocate time and energy effectively between work responsibilities and personal life demands, including family, health, and leisure (Otuyan & Andeyo, 2020). It involves maintaining a sense of satisfaction and involvement across both domains (Gagnano et al., 2020). Work-life balance has gained research attention due to its significant impact on employee well-being, job satisfaction, performance, and organizational outcomes (Haar et al., 2014). The increasing complexity of modern work environments, rising stress levels, shifting workforce demographics, evolving gender roles, and the growing prevalence of flexible work arrangements has made understanding work-life balance both timely and essential (Kelliher et al., 2018).

Work-life balance has been studied across various groups, each facing distinct challenges. Research on general employees finds that better work-life balance leads to higher job satisfaction, life satisfaction, and mental health across cultures, with cultural values such as collectivism strengthening these effects. The strength of these positive effects depends on cultural factors: work-life balance has a greater impact on satisfaction in more individualistic and gender-egalitarian societies, where personal autonomy and equal role expectations enhance the value of achieving balance (Haar et al., 2014). For industrial workers, particularly in production settings, overtime, poor communication, and lack of managerial empathy disrupt work-life balance by limiting personal planning and increasing stress (Engman, 2022). Studies on gender show that women face hidden cultural expectations to prioritize work as if they had no caregiving roles, often managing work-life balance alone and fearing career penalties if they disclose family responsibilities (Toffoletti & Starr, 2016). Among female managers, many report stalled career progression, long unpaid hours, and limited access to senior roles, despite using flexible work to improve their balance (Durbin & Tomlinson 2010). Investigations into solo-living professionals reveal they often feel excluded from work-life balance policies, as their personal needs—such as mental health or social

life—are not seen as legitimate reasons for flexibility (Wilkinson et al., 2018). Research on gig workers highlights that while flexibility is advertised, irregular hours, income insecurity, and constant availability worsen both time and financial aspects of work-life balance (Warren, 2021).

Managers play a central role in the implementation and success of work-life balance policies within organizations. In organizational contexts, managers are typically defined as individuals who coordinate and oversee the work of others while navigating interpersonal challenges, constrained resources, and evolving demands (Beenen et al., 2021). Subsequently, middle managers are defined as individuals who occupy intermediate leadership positions, reporting to senior management while simultaneously overseeing frontline employees and teams (Ahmadi et al, 2024; Beenen et al., 2021). While senior leaders may design work-life balance policies, it is middle managers who are responsible for putting them into daily practice and shaping how employees experience them (McCarthy et al., 2010). Their attitudes, awareness, and willingness to support flexibility often determine whether such policies are effective or merely symbolic (Maxwell, 2005). Therefore, middle managers experience unique contradictions: they are expected to support work-life balance for their teams but often lack the time, autonomy, or cultural support to achieve it themselves (Parris et al., 2008). Studies have shown that when managers actively promote and model balanced work practices, employee morale, satisfaction, and productivity improve significantly (Bradley et al., 2010). Conversely, lack of managerial support or inconsistent communication can undermine work-life balance efforts, regardless of the policies in place (Engman, 2022).

Additionally, middle managers play a critical role in organizational functioning due to their unique position at the intersection of strategic direction and operational execution. They act as translators of high-level goals into practical actions, bridging the gap between senior leadership and frontline teams (Heyden et al., 2017). Far from being passive implementers, middle managers often initiate change themselves, particularly when aligned with top management, significantly increasing employee support for new initiatives. Their role extends beyond task coordination—they serve as cultural carriers, emotional leaders, and innovation drivers within their teams (Huy, 2011; Mustafa et al., 2022). Middle managers additionally have a direct impact on organizational learning: when empowered and supported, they develop ambidextrous capabilities that allow them to both exploit current resources and explore new ideas (Usman et al., 2024). Furthermore, middle managers are central to talent

retention. Even simple interventions—such as encouraging middle managers to focus on turnover—have been shown to reduce quit rates and improve team stability (Friebel et al., 2022). Their involvement in boundary work, as shown by Azambuja et al. (2022), also reveals their subtle power in shaping how departments interact, negotiate priorities, and maintain cohesion. Taken together, these findings demonstrate that middle managers are not merely organizational intermediaries—they are pivotal actors who influence strategy, culture, performance, and innovation from within the middle layers of the hierarchy.

Moreover, managers today are working increasingly longer hours due to the growing complexity of organizational environments, escalating expectations for constant availability, and evolving cultural norms around leadership. Many managers take work home, struggle to mentally disconnect, and suffer negative effects on their physical and mental health because of these demands (Bilalli et al., 2013). The ideal of the “perfect manager”—defined as constantly present, productive, and committed—creates a culture of overwork that ultimately undermines personal well-being (Ford & Collinson, 2011). Managers are often expected to model work-life balance through their behaviour; however, they frequently lack the structural support and personal capacity to enact these practices in their own professional lives (Bradley et al., 2010).

Several concrete factors have been found to significantly affect work-life balance across organizational and personal domains. High job demands, such as excessive workload, time pressure, and mental exhaustion, directly reduce work-life balance by draining employees’ energy and recovery capacity. Over-commitment, where individuals invest emotionally beyond contractual obligations, has been shown to be one of the most damaging behaviours to work-life balance. Similarly, expectations of constant availability, such as being reachable outside office hours, increase stress and blur boundaries between work and private life (Björntoft et al., 2020). Use of digital communication tools, including smartphones and video conferencing, has intensified these effects by enabling work intrusions during non-work time, thus weakening psychological detachment (Hassard & Morris, 2022; Ezzedeen & Zikic, 2017). Low perceived flexibility—when employees feel they lack control over when and where to work—also predicts lower work-life balance, even in formally flexible roles (Björntoft et al., 2020, Wong et al., 2021). On the individual level, poor boundary management, such as difficulty switching between roles, contributes to increased work-family conflict (Michel et al., 2014; Andersz et al., 2018). Personality traits such as

perfectionism and neuroticism worsen work-life balance by increasing self-imposed pressure about work tasks. Organizational culture plays a key role as unsupportive leadership or unclear policies reduce employees' willingness to use available work-life balance initiatives (Sirgy & Lee, 2018). Lastly, gender norms affect work-life balance through unequal expectations. Women are often expected to take on more caregiving roles, leading to greater strain in balancing work and life domains (Guest, 2002).

1.2 Research Gap

Although work-life balance has been widely studied across different sectors and worker groups—including industrial employees (Engman, 2021), gig workers (Warren, 2021), and women (Toffoletti & Starr, 2016)—most of the research focuses on general employee populations. These studies tend to emphasize organizational outcomes such as productivity, being away from work, or employee turnover, rather than examining how individuals in leadership roles personally perceive and experience work-life balance (Ford & Collinson, 2011; Parris et al., 2008). Consequently, the well-being of managers, and particularly middle managers, has often been overlooked or treated as a secondary concern.

Existing literature often presents managers primarily as facilitators or gatekeepers of work-life balance, responsible for enforcing policies and supporting others in achieving balance (McCarthy et al., 2010; Maxwell, 2005). They are expected to model balanced behaviour while simultaneously managing high workloads, maintaining constant availability, and meeting strategic goals (Bradley et al., 2018; Wilkinson et al., 2018). Some research has shown that middle managers play a critical role in organizational success. They are responsible for translating strategic goals into everyday actions, shaping workplace culture, and maintaining employee motivation (Huy, 2011; Heyden et al., 2017; Friebe et al., 2022). In this way, they act as a crucial link between senior leadership and frontline staff, influencing both operational outcomes and team well-being.

Additionally, research has shown that many managers are disconnected from work-life balance narratives altogether, often due to a lack of role modelling, unclear communication, or fear of being seen as uncommitted if they use work-life balance benefits (Sánchez-Vidal et al., 2012). This contradiction—where managers promote work-life balance yet struggle to access it themselves—has been described as “caught in the middle” (Parris et al., 2008).

Despite the importance of their role, there is limited research on how middle managers themselves interpret work-life balance and what factors influence it. Existing studies tend to focus on what managers do for others—such as supporting employee flexibility or applying work-life policies—rather than exploring their own personal viewpoints, and the organisational or personal factors that shape them (McCarthy et al., 2010; Maxwell, 2005; Parris et al., 2008). This leaves a significant gap in understanding how middle managers perceive the dual pressure of leading others while maintaining their own well-being.

1.3 Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore how middle managers perceive work-life balance, and to investigate the different factors that affect their work-life balance. Rather than treating work-life balance as a fixed or universal concept, this study takes a more nuanced approach, recognizing that for middle managers, balance is often shaped by different aspects such as heavy workloads, expectations to always be available, organizational culture, gender expectations, and personal coping strategies. Special attention is given to the role of digital communication tools, informal workplace norms, and leadership expectations, which can blur the boundaries between work and private life, adding extra stress and making it harder for managers to recover and disconnect.

By giving voice to middle managers' personal experiences, this study aims to shift the focus from seeing them only as people who help others balance work and life, to explore how they view work-life balance themselves. This can help organizations better understand the pressures placed on managers and reflect on how current work-life balance policies may not always match the realities of managerial work. Based on these aims, the research is guided by the following two central questions: 1) How do middle managers perceive work-life balance? 2) What factors influence work-life balance for middle managers and how?

1.4 Delimitations and Scope

To enable a focused and in-depth exploration of the research question, a set of delimitations have been established for this study. Defining these boundaries is necessary to ensure a manageable scope within the time limitations of this bachelor thesis.

This study focuses on the experiences of middle managers as part of the broader white-collar workforce within organizations, whose work is characterized by managerial, administrative,

and knowledge-based tasks, as opposed to manual or frontline work. This focus allows the study to investigate a group that is uniquely positioned at the intersection of top-down expectations and bottom-up demands, and who, as such, may face challenges in managing their own work-life balance (McCarthy et al., 2010; Ford & Collinson, 2011).

The decision to limit the study to European contexts is both pragmatic and relevant, driven by the author's access to participants and familiarity with European work culture. Furthermore, European labour frameworks provide an important backdrop, as many countries in the region offer extensive formal support for work-life balance, such as regulated working hours and family leave provisions (Haar et al., 2014). This makes Europe a particularly suitable setting to explore the contradictions between formal policies and the actual day-to-day experiences of middle managers. Nevertheless, this geographic focus naturally limits the generalizability of the findings to non-European or less-regulated organizational environments.

The resulting scope is therefore middle managers in white-collar organizational roles within European contexts. As a key group in modern organizations, middle managers are responsible for translating strategic goals into everyday operations while managing teams, making them central to organizational effectiveness (Ahmadi et al., 2024; Beenen et al., 2021). Understanding how they perceive, and experience work-life balance can offer valuable insights into broader issues of leadership sustainability, well-being, and workplace culture. Their position at the intersection of leadership demands and employee support makes them an appropriate and timely focus for this study.

