

The Interplay of Idiosyncratic Deals and Social Exchange in Quality Employment: The Role of Autonomy Need Satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

Idiosyncratic deals (i - deals) have been conceptually and empirically linked to work - related outcomes among employees. However, when and how i - deals impact intern students' employment quality remains unclear. Drawing from self - determination theory, we investigated the influence of i - deals on two distinct employment quality outcomes: proactive work behavior and job burnout, and explored the mediating role of autonomy need satisfaction in these relationships. In addition, from the perspective of social exchange, we also hypothesized that i - deals stimulate proactive work behavior when students report a higher level of social exchange action and experience more job burnout when they show fewer exchange behaviors. Using a cross - sectional study, we surveyed 369 Chinese intern students from 15 vocational and technical education institutions using a cluster random sampling technique. Structural equation modelling and hierarchical regression analysis were used to analyze the data. The study revealed that autonomy need satisfaction mediated the relationships between i - deals and proactive work behavior as well as job burnout. In addition, social exchange was also found to be a significant moderator of the relationship between i - deals and job burnout rather than proactive work behavior. Specifically, the negative effect of i - deals on burnout was weakened as social exchange increased. Contributions and implications were discussed.

Keywords: idiosyncratic deals, job burnout, proactive work behavior, social exchange, autonomy need satisfaction.

INTRODUCTION

Quality employment reflects a smooth transition from school to work for young adults (Blokker et al., 2023; Congna & Saad, 2025). For early-career employees, high-quality employment help to reduce job burnout and enhances proactive work behavior. Job burnout reflects emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced professional efficacy (Lubbadeh, 2020). Proactive work behavior refers to actions employees take on their own initiative to enhance their future work environment (Bindl & Parker, 2011; Pratama et al., 2023). Graduates experiencing low burnout and high proactivity demonstrate stronger career prospects, higher job satisfaction, and reduced turnover intentions (Kleine et al., 2019). Given vocational education's critical role in China's digital economy, addressing graduate employment quality is essential for human capital sustainability (Liu & Hardy, 2021).

Current research on vocational education graduates' employment exhibits two limitations. First, studies emphasize macro-level employment rates while neglecting micro-level quality indicators. The employment rate of vocational education graduates approached 90% in 2024. However, salary levels remain modest, and career advancement prospects are limited (MyCOS, 2025). High employment rates mask underlying quality deficits.

Graduates face restricted career ladders, limited training opportunities, and high occupational stress, resulting in elevated burnout and diminished proactivity (Feng et al., 2025). Second, research has not examined the behavioral mechanisms or contextual conditions through which human resource management (HRM) practices affect graduate employment quality. Specifically, the psychological processes through which i-deals affect early-career burnout and proactivity remain unexamined.

Idiosyncratic deals (i-deals) are individually negotiated employment arrangements accommodating personal needs and developmental goals (Rousseau, 2015). I-deals create transparent employment relationships, help to reduce burnout, and promote work engagement and organizational citizenship behavior (Liao et al., 2016; Sun et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2025). Young adults particularly benefit from flexibility provisions and customized development opportunities (Anand & Rofcanin, 2022). Therefore, it is necessary to understand when and how these HRM practices enhance employment quality in both theoretical and practical aspects.

We address these gaps by investigating how and when i-deals improve employment quality for vocational e-commerce graduates. Drawing on self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017) and social exchange theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), we propose a moderated mediation model. I-deals satisfy graduates' autonomy needs which reflect the intrinsic desire for volition and self-direction. This satisfaction subsequently reduces burnout and enhancing proactive behaviors (Van den Broeck et al., 2021). Autonomy need satisfaction thus serves as the proximal mechanism linking i-deals to quality employment indicators. Furthermore, when graduates perceive high-quality social exchange, they are more likely to leverage i-deals to expand resources and engage in proactive behaviors (Singh & Vidyarthi, 2018).

Our research contributes to the literature in two ways. First, we identify autonomy need satisfaction as a specific mechanism explaining i-deals' dual effects on burnout and proactive behavior, refining self-determination theory's application to school-to-work transitions. Second, by positioning social exchange as a boundary condition, we reveal when i-deals translate into employment quality improvements, offering nuanced guidance for vocational institutions and e-commerce employers.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Self-determination theory (SDT) posits that individuals possess three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Autonomy need satisfaction refers to the feeling of volition and psychological freedom that is critical for motivated behavior and well-being. When work environments support autonomy, employees experience lower burnout and engage in more proactive behaviors (Van den Broeck et al., 2021). SDT provides a robust framework for understanding how i-deals affect early-career outcomes through need satisfaction.