2. Theoretical Framework

In this section, key theoretical perspectives will be integrated to build a foundational understanding of work-life balance from a managerial standpoint. Although direct research on managers' own work-life balance experiences remains limited, this chapter will draw on relevant literature including Boundary Theory, the Job Demands–Resources Model, Social Role Theory and Mindfulness Theory to provide a comprehensive theoretical framework for the study.

2.1 Boundary Theory

Boundary Theory, as developed by Ashforth et al. (2000), explains how individuals manage transitions between work and non-work roles by drawing on two key boundary

characteristics: flexibility (how much a role boundary can expand or contract) and permeability (how much one role can intrude into another). People typically prefer either segmentation (keeping work and life separate) or integration (blending them).

However, later developments in the literature have expanded this binary view, introducing nuanced boundary management profiles. For instance, Kossek et al. (2012) identified six distinct boundary styles such as “Fusion Lovers,” who thrive on role blending, and “Family Guardians,” who actively shield family time from work intrusions. More recently, the concept of zigzag working has emerged to describe the fragmented and spontaneous transitions between work and family domains, particularly in hybrid and remote settings (Harris & Haar, 2024). These frequent micro role transitions, which occur multiple times throughout the day, have been shown to elevate cognitive and emotional strain, increasing work–family conflict—especially when boundaries are weak or mismatched with personal preferences (Delanoeije et al., 2019; Ashforth et al., 2000).

The concept of Person–Environment fit refers to the degree of alignment between an individual's preferences, values, or behaviors and the characteristics of their surrounding environment—such as their workplace. In the context of boundary theory, Person–Environment fit plays a crucial role in understanding the dynamics of work–family conflict. When an individual's boundary management preference—such as a strong desire for segmentation—does not align with organizational norms that favour integration, it can result in heightened stress and role conflict (Piszczeck & Berg, 2014). This misalignment impairs the individual's ability to maintain boundaries that support their well-being. Conversely, when there is a strong Person–Environment fit—meaning organizational practices support employees' preferred boundary styles—work–family conflict is significantly reduced, and overall well-being is enhanced (Martineau & Trottier, 2024). An important expansion of Boundary Theory is the inclusion of regulative institutions —laws and policies such as parental leave, working time regulations, and national norms—that shape how individuals can manage work–family boundaries. When it aligns with employee preferences, they enhance people–environment fit and reduce work–family conflict (Piszczeck & Berg, 2014).

Managers are increasingly called upon to perform boundary work, particularly in emotionally complex domains such as mental health support. Collins, Ashman, and Crozier (2024) demonstrate how managers often find themselves balancing personal empathy with professional responsibility, leading to blurry role boundaries that heighten emotional strain

and risk of burnout. These managers frequently shift between roles—mentor, enforcer, peer—while lacking clear guidance or institutional support, making their boundary work both emotionally taxing and organizationally under-recognized. The study highlights that boundary work is not merely about role transitions but also about power, identity, and emotional labour, especially for those in leadership or representational roles (Collins et al., 2024).

Technology has significantly blurred the boundaries between work and personal life. The constant connectivity enabled by tools such as WhatsApp and Zoom contributes to role conflation, where individuals struggle to distinguish between work and nonwork domains throughout the day (Ghislieri et al., 2017; Mirbabaie & Marx, 2024). This merging of roles makes it harder to mentally disconnect, reinforcing the view that boundaries are increasingly fluid and difficult to manage in digital and hybrid work environments.

Workplace flexibility and a sense of control are essential for managing boundaries effectively and maintaining well-being. Autonomy and job feedback help individuals enact boundaries in ways that reduce work–life conflict (Martineau & Trottier, 2024), while boundary control—the ability to manage transitions between roles—has been shown to significantly enhance satisfaction and reduce stress (Kossek et al., 2012). However, when work-life boundaries are overly integrated, recovery time diminishes, increasing the risk of exhaustion and burnout (Wepfer et al., 2018). Additionally, boundary violations—such as work interruptions during personal time—can lead to either stress or satisfaction depending on whether the interruption aligns with personal goals, highlighting the role of emotional appraisal in work–family conflict (Hunter et al., 2019).

2.2 Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Model

The Job Demands–Resources model, introduced by Bakker and Demerouti (2007), is a widely applied framework for examining employee well-being, burnout, and motivation. It asserts that every job includes specific demands—such as workload, emotional pressure, or time constraints—that require sustained effort and may lead to strain. Conversely, resources—such as autonomy, support, and development opportunities—help employees meet goals, reduce stress, and promote engagement and growth (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). The interaction between these elements determines whether employees experience burnout or remain motivated.

The Job Demands–Resources model identifies two key mechanisms: the health impairment process and the motivational process. The health impairment process is especially pertinent for understanding the experiences of managers. High job demands such as long work hours, decision fatigue, and emotional labour can erode energy over time, resulting in emotional exhaustion and cynicism (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). These effects intensify when work-life boundaries blur (Salmela-Aro & Upadaya, 2018). For instance, in the pharmaceutical sector, work–life imbalance significantly increased burnout, particularly when employees lacked autonomy (Adil & Baig, 2018). This highlights how insufficient resources can make managerial roles unsustainable.

The motivational process of the Job Demands–Resources model explains how job resources foster engagement, reduce cynicism, and enhance performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). In managerial roles, key resources—such as team support, feedback, and autonomy—can strengthen resilience and effectiveness. Autonomy, for example, has been shown to reduce emotional exhaustion and increase initiative (Lee & Jo, 2023). Personal resources such as self-efficacy and mindfulness further shape how managers respond to demands. Mindfulness helps managers reframe stressors, leading to lower burnout and higher engagement (Lyddy et al., 2025; Grover et al., 2017). These internal strengths act as buffers, influencing how external demands impact well-being.

A central principle of the Job Demands–Resources model is that job resources buffer the negative effects of job demands—especially in high-pressure roles such as management. For example, supportive leadership can reduce strain from excessive workload and help prevent burnout (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). However, the effectiveness of resources depends on how they are used. Employees high in conscientiousness often apply resources to boost performance, while others use them to preserve well-being (Bao et al., 2022). Similarly, Van den Broeck et al. (2010) distinguish between challenge demands (motivating) and hindrance demands (draining), noting that resources are most effective when matched to personal coping goals which refer to the individual's internal strategies for managing work-related stress—whether the aim is to remain productive under pressure or to maintain emotional stability and prevent overload. These goals influence how people interpret demands and choose which resources to activate or develop. One proactive strategy is job crafting—where managers reshape their roles to align with their strengths, such as delegating tasks or building informal support systems (Demerouti & Bakker, 2011). These

actions can spark a gain spiral, where positive experiences and personal resources reinforce engagement over time (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).

2.3 Social Role Theory

Social Role Theory, first developed by Alice H. Eagly (1987), suggests that observed gender differences in behaviour are not innate but arise primarily from the social roles assigned to men and women. These roles, shaped by historical divisions of labour and reinforced by societal expectations, lead individuals to adopt traits and behaviours aligned with what is culturally deemed appropriate for their gender. Men are typically associated with agentic traits such as assertiveness and ambition, while women are linked to communal traits such as empathy, warmth, and cooperation. These socially constructed roles — rather than biological predispositions — that drive much of the variation in behaviour across genders (Eagly, 1987).

This theory explains how women and men may be treated differently based on deeply rooted expectations. In leadership roles, women often face a double bind—expected to be both assertive and nurturing—unlike their male counterparts (Dulin, 2007). When they challenge these norms, such as by advocating for flexible work or setting boundaries, they risk being viewed as less committed or competent (Rudman & Glick, 2002). This discourages female managers from using or promoting work-life balance policies, reinforcing a culture of overwork and undermining their own well-being. Many women internalize these pressures, adjusting their behaviour to avoid backlash and maintain credibility (Hanek & Garcia, 2022). In addition to this, a study on the "flexibility stigma" highlights the cultural belief that serious professionals should prioritize work above all else. For managers—especially men—using work-life balance policies can be seen as a sign of weakness or lack of commitment (Williams et al., 2013).

In addition to gendered expectations, the broader structure of managerial life is shaped by the simultaneous demands of multiple social roles. Managers frequently navigate overlapping responsibilities—such as professional responsibilities, caregiving, and personal commitments—which can either enhance or impair well-being depending on the level of structural and relational support available. Many research studies indicate that the presence of strong organizational and familial support systems can mitigate role strain and promote psychological well-being, whereas a lack of such support increases the risk of stress and burnout (Nordenmark, 2004). Furthermore, managerial roles are often characterized by

internalized expectations to prioritize organizational goals above personal needs, leading individuals to overextend themselves and compromise work-life boundaries, even when they personally endorse the value of balance (Hoyt et al., 2013).

2.4 Mindfulness Theory

Mindfulness theory is increasingly recognized within organizational research as a valuable framework for understanding how individuals self-regulate attention and manage emotional experiences in demanding work settings. Mindfulness is typically defined as the ability to direct attention purposefully to the present moment while adopting a non-judgmental and accepting stance toward thoughts, emotions, and sensations (Bishop et al., 2004). This definition integrates two key dimensions: (1) self-regulation of attention, where individuals notice when attention has drifted and consciously bring it back to the present, and (2) orientation to experience, which refers to an open and curious attitude toward internal and external events, without attempting to avoid or control them (Bishop et al., 2004; Feldman et al., 2006). Mindfulness is understood as a skill that can be trained through practices such as meditation but also cultivated in everyday work situations (Anderson et al., 2007). Within organizations, mindfulness interventions have been linked to improved well-being, stress reduction, emotion regulation, and enhanced interpersonal functioning (Good et al., 2015).

Mindfulness at work can be understood as a process that helps people combine two ways of thinking and acting: the 'Being' mode and the 'Doing' mode. The 'Being' mode is about being present, aware, and accepting what is happening without judgment. The 'Doing' mode is about focusing on tasks and working toward goals. While mindfulness is often linked to the 'Being' mode, recent studies show that it can also improve how people work in the 'Doing' mode. When people are mindful, they remain engaged in their tasks while staying aware of their thoughts and emotions, helping them avoid automatic reactions or becoming overwhelmed in stressful situations (Lyddy & Good, 2017). Good et al. (2015) further explain that mindfulness supports better focus, emotional regulation, and behavior at work, helping employees handle complex demands without mental overload. For managers and leaders—who often face high-pressure decisions and emotional challenges—mindfulness offers a way to approach work with greater calm, clarity, and balance.

Additionally, mindfulness is seen more and more as a personal resource within the Job Demands–Resources model. It helps people handle high work demands and supports their

overall well-being. Research shows that mindfulness lowers feelings of burnout and emotional exhaustion by helping people manage their emotions, rethink stressful situations in a more positive way, and build inner strengths such as hope and optimism (Malinowski & Lim, 2015; Hülshager et al., 2013; Grover et al., 2017). Studies by Zivnuska et al. (2016) and Karadas et al. (2025) show that mindfulness does more than help people cope—it helps them build more resources over time, such as feeling more engaged at work, becoming more resilient, and achieving better balance between work and personal life. These extra resources protect employees from stress and help them stay motivated.

3. Methodology

This chapter presents the research methodology used for this study, including the reasoning behind choosing a qualitative approach and the methods applied for data collection and participant selection. It outlines how the interviews were designed and conducted, followed by a description of the data analysis process. Finally, the chapter reflects critically on the strengths and limitations of the chosen methods.

3.1 Selection of Research Methodology

This thesis adopts a qualitative research approach to explore how middle managers perceive and experience work-life balance in organizational settings. A qualitative methodology is suitable when the goal is to understand the nuanced, lived experiences of individuals, rather than to test hypotheses or quantify phenomena (Sandelowski, 2000; Reeves et al., 2008). The research question requires a deeper engagement with subjective experiences, personal narratives, and contextual understanding, which quantitative methods such as surveys or statistical models cannot adequately capture.

This approach was selected not only for its methodological fit, but also due to a personal and scholarly intention to develop deeper knowledge of the topic. Rather than focusing on surface-level insights or generalized trends, this study aims to explore how middle managers experience and interpret work-life balance in their everyday professional lives, and to explore the various organizational, cultural, and personal factors that shape those experiences. Qualitative research enables this kind of depth, allowing authors to access dimensions of thought, feeling, and meaning that remain hidden in more structured quantitative studies.

Quantitative approaches, although useful for establishing general patterns across large populations, are limited in their ability to explore the complexity and depth of human behaviour, especially in organizational contexts (Bell et al., 2019). Surveys tend to rely on predetermined questions and response scales, which restrict participants' ability to elaborate or provide context for their answers. In contrast, interviews allow for follow-up questions, emotional insight, and flexibility to explore themes as they emerge during the conversation (Campbell et al., 2020).

An abductive approach was used in this thesis to ensure that the research was both guided by existing theories and open to new insights that could emerge from the data. This method was chosen because the study is exploratory in nature, aiming to capture the personal experiences of managers while also building on established theoretical frameworks.

Thematic analysis was applied to identify and interpret meaningful patterns within the interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis offered a structured yet flexible approach to organizing complex narratives, allowing for both theoretical relevance and responsiveness to participants' own perspectives.

3.2 Data Collection

In this study, data was collected through semi-structured interviews. This method was chosen because it allows participants to share their experiences and thoughts in their own words, while the author still ensures that all key topics are covered. It provides space for follow-up questions if new interesting themes appear during the conversation.

Twelve interviews were conducted in two ways: approximately half were done in person, and the other half were conducted online using Microsoft Teams. This flexible approach made it easier for participants to choose the option that worked best for them, considering their personal preferences and schedules.

The interviews took place between the 21st of April and the 6th of May 2025. Most interviews lasted between 25 to 55 minutes, depending on the availability of the participants. Some interviews were shorter, around 25 minutes, as participants had very limited time due to their busy work schedules. However, this did not affect the quality of the results. The questions were open-ended and carefully designed to invite reflection, and the conversational interview style encouraged participants to go straight to the key points. In these cases, it was

important to use the opportunity to gather important insights, even if the conversations had to be more focused and concise. Since the time frame for data collection in this study was limited, and it was challenging to find participants within a short period, it was essential to take any available opportunity to conduct interviews whenever possible. This approach ensured that valuable data could still be collected despite the time constraints.

All interviews were conducted in English to ensure consistency across participants and to make the data easier to compare during analysis. Each interview was audio recorded with the participant's permission to make sure the information was captured correctly. Later, the recordings were transcribed word for word using an automatic transcription tool, and the author carefully checked the transcripts manually to ensure accuracy.

The interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions, focusing on the main topics connected to the study's purpose. These questions helped participants reflect on their experiences and perceptions related to the research topic but also left room for them to bring up issues that were important to them.

Throughout the data collection, the author ensured that all participants gave informed consent before the interviews started. They were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time if they wished. All collected data was treated confidentially, and no personal or identifiable information was shared in the final report.

3.3 Respondents

The participants for this study were selected using a purposive sampling strategy, which is common in qualitative research when the goal is to reach individuals with specific experiences or positions relevant to the research question (Campbell et al., 2020). The aim was to gather insights from middle managers currently holding leadership roles in different industries and organizations across Europe.

All participants were based in European countries, with most of them being Swedish nationals. A few participants were from other European backgrounds, including French, Belarusian, Dutch, and German. This variety allowed the author to explore whether differences in work-life balance experiences and perceptions might be influenced by cultural or national contexts, such as the country where participants grew up or currently work. However, it is important to note that Swedish participants represented the largest group,

reflecting both the author's proximity and the Swedish business environment where many participants work.

The participants represented a range of industries, including customer goods, consulting, art, music, IT, sport, tech, and tax advisory, which allowed the study to explore whether work-life balance challenges and strategies differ across various business sectors.

All participants were in mid-career positions, with most of them being in their 30s to early 40s, and none of them were in the early stages of their careers. They all held management roles, responsible for managing teams of different sizes, ranging from around 4 to 50 people. This ensured that all participants were navigating both managerial responsibilities and personal life demands at a similar career stage.

Additionally, the sample included participants of different genders, with both men and women represented. This diversity was important for the study, as it created an opportunity to explore whether gender played a role in how work-life balance is experienced and managed. It was interesting to see if there were differences between female and male managers, both in how they approach work-life balance and how they experience the challenges connected to it.

Given the short timeframe for data collection and the limited access to potential participants, the recruitment was done primarily through the author's professional network. This approach was necessary due to the time constraints of the study, and using existing contacts allowed the author to quickly identify and connect with suitable participants. Additionally, some participants were reached through referrals and recommendations, including through colleagues, friends, or even spouses of the initial participants. This snowball method was effective in identifying managers who fit the profile required for the study within the available time frame.

While this approach—drawing on the author's professional network and using a snowballing method—was pragmatic given the limited time for data collection, it may have limited the diversity of the sample. Participants came largely from similar social and professional circles, which could have influenced the range of perspectives captured. While the sample included individuals from various industries and cultural backgrounds, the reliance on existing contacts may have resulted in certain homogeneity, particularly in terms of career stage, managerial roles, and organizational settings.

An overview of the participants is presented in Table 1, providing details such as gender, role, nationality, industry, company size, team context, and the date of the interview.

Table 1

Gender	Role	Nationality	Country	Industry	Company Size	Team Context	Interview conducted
Male	Head of Group Finance	Swedish	Sweden	Tax Advisory	Medium	Managing ≈ 8 people	22nd April 11:30-12:00
Female	Managing Director	French	UK	Customer Goods	Small	Managing ≈ 4 people	22nd April 15:30-16:15
Female	Managing director	Swedish	Sweden	Customer Goods	Small	Managing ≈ 30 people	25th April 10:30-11:15
Male	Managing Director	Swedish	Germany	Customer Goods	Small	Managing ≈ 10 people	21st April 14:00-14:30
Male	CFO	Swedish	Sweden	Customer Goods	Large	Managing ≈ 50 people	30th April 09:30-09:55
Female	Exhibition Manager	Belarussian	Austria	Art	Large	Managing ≈ 25 people	22nd April 19:30-20:30
Male	Head of IT	Swedish	Sweden	IT	Medium	Managing ≈ 15 people	23rd April 15:00-15:45
Male	CMO	Swedish	Sweden	Sport	Small	Managing ≈ 10 people	6th May 15:45-16:30
Male	Head of Operations	Swedish	UK	Customer Goods	Small	Managing ≈ 8 people	25th April 11:15-12:00
Male	Head of Data	Swedish	Sweden	Music	Large	Managing ≈ 40 people	24th April 11:00-11:30
Male	Senior Manager	Netherlands	Sweden	Tech	Medium	Managing ≈ 25 people	26th April 11:00-11:45
Male	Managing Director	German	Sweden	Consulting	Small	Managing ≈ 20 people	24th April 16:00-16:30

Table 1 summarizes key background details of the twelve middle managers who participated in the study. It outlines their roles, nationalities, industries, organizational contexts, and team sizes, alongside the dates of the interviews.

3.4 Interview Guide

For this study, a semi-structured interview guide was developed to explore middle managers' experiences and perceptions of work-life balance. The semi-structured format was chosen because it allows for consistency across all interviews while also giving the flexibility to ask follow-up questions and explore unexpected but relevant topics that may emerge during the conversations. This format was especially useful for giving participants the space to reflect on their own experiences and stories, while ensuring that all the key areas related to the research question were covered.

The interview guide was developed based on the theoretical framework of this study, drawing from Boundary Theory, the Job Demands–Resources Model, and Social Role Theory. These theories helped to shape the focus areas of the interviews and ensured that the conversations explored both personal and organizational aspects of work-life balance, including how gender and cultural norms might influence the participants' experiences.

The interview guide started by exploring how participants manage the boundary between work and personal life. Questions invited them to reflect on whether they can disconnect after

working hours and how digital tools, such as emails, Teams, or Slack, influence their ability to do so. Following this, the interviews addressed the culture of availability and role expectations. Participants were encouraged to reflect on whether they experience unspoken expectations to always be reachable, and whether their role, level of seniority, or gender might shape these expectations.

Further questions focused on workload, pressure, and support. Participants shared what aspects of their jobs they found most demanding and whether they felt supported by their organizations, leaders, or colleagues. They were also asked about the formal work-life balance policies available in their workplace and whether they felt able to use them.

Another part of the interview guide explored recovery and coping strategies. Participants discussed how they deal with work stress, how they recover after demanding periods, and whether they felt they had enough time and space for recovery and self-care. The guide then shifted to questions about organizational and cultural norms, prompting participants to reflect on how leadership, success, and personal sacrifice are valued in their workplace, and whether they had noticed any differences based on gender.

In addition, the guide explored the perceived gap between formal work-life balance policies and the everyday reality in participants' organizations. Finally, participants were invited to share what work-life balance means to them personally, whether they feel it is achievable, and what obstacles they see in their context.

The interview guide was used as a flexible tool throughout the data collection process. While the same topics were discussed with all participants, the order and flow of the conversations were adapted depending on how the discussions evolved. This allowed the author to ask follow-up questions and explore new topics that participants brought up, making the interviews more dynamic and personal. The guide was prepared using simple and open-ended questions to create a reflective and comfortable atmosphere for participants. Before starting the actual interviews, the guide was tested with two professional contacts from the author's network, which helped to refine the wording and sequence of the questions for clarity and flow. The complete interview guide is presented in *Appendix A - Interview Guide*.