Social exchange theory (SET) explains workplace relationships as reciprocal exchanges of resources and obligations (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). High-quality social exchange relationships are characterized by trust, mutual investment, and long-term orientation. These relationships enhance employees' willingness to utilize organizational resources and respond with positive behaviors (Cropanzano et al., 2017). Therefore, we integrate SDT and SET to explain how i-deals affect graduate employment quality. I-deals provide autonomy support that satisfies basic psychological needs. However, the effectiveness of i-deals depends on the quality of social exchange relationships that facilitate resource utilization.

Idiosyncratic deals and autonomy need satisfaction

Idiosyncratic deals (i-deals) are personalized employment arrangements negotiated between employees and employers (Rousseau, 2005). Developmental i-deals, such as customized training, flexible scheduling, and special career opportunities, reflect organizational investment in employee growth (Ng & Lucianetti, 2016). These arrangements provide autonomy support by empowering employees volition over their work conditions and developmental paths (Anand & Mitra, 2022). When graduates negotiate i-deals, they experience greater control over job demands and resources, directly satisfying their autonomy needs (Van den Broeck et al., 2021). Research has confirmed that i-deals positively correlate with job autonomy and satisfaction (Hasselgren & Jonsson, 2024; Karakitapoğlu-Aygün et al., 2024). Thus, we develop our first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: I-deals are positively related to autonomy need satisfaction.

Autonomy need satisfaction and job burnout, proactive work behavior

Autonomy need satisfaction reduces burnout by increasing perceived control and reducing psychological strain (Van den Broeck et al., 2021). When individuals feel autonomous, they experience less emotional exhaustion and maintain stronger professional efficacy (Guo et al., 2023). Moreover, autonomy satisfaction enhances proactive behavior by fostering intrinsic motivation and volitional engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Graduates who feel autonomous are more likely to pursue developmental opportunities (Yang et al., 2024). Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2a: Autonomy need satisfaction is negatively related to job burnout.

Hypothesis 2b: Autonomy need satisfaction is positively related to proactive work behavior.

The mediating role of autonomy need satisfaction

The arguments above posit that i-deals provide autonomy support, and that autonomy satisfaction subsequently improves employment quality outcomes. This sequence suggests a mediating mechanism based on SDT. When organizations grant i-deals, graduates perceive greater control over their work and development, satisfying their autonomy needs (Ryan & Deci, 2017). This satisfaction then reduces burnout and stimulates proactive behaviors (Van den Broeck et al., 2021). For example, Luo et al. (2020) found that personalized work agreements enhanced employees' autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs through the analysis of employee - supervisor matching data, which in turn facilitated proactive work behavior.. Thus, i-deals influence employment quality indirectly through autonomy need satisfaction.

Hypothesis 3a: Autonomy need satisfaction mediates the relationship between development i-deals and job burnout.

Hypothesis 3b: Autonomy need satisfaction mediates the relationship between development i-deals and proactive work behavior.

The moderating role of social exchange

Social exchange refers to the exchange relationship between employees and organizations. It is more than a simple economic exchange relationship and also encompasses an exchange relationship of trust, cooperation, and mutual benefit between employees and organizations (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). High-quality social exchange is characterized by trust, perceived organizational support, and mutual investment (Cropanzano et al., 2017). Under frequent exchange, employees believe that i-deals represent genuine organizational commitment rather than transactional arrangements (Jankelova et al., 2025). This enhances the psychological impact of i-deals, making them more effective in reducing burnout and stimulating proactive behavior (Yang et al., 2024). Graduates who believe that their organizations feel safer exercising the flexibility and development opportunities granted through i-deals, which directly reduces emotional exhaustion and encourages proactive behaviors (Ahmad et al., 2023).

Conversely, under a low level of social exchange, individuals may view i - deals skeptically, which limits their motivation. (Cropanzano et al., 2017). Without trust and perceived support, employees lack confidence to leverage i-deals for resource expansion or burnout reduction (Li et al., 2024). The level of social exchange thus determines whether i-deals translate into burnout and proactive behaviors For example, Li and Kong (2021) found that a lower level of leader - member exchange led to perceived deviant tolerance, which in turn resulted in a decrease in their deviant and proactive behaviors. Accordingly, we propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 4a: Social exchange moderates the negative relationship between i-deals and job burnout such that this relationship is stronger when social exchange is high.

Hypothesis 4b: Social exchange moderates the positive relationship between i-deals and proactive work behavior

such that this relationship is stronger when social exchange is high.

Based on the above hypotheses, we proposed the research framework illustrated in Figure 1.