3.5 Data analysis

This study was conducted using an abductive research approach, which guided the overall design and interpretation of the findings. For the analysis of the interview data, a thematic analysis method was applied. This combination allowed for a flexible and iterative process, where theoretical frameworks and empirical insights informed one another throughout the development of key themes.

At the outset, the interview guide was developed based on established theories, including Boundary Theory, the Job Demands–Resources Model, Social Role Theory, and Mindfulness Theory. These frameworks informed the initial design of interview questions, helping to shape the conversation and prompt participants to reflect on relevant dimensions of work-life balance. During the interviews, questions were asked with these theoretical lenses in mind, enabling an early alignment between conceptual constructs and participants' responses.

Once the interview data were collected, thematic analysis began with close reading and re-reading of the transcripts. Initial codes were generated from participants' language and experiences, many of which aligned with the theoretical concepts used during interview design. However, during this stage, new and unanticipated themes also emerged—ideas and experiences that extended beyond the boundaries of the original theoretical frameworks.

Recognizing this, the analysis adopted an abductive approach, where the author moved back and forth between the data and the literature. Existing theories were revisited and critically examined considering these emerging patterns, while the new insights were further refined through comparison with the empirical material. This dialogue between theory and data helped to develop a more comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences.

To structure the findings, the coding process was inspired by the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2013) and principles of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This involved organizing the data into first-order codes (grounded in participants' language), second-order themes (reflecting analytical interpretation), and aggregate dimensions (representing conceptual categories).

Thematic analysis remained flexible, theory-informed, and participant-driven. The result was a set of themes that were not only conceptually meaningful but also closely aligned with the voices and lived realities of the participants.

3.6 Trustworthiness

Credibility

Credibility refers to whether the research findings truly reflect the participants' experiences (Nowell et al., 2017). To reduce the risk of bias, all interviews were conducted using open-ended questions, allowing participants to speak freely and in their own words. They were not told the specific focus of the research in advance to avoid leading their responses. All interviews were recorded and transcribed carefully. During interviews, their answers were repeated in other words to check if they were understood correctly.

Transferability

In qualitative research, it is often hard to say if the results can apply in other situations (Bryman & Bell, 2013). This study focused on middle managers across several European companies that varied in industry — including tax advisory, music, IT, sport, and consumer goods — but shared some similarities in terms of organizational size and managerial responsibilities. These factors may limit how well the findings can be applied to other companies or countries.

Dependability

All steps of the study—from planning to interviews and analysis—were done by one person. However, the work was regularly reviewed by a university supervisor, which helped to maintain quality and reduce personal bias. All steps in the research were written down and saved. This included how interview questions were made, how data was coded, and how themes were developed (Elo et al., 2014; Nowell et al., 2017). Still, because only one person collected and analysed the data, some dependability issues may remain (Bryman & Bell, 2013).

Confirmability

Every person has personal values and opinions, which may influence how the data is understood (Bryman & Bell, 2013). Since this study was conducted by one person, extra care was taken to stay objective and fair during the analysis. The author regularly thought about

personal views and how they could affect the findings. The goal was to present the interviewees' experiences as truthfully as possible, without letting personal opinions affect the conclusions.

3.7 Critical reflections

Reflecting critically on the methodology applied in this study, it is important to acknowledge both its strengths and inherent limitations. The use of semi-structured interviews provided valuable insights into the lived experiences of middle managers regarding work-life balance. However, due to the sensitive, personal, and often psychological nature of the topic, the data collection process presented certain challenges.

Work-life balance is a deeply personal subject that touches on aspects of well-being, identity, and individual coping strategies. Discussing these topics can provoke feelings of vulnerability, as it requires participants to reflect on their internal struggles and admit potential shortcomings in balancing work and personal life. As is typical in such contexts, participants may have been influenced by social desirability bias, preferring to present themselves in a positive light. This tendency may have been amplified in this study since the participants were primarily recruited from the author's professional network. Knowing the interviewer beforehand might have created a sense of familiarity that, rather than encouraging openness, led some participants to withhold more personal or sensitive reflections, possibly to maintain a certain professional image.

Furthermore, the deliberate choice was made not to provide participants with the full list of interview questions in advance. The rationale behind this was to avoid overly rehearsed or formalized responses, and to foster spontaneity and authenticity in the reflections shared. While participants were given a general idea of the topic—namely, that the interview would focus on their experiences with work-life balance as managers—they were not guided through specific questions beforehand. This strategy helped minimize the influence of social desirability bias and encouraged more honest responses.

Moreover, it was observed during the interviews that participants tended to avoid directly admitting difficulties with work-life balance, often providing generalized or idealized responses. To overcome this, it was necessary to approach the subject from various angles, using indirect questioning techniques that encouraged participants to reflect on their routines,

feelings, and coping behaviors. This method allowed for more nuanced insights to emerge and revealed aspects of their experiences that might have remained hidden if approached only through direct questions.

An additional methodological limitation relates to the discussion of gender. Despite the inclusion of both male and female participants, it was noted that conversations around gender roles and expectations were sometimes limited, particularly when male participants were interviewed. It appeared that some hesitation existed when discussing gender-related issues, potentially influenced by the fact that the interviewer was female. This dynamic may have led to certain guarded or cautious responses, possibly reducing the depth of reflections shared by male participants. In contrast, female participants generally appeared more comfortable addressing these issues, providing more open and detailed responses. This observation underlines how the identity of the interviewer can influence participant comfort and openness, particularly when sensitive or socially charged topics, such as gender, are discussed.

3.8 Methodological considerations for future replication

If this study were to be conducted again, an important methodological adjustment would involve expanding and diversifying the sample. The original research included twelve participants, primarily based in Europe and largely recruited through professional networks. A broader sample would help provide more detailed insights and enrich the diversity of perspectives. Specifically, future research could aim to increase the number of participants to capture a wider range of experiences across different managerial contexts. Geographic diversity could also be enhanced by including middle managers from non-European regions such as North America, Asia, and Africa, where cultural norms, labor regulations, and organizational expectations regarding work-life balance may differ substantially. This would allow for comparative analysis and strengthen the global applicability of the findings.

Furthermore, including participants from a wider range of industries would help build a more complete understanding of how work-life balance works in different types of jobs. Fields such as healthcare, finance, law, education, manufacturing and other related industries often involve higher stress and longer hours, which may lead to different experiences. Exploring a wider mix of industries could provide important insights that were not fully explored in this study. Adding voices from less-represented or more demanding sectors would make the

analysis stronger and show how different work environments affect the well-being of middle managers.

Involving people from a range of career stages would offer a broader picture of how work-life balance is shaped by experience, personal development, and changing responsibilities over time. Including early-career managers could help explore how newer leaders deal with work pressure, overcommitment, and the learning curve of leadership roles. Their perspectives may reveal different coping strategies or expectations compared to those with more experience. On the other hand, involving late-career professionals could offer a longer-term view on how work-life balance shifts throughout one's career. Their reflections could help highlight how priorities change with age, seniority, and approaching retirement.

Thus, it could benefit from a more structured focus on personality and psychological traits. Future research could include a deeper look at how different personality traits and coping styles—such as emotional intelligence, mindfulness, resilience, or stress tolerance—affect how managers experience and manage work-life balance. These personal qualities may play a big role in how people handle pressure, set boundaries, or deal with overwork. To support this, it could be helpful to use established psychological tools, such as the Big Five personality test or resilience scales. These tools would make it easier to compare results across participants and better understand how individual differences shape work-life experiences.

Additionally, introducing a follow-up phase with selected participants could enhance the study's depth and temporal relevance. Many participants described their experiences of work-life balance as evolving and context-dependent. Conducting a second round of interviews several months later would allow for observation of how their strategies and perspectives shift over time, especially in response to organizational changes or personal life events. This longitudinal approach would support a more dynamic understanding of how managers adapt to ongoing work-life demands.

4. Empirical findings

This section presents the empirical findings from interviews with middle managers, exploring how they define and experience work-life balance. Key themes include blurred boundaries, availability pressure, managerial stress, recovery strategies, gender differences, the role of

organizational culture, and the subjective meaning of balance. Together, these findings offer a nuanced understanding of the complex factors influencing work-life balance in managerial roles.

4.1 Blurred Boundaries

One of the main themes emerging from the interviews was the difficulty participants faced in separating work and personal life. Many described how their work often extended beyond official working hours, making it challenging to fully "switch off" mentally, even when they were physically away from work. Participants explained that thoughts about work tasks or unfinished business often stayed in their minds during evenings or weekends, interfering with their ability to relax and enjoy personal time. For example, Participant 1 shared that although he tries to spend time with his family and engage in personal activities, his mind remains occupied by work matters, saying, *"On a day-to-day, I still think about work. There's always something, the work is never done. So, my brain is always on".*

A key factor that contributed to these blurred boundaries was the role of digital tools, such as emails, Teams, and Slack. These platforms, often installed on personal devices, created a constant stream of work notifications that blurred the line between work and leisure time. Participant 4 described how the availability of these tools made it much harder to fully disconnect, stating, *"It's harder to shut off completely, especially in this digital age where you get your emails on your phone and Slack or Teams messages and stuff like that".* Several participants recognized this challenge and described strategies they adopted to manage it. Some set clear personal rules, such as activating "Do Not Disturb" modes or instructing their teams to only call for urgent matters. Participant 5 elaborated on his personal boundaries, saying that he informed his team to only call him if something truly urgent occurred, while intentionally ignoring emails or messages during personal time: *"If you need to reach me in the evenings for something that's urgent, call. Don't text me or don't email me or don't Slack me or Teams me because I won't be checking that as regular".*

Despite these efforts, many participants still found it difficult to fully disconnect. Participant 2 admitted that despite her efforts, thoughts about work often arose even during family time, replying simply, *"Yes, I do."* when asked if work remained on her mind outside of working hours. Similarly, Participant 7 observed that while he is generally good at mentally switching off from work during weekends, during critical periods or when facing high-pressure

situations, work thoughts continued to dominate his personal time: *"Sometimes, if it's a big deal or something, then I can't stop thinking about it"*.

Additionally, some participants shared that they kept notifications on for certain apps, not because they wanted to be always available, but to feel they could control when they responded. Participant 4 shared that he keeps Teams notifications on but not emails, saying, *"I only have Teams on. I never have a notification for emails. But I check them quite regularly. But I don't have a notification on"*. This allowed him to stay informed without feeling that he had to respond immediately, and to manage his personal boundaries in a way that suited him.

Participants spoke about the importance of managing priorities to reduce stress and regain control over their work and personal life boundaries. Many described how, with experience, they had learned to focus on what truly mattered and to intentionally ignore non-urgent matters, especially during personal time. Participant 9 explained that he became better at prioritizing over the years, noting that while he used to feel the need to respond to everything, now he filters tasks carefully and does not reply to every message immediately: *"I become better at prioritizing so that I don't reply to everything. It's rather filtered out"*.

4.2 Availability Pressure

Another theme that appeared strongly in the participants' accounts was the feeling of always needing to be available for work, regardless of time or day. Many participants described that while there were no formal rules requiring them to be online after hours, they still felt a personal or professional expectation to remain reachable during evenings or weekends. Participant 7 noted that although there was no official requirement to work during weekends, managers often accepted the reality of needing to work outside standard hours if the situation demanded it. He shared, *"I think it was a combination of, you know, wanting to show yourself as a reliable employee. Not required, but expected, maybe"* (Participant 7). Moreover, there was an "unspoken rule" in many workplaces, where being constantly accessible was part of demonstrating leadership and dedication. Participant 8 reflected on this dynamic, saying, *"I used to try to do everything. I used to try to be, you know, always available, and I figured the best way to success, I thought, was to really be on all the time"*.

Several participants reflected that this feeling of needing to be always present and responsive was especially strong earlier in their careers. Participant 6 admitted that earlier in his career,

he worked long hours and felt a stronger urge to always be available. However, with experience, he learned to set more boundaries and found it easier to disconnect, although he still acknowledged the challenges in doing so: *"These days, I have become much better at just cutting it out... I'm better at shutting off my phone, not turning it off completely, but rather putting it in 'Do Not Disturb' mode".*

While participants tried to set personal rules—such as not checking emails after a certain hour or instructing teams to call only for urgent matters—they still admitted that the pressure to be reachable persisted and contributed to stress and difficulties in relaxing. Participant 1 described that although he tries to maintain boundaries, he sometimes feels that he himself is the one violating them, admitting, *"I can disrespect it myself every now and then. And I think it's more myself than anyone else, actually".* This shows how the pressure could be self-imposed, adding to the complexities of managing work-life boundaries.

All participants described working evenings or weekends as a routine aspect of their role but emphasized that this was not inherently problematic as long as they maintained control over their time. Participant 7 explained that being available outside of standard hours was acceptable when it was his choice, stating, *"It's not required, but expected, maybe... and I'm fine with that, as long as I decide when I respond."* Similarly, Participant 5 reflected on his flexible approach, noting, *"I don't mind working in the evening if I've had the space during the day. As long as it evens out and I'm the one managing it, it's fine."*

4.3 Managerial Stress

Participants described that being a manager brings specific types of stress, mainly because they must balance their own tasks while also supporting their teams. Several participants explained that this double responsibility often creates a feeling of being overwhelmed. Participant 7 shared that one of the most demanding aspects is having to manage his own workload while remaining available for his team whenever they need support, stating, *"The most stressful part [is] feeling that you're supporting your team enough, that you can perform your own work tasks at the same time as you're being a mentor to your team and being able to, you know, help them get their... to be there when they ask, can I get five minutes of you? Because I need your input on this".* This illustrates how participants felt the constant need to balance two roles at once, which they found emotionally and practically demanding.

Additionally, several participants described that the responsibility of supporting others was often more stressful than their own tasks. Participant 5 explained that ensuring his team members feel supported and not overwhelmed is something he always worries about, *"Making sure they don't feel overwhelmed, that they feel supported, that's the part that stresses me the most. Not my own tasks, but theirs"*.

Some participants described feeling caught between the expectations coming from their own managers and the needs of their teams. Participant 10 explained that this "middle" position often made him feel conflicted, as he had to manage both upwards and downwards expectations, which added extra strain to his role. He shared, *"It's always a balancing act. You have expectations from your own boss, and then you have your team needing your support. You are kind of in the middle and that can be exhausting"*.

Participants described experiencing guilt when they could not support their teams outside of work hours. Participant 12 admitted that even though there is no official requirement to be always available, he sometimes feels guilty if he cannot respond or help his team during evenings, *"I feel bad if I can't help when someone reaches out... even if it's late. I feel I should be there"*. Similarly, Participant 10 reflected that while he tries to set boundaries, he still finds it difficult to not feel responsible for his team's well-being, *"You can't help but feel responsible for how your team is doing, even when it's outside work hours. It's hard to fully let go"*.

4.4 Recovery Strategies

A recurring theme from the interviews was how participants recovered from work-related stress and how they viewed the idea of work-life balance as an ongoing process rather than a perfect state. Many participants emphasized that activities such as exercise, spending time with family, and engaging in hobbies played an important role in helping them recharge from work demands. Participant 12 described how playing tennis and spending Saturdays disconnected from work helped him clear his mind, stating, *"I play tennis, and I spend Saturdays really switching off. I spend time with my family, I have a home-cooked dinner, I try to really turn it off for that day"*. Similarly, Participant 8 shared that exercising regularly and walking his dog were his main ways to unwind and regain energy, explaining, *"I work out a lot. And I walk my dog for two hours. This is my way to recover from everything"*.

Interestingly, several participants underlined the role of family support as crucial for sustaining work-life balance over time. Participant 3 reflected on how she and her partner balanced each other's workloads during different life periods, stating, *"If in one period of life I have to take a more demanding job, then the other is doing more at home, and then we switch when needed"*. This shared responsibility was seen as an important coping mechanism, enabling managers to handle demanding work phases without fully sacrificing family commitments. Along the same lines, Participant 5 shared that simply having conversations with a partner outside the industry provided an outlet for expressing work frustrations and helped to gain a different perspective: *"Sometimes your partner is not from this industry, so it helps to share something that happened with a person who is not from a similar industry"*.

4.5 Gender Differences

A theme that emerged from several interviews was the perception that gender influenced how managers experienced and managed work-life balance. However, opinions among participants were equally divided. Some participants described clear gender-based differences, while others felt that gender was not a significant factor, pointing to personality and organizational culture as more decisive factors. For example, Participant 8 commented, *"I don't really see that big of a difference. It's more about personality and individual preferences than gender"*. In contrast, Participant 3 shared that, based on her experience, gender differences were still very present, saying, *"There's no doubt that there's a difference between being a professional woman and being a professional man... even when you are senior, you have to keep your guard up and fight a little bit harder"*.

Participants who noted such differences highlighted that women often felt additional pressures to prove themselves, particularly when taking parental leave or aiming for senior positions. Participant 2 explained, *"There is a perception that as a woman, especially if you take parental leave, you need to show that you are still as committed as before, or even more"*. Similarly, Participant 3 reflected that women often needed to be more prepared and overqualified to be considered for the same roles as men, *"Women are overall more qualified for the roles that they get than men are... they have to be more experienced to get the same role as a man"*.

Furthermore, participants observed differences in how men and women handled stress and sought support. Participant 12 noted that men often found it harder to admit when they were overwhelmed or stressed, preferring to deal with these feelings privately: *"Men often just hold it in and try to push through"*. In contrast, Participant 1 highlighted that women were generally more open to seeking help or sharing when they felt overloaded, which contributed to different coping styles between genders.

Additionally, some participants pointed out subtle but persistent assumptions in professional settings. Participant 3 shared a striking example where, after leading a significant presentation during a leadership meeting, an older male participant approached her—not to discuss the content—but to ask her to organize a taxi, despite her senior role: *"He could ask, like, can someone please organize a taxi? But no, he only asked me because I was the only woman in the room"*. Similarly, Participant 1 reflected on broader differences in how women and men approach work expectations. He suggested that women are often more detail-oriented and feel pressure to excel across all assigned tasks, which may lead to exhaustion, whereas men might adopt a more strategic focus, prioritizing tasks based on visibility and expected outcomes.

4.6 Organisational policies and culture

The empirical findings strongly indicate that organizational culture significantly influences how work-life balance policies are actually used and perceived. While formal policies such as flexible hours, remote work, and parental leave are widely implemented, their effectiveness largely depends on the informal norms and behaviours modelled by managers. Several participants emphasized that managers act as cultural role models: if they consistently work late, avoid taking parental leave, or respond to emails after hours, it implicitly signals to employees that such behaviours are expected, regardless of official policy statements. As Participant 3 noted, *"If the manager doesn't take parental leave or vacation, then your personnel won't do it. The manager is a mentor and a role model. They set what is expected"*.

Moreover, participants pointed out that managers themselves often struggle to utilize work-life balance policies due to cultural expectations of constant availability and high performance, even when these expectations are not explicitly stated. Participant 9 said, *"Policies exist, but at the end of the day, it's the culture and leadership behaviour that decides if you feel safe to use them. It's not about what's written—it's about what you see your*

manager do". This reinforces the idea that culture acts as a filter through which formal policies are interpreted, making leadership behaviour a crucial determinant of whether employees feel empowered to prioritize work-life balance.

However, in companies where leaders openly model healthy work-life practices, such as setting clear boundaries or actively taking leave, employees reported feeling more comfortable using the same benefits. Participant 6 explained, *"My boss takes flexible hours seriously, and because of that, the whole team feels safe to do it too. It becomes a norm, not an exception"*. Therefore, the enactment of work-life balance policies is not merely a matter of availability but is deeply embedded in the organization's cultural fabric, with managers playing a pivotal role in shaping these informal expectations.

4.7 Balance Meaning

The interviews revealed that the concept of work-life balance was highly subjective and varied greatly among participants. Each participant described work-life balance in different ways, demonstrating that for some, it was about achieving harmony between work and personal life, while for others, it was about blending both domains seamlessly. For instance, Participant 1 shared that for him, work-life balance was about flexibility and being able to plan his own time, such as attending his child's sport activity or going to the doctor during the day, while also working on weekends if needed. Similarly, Participant 8 reflected that he did not perceive work and life as strictly separate spheres, but rather as integrated elements of his daily routine, emphasizing that he felt comfortable mixing them because this allowed him to be present both at work and at home.

Moreover, participants consistently expressed the belief that achieving work-life balance is not about strict separation but rather about finding what works individually and adapting over time. One of the participants explained, *"I think it's all of that. And I also think it's mainly feeling like you have time to do the things you want to do... That's a good way to sort of track your work-life balance. You need to first define how you want to live your life"*. Similarly, Participant 4 remarked that work-life balance should be seen as a journey that evolves with life circumstances, observing, *"It's all about finding your own harmony... it's not about rigid rules"*.

Interestingly, most participants acknowledged that while they felt they had some degree of balance, this balance was not static. It changed over time, depending on their role, personal

circumstances, and specific work periods. Participant 9 explained that his sense of balance evolved throughout his career and was influenced by the increasing responsibilities that came with senior roles, where flexibility often replaced strict working hours.

When discussing what influenced their ability to maintain work-life balance, participants pointed to several key factors. Personal traits and habits played an important role, with some participants noting that their own ambition and drive often led them to work beyond regular hours, creating self-imposed pressures. At the same time, organizational culture and managerial expectations were cited as significant influences. Participant 11 noted that certain company cultures made it harder to disconnect, while others were more understanding and encouraged healthy boundaries. Furthermore, Participant 7 noted that the nature of the tasks—especially in high-responsibility or high-pressure roles—was mentioned as a factor that could blur boundaries and make it harder to fully disengage from work, regardless of formal policies in place.

5. Analysis

This section analyses the empirical findings using Boundary Theory, the Job Demands–Resources model, Social Role Theory, and Mindfulness Theory. By connecting these frameworks to participants' experiences, the analysis explains how personal, organizational, and cultural factors interact to shape middle managers' work-life balance.

The Job Demands–Resources model describes long hours and blurred lines between work and personal life as harmful, leading to stress and burnout (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

However, middle managers often accepted this as a normal part of their job, while maintaining the perception that they had good work-life balance. They did not see long working hours or working during evenings and weekends as problematic, as long as they had freedom and control over their time. This highlights a nuanced application of the Job Demands–Resources framework, in which perceived autonomy serves as a buffer against negative effects.

The empirical findings illustrate that blurred work-life boundaries were a dominant theme across participants, with digital tools such as Microsoft Teams, Slack, and email playing a central role in eroding the separation between work and personal life. This aligns directly with Boundary Theory, particularly the concepts of permeability and flexibility (Ashforth et al., 2000). The participants' struggles to disconnect mentally, even during leisure time, reflect

high boundary permeability, where work intrudes into personal domains, worsened by always-on digital connectivity (Ghislieri et al., 2017; Mirbabaie & Marx, 2024). However, managers in this study were generally comfortable with blurred boundaries—as long as they could set their own limits. For example, they turned off notifications or told their teams not to message them unless it was urgent. This aligns with the idea of Person–Environment fit, where people feel more satisfied and less strained when their work setup matches their personal preferences (Piszczyk & Berg, 2014). In addition, some managers described switching between work and personal roles many times a day—something known as “zigzag working” (Harris & Haar, 2024). While potentially tiring, those who felt in control reported managing it better, further supporting the application of Boundary Theory.

The specific aspects associated with middle management roles—such as balancing personal workload with team support—correspond strongly to the Job Demands–Resources model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). The interview data reveal that high job demands, including emotional pressure, constant decision-making, and the expectation to always be available, contribute to the health impairment process, increasing emotional exhaustion and diminishing recovery capacity (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Salmela-Aro & Upadaya, 2018). At the same time, the findings confirm the critical role of job resources, such as autonomy, team support, and personal coping strategies, in buffering these demands. Participants who described effective prioritization and boundary-setting reflect job crafting behaviors (Demerouti & Bakker, 2011), where they proactively adjusted work practices to protect well-being. The accounts show that personal resources, such as mindfulness and self-awareness—though not always explicitly named—helped participants manage the pressures of their roles. This aligns with the Job Demands–Resources model’s extension to include personal strengths as resilience factors (Grover et al., 2017; Lyddy, Good et al., 2025).

The experiences of male and female middle managers in this study reflect, in many ways, the core ideas of Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987), which explains how gendered expectations shape behavior in the workplace. Female managers often reported feeling the need to be “over-prepared” or work harder to earn credibility, especially after taking parental leave or while striving for leadership roles. These findings are consistent with the concept of the double bind (Rudman & Glick, 2002), where women are expected to be both competent and caring—assertive but not too aggressive. This tension can lead to added pressure and

self-monitoring, contributing to emotional strain and a cautious use of work-life balance benefits.

The data supports the existence of a flexibility stigma (Williams et al., 2013), where both men and women feared being perceived as less committed if they used work-life balance policies such as flexible hours or parental leave. This stigma reinforces a culture of overwork and presenteeism. Notably, male managers in the study often avoided showing vulnerability or asking for support—further illustrating gendered coping styles shaped by social expectations that discourage emotional openness in men (Hanek & Garcia, 2022). However, a surprising split appeared in the responses. About half of the participants—men and women alike—believed gender did not play a major role in shaping their work-life balance experiences. They felt that challenges around availability, stress, and balance were shared by all managers and were more influenced by personal values, leadership culture, or workload than by gender. This finding is interesting because it contrasts with much of the existing literature, which often emphasizes the impact of gender roles on work-life balance, especially for women in leadership (Toffoletti & Starr, 2016; Tomlinson & Durbin, 2010; Kossek & Lambert, 2002). This shows that Social Role Theory may not fully explain all modern experiences.

Participants described various recovery strategies, such as exercise, spending time with family, and engaging in hobbies, that allowed them to manage work-related stress and maintain a sense of balance. These strategies can be linked to Mindfulness Theory, which emphasizes the importance of self-regulation of attention and present-moment awareness (Bishop et al., 2004). Participants' efforts to create intentional recovery moments, such as technology disconnection on weekends, mirror mindfulness practices aimed at facilitating psychological detachment from work—a key mechanism for preventing emotional exhaustion (Hülshager et al., 2013; Malinowski & Lim, 2015).

Findings about work-life balance organisational policies closely align with the Job Demands–Resources model and Social Role Theory, which together help explain the managerial paradox identified in this theme. From the perspective of the Job Demands–Resources framework, managers experience heightened job demands—such as workload, emotional labor, and expectations of availability—while often lacking organizational resources that explicitly support their own work-life balance, despite these being formally offered to employees. This imbalance worsens the health impairment process,

leading to strain and potential burnout if managers feel unable to disconnect or take leave themselves. Additionally, Social Role Theory offers a lens to understand the cultural and symbolic dimension of managerial behavior. Managers, especially in high-visibility leadership roles, internalize societal and organizational norms that associate leadership with constant availability, dedication, and sacrifice, often at the expense of personal well-being. This reinforces a self-perpetuating cycle, where managers both model and embody an unsustainable work culture, sending implicit signals to employees that utilizing work-life balance policies may be career-limiting or seen negatively.

While few participants explicitly used the term "mindfulness," the practices they described—such as focusing on the present, engaging in reflective conversations with partners outside the industry, and adjusting their planning to life circumstances—reflect the 'Being' and 'Doing' modes integration highlighted by Lyddy & Good (2017). These personal strategies acted as internal resources, helping managers buffer the effects of high demands and aligning with the Job Demands–Resources model's recognition of mindfulness as a dynamic coping mechanism (Grover et al., 2017; Lyddy, Good et al., 2025).

Finally, participants described work-life balance as a flexible and constantly changing process, rather than a fixed or perfect state. This supports the idea from Boundary Theory that boundaries between work and personal life are shaped by personal preferences and changing situations (Ashforth et al., 2000; Delanoeije et al., 2019). Their experiences suggest that balance is not about strict separation, but about adjusting over time in ways that suit their roles and lives—an idea that fits with both Boundary Theory and the Job Demands–Resources model.

Moreover, the findings highlight the dynamic interplay between organizational culture, leadership expectations, and individual strategies, emphasizing the complex environment in which middle managers operate. This intersection underscores the importance of integrating multiple theoretical perspectives, as the experiences of middle managers cannot be fully captured through a single framework. Instead, a comprehensive understanding requires a multifaceted approach that accounts for organizational structures, personal agency, cultural norms, and gendered dynamics.

6. Discussion

This chapter explores how middle managers view work-life balance and identifies the key factors that shape their experiences, by linking the study's findings to previous research. It highlights both consistencies and divergences with earlier studies, offering a comparative perspective on how current insights align with or challenge established knowledge.

One of the most salient findings is the absence of a uniform definition of work-life balance among participants. Each manager articulated a unique and evolving understanding of the concept, often shaped by personal values, life stages, and role responsibilities. This reinforces the argument by Otuya & Andeyo (2020), who describe balance as the effective distribution of time and energy between professional and personal spheres. Yet, the present study expands this notion by highlighting that balance is not merely about time management—it is about achieving a personally meaningful sense of control and fulfilment.

Rather than viewing balance as a static or ideal state, participants described it as a dynamic process that shifts over time. For some, balance meant allocating energy fairly between work and personal life. For others, it involved staying connected to work outside traditional hours—when such engagement fostered a sense of agency and peace of mind. This aligns with Gragnano et al (2020) emphasis on maintaining satisfaction across domains, but the findings extend this by illustrating how participants sustain well-being through context-sensitive adaptations.

This study challenges the traditional binary of segmentation versus integration as outlined by Michel et al. (2014). Rather than striving for strict boundaries, participants emphasized flexibility as the cornerstone of their balance strategies. Especially during life transitions—such as parenthood—managers reported needing to recalibrate and reassess their routines. This contrasts with earlier studies that emphasized role separation as essential for well-being. In contrast, the current study suggests that adaptability and self-regulated priority-setting are more central to balance for middle managers.

Notably, many managers preferred to integrate work and life rather than separate them. Evening email checks or staying informed on weekends were described not as intrusions, but as empowering choices that reinforced a sense of control. This suggests that having control over when and how they connect to work can reduce stress—unlike in earlier studies, where

constant digital connection was linked to burnout and exhaustion (Björntoft et al., 2020; Hassard & Morris, 2022).

Long working hours were not, in themselves, perceived as problematic by most participants. Many managers reported working late or engaging in work-related tasks during weekends, yet did not view this as harmful to their sense of balance. Instead, they emphasized the importance of autonomy, flexibility, and personal coping strategies over the actual number of hours worked. These findings are consistent with previous research showing that while high workloads and expectations of constant availability can negatively affect well-being, their impact is shaped by individuals' perceived control and ability to manage demands (Björntoft et al., 2020). In this study, participants indicated that having the freedom to decide when and how to engage with work made extended hours more manageable.

These observations diverge from existing literature that links extended working hours and constant availability with heightened stress and reduced well-being (Bilalli et al., 2013; Ford & Collinson, 2011). In contrast, the managers in this study did not automatically associate long hours with imbalance. Instead, self-determined boundaries and internally driven expectations appeared to serve as protective factors. This challenges the assumption that overwork inherently leads to poor work-life balance, suggesting instead that perceived autonomy and individual control play a critical role in shaping how work demands are experienced.

Although formal flexibility policies existed in most participants' workplaces, actual work-life balance experiences were primarily shaped by organisational culture and leadership behaviours. Participants emphasised that norms were set not by written policies, but by what leaders did. For example, when senior managers worked late or ignored flexibility options, others felt discouraged from using them—despite formal entitlements. This finding supports prior research by Maxwell (2005) and McCarthy et al. (2010), which shows that the implementation of work-life policies hinges on managerial modelling. Similarly, Sirgy and Lee (2018) argue that employees' willingness to use flexibility options depends on cultural acceptance. These findings suggest that leadership actions may have greater influence than formal policy statements in shaping the feasibility of work-life balance.

Participants frequently described their role in absorbing emotional stress from their teams—acting as buffers between senior leadership and direct reports. This invisible labour

often went unacknowledged, contributing to emotional exhaustion. These findings echo Parris et al. (2008) and Bjärntoft et al. (2020), who emphasize the emotional demands placed on middle managers and their implications for recovery and well-being.

Many managers described how factors—such as setting limits on overtime, prioritising urgent tasks, and protecting time for recovery—were essential in maintaining work–life balance. It helped them stay focused during work hours and disengage meaningfully in their personal time. Participants shared that these self-regulatory practices developed over time and were not the result of formal training. This mirrors evidence from previous research highlighting that poor boundary management and over-commitment are key threats to balance, while individual actions such as establishing boundaries and limiting emotional investment beyond contractual obligations can significantly enhance well-being (Bjärntoft et al., 2020; Sirgy & Lee, 2018).

Notably, many managers imposed high standards on themselves and internalised responsibility for both their own and their teams' outcomes. This self-imposed pressure, while not externally driven, made it harder to switch off—a pattern linked to perfectionism and over-commitment as described by Sirgy and Lee (2018).

Support from family and partners—particularly in household and childcare duties—was cited as essential in maintaining balance. Female participants especially emphasized the need for equal partnership at home. This highlights that work–life balance is shaped not only in the workplace but also within domestic settings. These findings are consistent with previous studies showing that work-life balance is deeply influenced by domestic arrangements and gendered expectations. For example, Guest (2002) and Toffoletti and Starr (2016) highlight how women often carry the greater share of caregiving duties, limiting their ability to fully benefit from organizational flexibility. As Durbin and Tomlinson (2010) further suggest, without shared support at home, flexible work arrangements may not translate into real balance for women in leadership roles.

Interestingly, gender did not emerge as a dominant factor in participants' experiences. While half the respondents noted subtle gendered assumptions or expectations—such as women being expected to manage caregiving or men avoiding parental leave—the other half insisted that balance depended more on personality, role, and organizational culture. This finding diverges from earlier studies emphasizing gendered struggles (Toffoletti & Starr, 2016;

Tomlinson & Durbin, 2010), and may suggest an evolving workplace culture where traditional gender roles are less rigid. Nonetheless, individual accounts reveal that gendered assumptions have not disappeared entirely.

Participants described how their work–life balance strategies changed over time. Earlier in their careers, many felt the need to prove themselves through constant availability and overwork. With experience, however, they became more confident in setting boundaries and prioritizing what mattered. This finding suggests that career maturity fosters resilience and clarity—highlighting the role of personal development in managing balance. It implies that early-career managers may require targeted support in developing self-management skills. This supports a study that managers initially adopt overwork as a way to prove themselves, but over time may develop healthier strategies to cope (Bilalli et al., 2013).

7. Conclusion

This chapter concludes the study by summarizing the key findings in relation to the research questions. It discusses the theoretical contributions, practical implications, and study limitations, and suggests directions for future research.

This thesis explored how middle managers perceive work-life balance, and what factors influence work-life balance for middle managers. The findings reveal that work-life balance is not a fixed state, but a dynamic, deeply personal process shaped by individual strategies, organizational culture, leadership expectations, and life circumstances.

One of the most insightful conclusions is that middle managers do not adhere to a single, standardized definition of work-life balance. Instead, the concept is understood as a deeply personal and evolving sense of harmony—shaped by individual circumstances, values, and professional responsibilities.

Rather than being a fixed or ideal state, work-life balance can be better understood as a dynamic process—one that evolves over time in response to different life stages, shifting priorities, and workplace demands. For some, it involves distributing time and energy between personal and professional roles in a way that feels fair and peaceful. For others, it may include maintaining a connection to work beyond traditional hours, especially when doing so provides a sense of control or fulfilment.

A recurring insight is that maintaining work-life balance does not depend on rigid boundaries or a strict equal division between professional and personal time. Instead, it centres on discovering a rhythm that feels sustainable and meaningful. Flexibility—rather than strict separation—emerges as a key strategy for managing competing demands. During intense work periods or personal life transitions, such as becoming a parent, the sense of balance often shifts, requiring thoughtful reassessment and realignment.

Blending work and life, rather than keeping them entirely separate, also appears to be a preferred approach. The ability to check emails in the evening or stay informed about work matters over the weekend can offer a sense of control and peace of mind. In these cases, balance is not about enforcing hard boundaries but about integrating both spheres in a way that feels natural and fulfilling.

Importantly, a clear-cut separation between work and personal life is rarely regarded as the ideal. This suggests that the concept of balance has evolved—from being about “switching off” completely to being about maintaining a sense of control and comfort with how work and life intersect. The range of approaches further underscores the view that work-life balance is not a universal formula, but rather a personal, continually evolving experience of harmony.

Interestingly, long working hours do not necessarily undermine one’s overall sense of work-life balance. It is common for middle managers to check emails late at night or attend to tasks over the weekend, yet such behaviours are often perceived as a natural aspect of the role rather than a significant problem. The emphasis tends to be less on the total number of hours worked and more on the presence of flexibility, autonomy, and effective coping strategies. In this context, balance is less about enforcing strict boundaries and more about having control over when and how work responsibilities are managed. As a result, extended work hours do not automatically translate into imbalance, provided there remains space for recovery and personal time.

There appear to be few significant differences in how work-life balance is approached across various cultures, nationalities, or industries. This reinforces the idea that balance is fundamentally personal. What feels balanced to one individual may not feel the same to

another. Sacrificing personal time to complete urgent tasks or support a team is often regarded simply as part of the job and is widely accepted as such.

One of the most influential factors in shaping work-life balance is organizational culture. Having flexible policies in place is not enough on its own; the behaviours modelled by leadership are what truly define workplace norms. When senior leaders consistently work late and avoid using flexible arrangements, others often follow suit—even if more accommodating policies exist. In such cases, informal cultural expectations can outweigh formal rules. Employees feel more empowered to use balance-supporting options when they see colleagues and higher-ups doing the same. A workplace culture that genuinely supports balance gives individuals permission to take breaks, say no, or log off on time without guilt. Conversely, cultures that glorify overwork may pressure employees to sacrifice personal well-being, regardless of official policy.

While this study did not aim to directly measure the influence of cultural orientation on satisfaction, it became evident that cultural context plays a significant role in how work-life balance is experienced and supported. Participants from different regions described distinct advantages depending on their cultural setting. Collectivist cultures often provided stronger social and family-oriented support systems, where maintaining work-life balance enabled individuals to spend more quality time with family and close-knit communities—an important source of satisfaction in those contexts. In contrast, participants from more individualistic cultures emphasized the importance of autonomy, personal freedom, and self-directed time. For them, achieving work-life balance enhanced their sense of control over life and time, which led to greater satisfaction. Thus, both collectivism and individualism can strengthen the effects of work-life balance on satisfaction, but through different pathways.

In addition to structural and cultural influences, the emotional demands placed on managers play a critical role. Managers often act as emotional buffers—spending time resolving conflict, offering mentorship, and absorbing stress on behalf of their teams. This kind of invisible labour is rarely acknowledged and can lead to emotional exhaustion, ultimately impacting their ability to recharge and maintain balance. Recognizing this emotional dimension is essential to understanding the true scope of managerial work and the kind of support needed.

Individual mindset and personal habits strongly influence work-life balance. The ability to prioritize effectively, establish clear boundaries, and remain focused in the present helps in managing workloads without becoming overwhelmed. These behaviours align closely with mindfulness-based approaches that emphasize awareness and intentional action. Those who adopt such strategies tend to be better at recognizing when to stop working and how to enjoy personal time. However, high internal standards and a strong sense of responsibility—particularly for both personal performance and team success—can create tension. Even in the absence of external demands, this internalized pressure can make it difficult to disconnect, showing that balance is also shaped by how individuals manage themselves.

Support from partners and family members plays a crucial role in sustaining work-life balance. Many rely on their families—especially for sharing household and childcare responsibilities—which significantly eases the pressure of long hours or unexpected work demands. This highlights that work-life balance is not only shaped by what occurs at work but also by conditions at home. When personal life is supported, it becomes easier to handle professional challenges. In this sense, balance is a shared responsibility that spans both professional and domestic spheres.

Gender does not appear to be a dominant factor in shaping experiences of work-life balance. Unlike much of the existing literature, which often highlights gender-based disparities, insights in this context suggest more diverse perspectives. Some see balance as a role- or personality-based issue, unaffected by gender. Others still encounter assumptions shaped by traditional stereotypes—such as the expectation that women should manage more caregiving responsibilities, or that men are less likely to take parental leave. These contrasting views may reflect an evolving workplace culture where identity-based roles are becoming less rigid, or they may be influenced by the specific industries or environments being examined. While gender can still influence experiences in some cases, it may no longer be the primary factor. Instead, individual, organizational, and role-specific factors seem to hold greater influence today.

Over time, approaches to work-life balance tend to evolve. Early career stages often involve greater pressure to prove oneself and maintain high availability. As professionals gain experience and confidence, they typically develop stronger boundaries and clearer priorities.

This suggests that career maturity plays a pivotal role—not because demands diminish, but because individuals become more confident in making intentional decisions about how to protect their time and focus on what matters most.

In conclusion, this study shows that work-life balance for middle managers is not a fixed formula but a personal, evolving process shaped by a range of individual, organizational, and cultural factors. Rather than relying on strict boundaries, managers often seek flexible, self-defined strategies that reflect their values, roles, and life circumstances. Autonomy, leadership culture, emotional demands, and support both at work and at home all play vital roles—highlighting that achieving balance is a shared, dynamic effort that changes over time.

7.1 Theoretical Contributions and Practical Implications

7.1.1 Theoretical Contributions

This study offers an important theoretical contribution by focusing on middle managers—a group that has often been overlooked in research on work-life balance. While many existing studies examine either general employees or senior executives, middle managers tend to appear only as implementers of policies, not as individuals with their own unique work-life experiences. By giving space to their voices, this research fills a clear gap and shows that middle managers face complex and specific challenges related to balancing work and life demands.

Furthermore, much of the existing literature on work-life balance was developed more than a decade ago. Since then, the structure of work has changed significantly through digitalization, hybrid work arrangements, and shifting workplace cultures. This study provides timely, updated insights into how work-life balance is experienced today, from the perspective of those who are both leaders and employees. The findings highlight the evolution of work-life expectations and contribute to refreshing a field of knowledge that is ready for re-examination and renewal.

This study contributes to expanding how work-life balance is defined. Rather than treating it as a fixed outcome or measurable condition (e.g., number of hours worked), participants described it as an ongoing negotiation—a process shaped by mindset, context, and shifting personal priorities. This supports a more dynamic, process-oriented understanding of balance,

which aligns with contemporary views in organizational psychology and challenges traditional binary models of “work” versus “life.”

The study challenges commonly held assumptions, particularly around gender and long working hours. While many past studies emphasize gender differences in work-life experiences, this research found no consistent pattern—indicating that work-life balance is increasingly shaped by individual values and organizational culture rather than traditional gender roles. Similarly, long working hours did not always lead to negative experiences of imbalance, especially when individuals had control, flexibility, and supportive environments. These observations expand the theoretical understanding of work-life balance by emphasizing subjectivity, agency, and context.

7.1.2 Practical Implications

This study provides several valuable insights for real-world practice. First, it can serve as a helpful resource for individuals—especially those considering management careers—who may worry that leadership inevitably leads to stress and imbalance. The findings show that while management can be demanding, it does not automatically result in burnout or personal sacrifice. With the right mindset, boundaries, and support systems, it is possible to manage both professional responsibility and personal well-being. This could encourage more people to pursue meaningful leadership roles without fear of losing their balance.

For middle managers themselves, the study brings clarity, reassurance, and validation. It reflects common struggles and strategies, helping managers better understand their own situation. This can reduce feelings of isolation and encourage healthier ways of working, especially through self-awareness, prioritization, and communication.

For organizations, the practical implications are equally important. The research shows that work-life balance is not just about having the right policies—what truly matters is company culture, leadership behaviour, and visible support. Companies that want to attract and retain effective managers must create environments where balance is respected, flexibility is encouraged, and emotional labour is recognized. This includes training leaders to model healthy habits and offering resources that support both personal well-being and team leadership.

This thesis offers practical insight for leadership development programs. Many participants indicated that their ability to manage work-life balance improved with self-awareness, experience, and maturity. These skills—such as prioritizing, letting go of perfectionism, and being mentally present—can be developed and supported through coaching or mindfulness-based leadership training. Organizations seeking to reduce burnout and improve performance among future leaders should consider including work-life balance and emotional regulation as core parts of managerial training.

Finally, in today's competitive job market, companies are under pressure to offer more than just financial compensation. Insights from this study can inform employer branding strategies by showing that what middle managers value most is not shorter working hours, but trust, flexibility, autonomy, and supportive leadership. Communicating and delivering on these values can enhance employee retention, improve engagement, and attract talent who are looking for sustainable and meaningful career paths.

7.2 Limitations

The first limitation concerns the relatively small number of participants. With only twelve interviews conducted, the sample size was limited. While this aligns with the qualitative and exploratory nature of the research, a larger and more diverse group could have revealed additional themes or contrasting experiences. If the study were to be repeated, efforts would be made to include more participants to ensure broader saturation of themes and potentially increase the richness and diversity of perspectives.

Most participants were based in Europe, and a significant proportion were Swedish by nationality or worked in Swedish-based companies. While this offers a valuable look into work-life balance within the context of European labor norms, especially in a Scandinavian setting known for progressive work-life policies, it limits the generalizability of the findings. Work-life balance may look very different in other regions, especially in countries with fewer social protections, different cultural norms, or more rigid organizational structures. Future research should include participants from a broader international range to compare how cultural and national contexts shape the experience of middle managers.

Although participants came from several industries—including consulting, IT, tax, art, and consumer goods—the spread was still limited, and some sectors were underrepresented. In particular, high-pressure sectors such as finance, law, or healthcare, and others such as

manufacturing or education, were not included. Each of these industries may present very different challenges and expectations for work-life balance. A more industry-diverse sample would provide a fuller picture of how context affects middle managers' experiences.

The majority of participants were recruited through the author's personal and professional network, and several were referred through snowball sampling. While this was necessary due to time constraints, it may have introduced bias by selecting individuals from similar social or professional environments. As a result, some perspectives—particularly those from less-connected or more marginalized professionals—may be underrepresented. In future studies, broader recruitment strategies, such as open calls across professional platforms or through company partnerships, would help address this limitation.

The study was conducted within a limited time frame, which influenced both participant recruitment and the depth of interviews. Some interviews were shorter than ideal due to scheduling difficulties, and more time would have allowed for follow-up interviews to deepen the data. In a longer-term study, conducting two rounds of interviews would provide richer insight into how managers' experiences evolve over time or in different work phases.

7.3 Future Research

This study found mixed responses regarding gender—while some participants shared gender-based stereotypes or experiences, others stated that gender played no role at all in their work-life balance. This contradicts much of the existing literature, which often highlights gender differences as a central issue. Future research should investigate whether this reflects a broader shift in workplace culture, and how gender roles are evolving in different industries, countries, or age groups. More focused studies could explore whether gender matters more at different life stages (e.g., during parenting, caregiving, or late-career transitions).

This study mostly included participants with significant professional experience. However, the experience of younger or early-career managers—those just beginning to take on leadership roles—remains largely unexplored. Future research could examine how new managers balance increased responsibility with personal development, social life, and career building. Younger professionals may face different pressures and expectations, especially in fast-moving or startup environments. Understanding their challenges could help companies design better support systems for future leaders.

As this study was largely European, especially Swedish in context, future research should expand to other regions and cultures to see how work-life balance is defined and experienced in other cultural and regional settings. Comparing middle managers across different continents, such as Europe, Asia, and North America, could highlight meaningful differences in values, workplace expectations, and approaches to managing work and personal life..

Further studies could focus on specific industries that were underrepresented in this research, such as finance, healthcare, law, education, or hospitality. These sectors often have higher stress levels, stricter schedules, or more rigid organizational structures, which may result in different patterns of work-life balance. Examining sector-specific dynamics would add granularity to our understanding and help tailor strategies for different work environments.

While this study touched on individual strategies such as prioritization and mindfulness, future research could look more closely at how personality traits (e.g., perfectionism, emotional intelligence) or coping styles influence how managers handle work-life balance challenges. This would offer a more psychological perspective and help identify which personal characteristics support resilience in leadership roles.

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Appendix

Appendix A - Interview Guide

1. Boundary management

- How they distinguish or blend work and personal life on a daily basis.
 - Whether and how they “switch off” after working hours.
 - The impact of digital communication and availability expectations (e.g., email, Slack, Teams).
 - Whether boundaries are self-imposed, externally enforced, or constantly negotiated.
 - Instances where boundaries collapse or feel violated.
-

2. Availability culture and role expectations

- How they perceive the unspoken rules around being available (evenings, weekends).
 - How their position or identity (e.g., gender, seniority) influences what is expected of them.
 - Pressure to be “always on” or to perform commitment through overwork.
 - How these expectations affect their stress levels and sense of guilt or responsibility.
 - How managers internalize the “ideal leader” persona—always in control, available, high-performing.
-

3. Workload, pressure, and support

- What the most demanding aspects of their job are.
 - Whether they feel supported by senior leadership, HR, or colleagues.
 - If they feel they have enough autonomy or flexibility to manage their workload.
 - Access to and use of formal WLB policies (e.g., flextime, remote work).
 - Barriers to using those policies (e.g., fear of stigma, operational pressures).
-

4. Recovery and coping strategies

- How they recover from work stress (e.g., hobbies, time with family, exercise).
 - Whether they feel recovery is adequate or constantly interrupted.
 - The role of self-care, mental health, and burnout prevention.
 - Personal strategies for maintaining energy and resilience.
-

5. Cultural norms

- Whether they feel being a manager inherently requires sacrificing personal time.
 - How “success” in their role is defined—by hours, results, visibility?
 - Whether they’ve observed or experienced differential treatment based on gender (e.g., assumptions about commitment).
 - The balance (or conflict) between being a “good parent” and a “good manager.”
-

6. WLB policy vs. practice

- How formal WLB policies are communicated and implemented in their workplace.
 - Whether these policies feel authentic or performative.
 - Their own role in enforcing or modeling WLB for their team.
 - Contradictions they experience between official policies and daily realities.
-

7. Personal meaning of “balance”

- What WLB means to them personally (e.g., harmony, separation, integration).
 - Whether they feel they have achieved it—or if it feels out of reach.
 - Strategies they use to manage these role clashes (or whether they feel it's even possible).
 - Their aspirations vs. current reality in terms of balance.
 - Whether WLB feels like a possibility or a myth in their context.
-

Appendix B - List of participants and information about the interviews

Gender	Role	Nationality	Country	Industry	Company Size	Team Context	Interview conducted
Male	Head of Group Finance	Swedish	Sweden	Tax Advisory	Medium	Managing ≈ 8 people	22nd April 11:30-12:00
Female	Managing Director	French	UK	Customer Goods	Small	Managing ≈ 4 people	22nd April 15:30-16:15
Female	Managing director	Swedish	Sweden	Customer Goods	Small	Managing ≈ 30 people	25th April 10:30-11:15
Male	Managing Director	Swedish	Germany	Customer Goods	Small	Managing ≈ 10 people	21st April 14:00-14:30
Male	CFO	Swedish	Sweden	Customer Goods	Large	Managing ≈ 50 people	30th April 09:30-09:55
Female	Exhibition Manager	Belarusian	Austria	Art	Large	Managing ≈ 25 people	22nd April 19:30-20:30
Male	Head of IT	Swedish	Sweden	IT	Medium	Managing ≈ 15 people	23rd April 15:00-15:45
Male	CMO	Swedish	Sweden	Sport	Small	Managing ≈ 10 people	6th May 15:45-16:30
Male	Head of Operations	Swedish	UK	Customer Goods	Small	Managing ≈ 8 people	25th April 11:15-12:00
Male	Head of Data	Swedish	Sweden	Music	Large	Managing ≈ 40 people	24th April 11:00-11:30
Male	Senior Manager	Netherlands	Sweden	Tech	Medium	Managing ≈ 25 people	26th April 11:00-11:45
Male	Managing Director	German	Sweden	Consulting	Small	Managing ≈ 20 people	24th April 16:00-16:30

Appendix C - AI Transparency Note

AI was used throughout the writing process to support language clarity and correctness. Specifically, AI was employed to identify and correct grammatical errors, assist in formulating clearer and more coherent sentences, and conduct a final review for spelling and minor language inconsistencies. It was used as a complement to the author's own writing and editing efforts, ensuring that the final text met academic standards. All content, ideas, and interpretations remain the sole responsibility of the author, and all AI-generated suggestions were critically reviewed before inclusion.