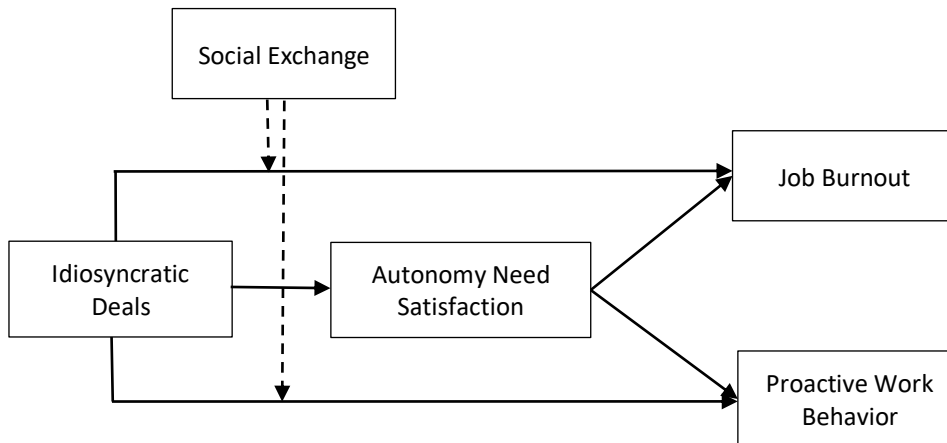


Figure 1. The Research Framework

RESEARCH DESIGN

In this study, data were collected via a questionnaire survey, and the samples were from fifteen vocational colleges and universities. The survey employed cluster random sampling. The selected sample comprised junior students majoring in e-commerce from 15 vocational colleges and universities. These students are in the middle of their employment internship and can comprehensively understand their work situation and career status. To guarantee the validity of the questionnaire, the respondents were informed in advance that the collected data would be used solely for scientific research, and the survey was conducted anonymously.

A total of 620 questionnaires were distributed, and 519 were returned. After the questionnaires were collected, those with missing items and obvious errors were excluded. Finally, 369 valid questionnaires were obtained. The validity rate of the questionnaire is 71.1%.

Measures

The questionnaires used in this study are all mature ones, and appropriate modifications were made according to the content of the study. The questionnaire was based on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree).

I-deals. The i-deals was based on the Idiosyncratic Deals Scale developed by Hornung et al. (2008), with appropriate modifications based on this study, with three items, such as “Flexible start and finish times”, which had a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.891.

Autonomy need satisfaction. The Autonomy Needs Satisfaction Scale developed by Guardia et al (2000) was modified to include four items, such as “I am able to express my opinions and ideas freely at work”, and the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of this scale was 0.874.

Proactive work behavior. The scale developed by Strauss et al. (2012) was used for proactive occupational behaviour. The scale consists of four items, such as “Recently I have begun to think more about what I want to accomplish in my job in the next year or two”. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for this scale was 0.833.

Job burnout. Job burnout was measured by the Chinese version of MBI-GS (Maslach Burnout Inventory – General Survey) scale (Schutte et al., 2000) which was revised by Li and Shi (2003). The scale includes three items, such as “I am often bored with the work I am doing”. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of this scale was 0.765.

Social exchange. The three - item social exchange scale developed by Lai et al. (2009) was used. A sample item includes “the unit can provide me with the resources I need.”. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of this scale was 0.863.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Measurement model

In this study, we used Harman's one - way test for common method bias and conducted an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) without rotation. The results of the exploratory factor analysis showed that there were four factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, and the contribution rate of the first factor was 37.3%, which was less than the 50% criterion (Hair, 2009; Podsakoff, 2007). Therefore, there was no serious common method bias in this study.

The results of the reliability test for each dimensional variable indicated that the Cronbach's alpha coefficient and CR values of the five dimensions were all greater than 0.7, as presented in Table 1. This suggests that the scales had high reliability.

The internal structural validity was examined using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). According to the guidelines of Browne & Cudeck (1993) and Hu & Bentler (1998), a good model fit is achieved when the comparative fit index (CFI) and Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) exceed 0.90, the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) falls below 0.08, and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) remains under 0.10. The model in this study fit the data well: $\chi^2 = 244.356$, $df = 109$, $\chi^2/df = 2.242$, $TLI = 0.935$, $CFI = 0.948$, $SRMR = 0.049$, $RMSEA = 0.071$. The convergent validity of the scale was measured by the average variance extracted (AVE). The AVE values of each dimension were greater than 0.5, suggesting that the convergent validity of the scale was satisfactory.

For the test of discriminant validity, the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) was calculated. As shown in Table 2, the value of the square root of the AVE for each dimension was greater than the correlation coefficient of the other dimensions, which indicated that the sample had good discriminant validity.

Table 1 Reliability and Validity Indicators

Latent Variables	Observed Variables	Factor Loading	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Idiosyncratic Deals	GX1	0.923	0.891	0.932	0.821
	GX2	0.911			
	GX3	0.883			
Autonomy Need Satisfaction	ZZ1	0.898	0.874	0.915	0.728
	ZZ2	0.856			
	ZZ3	0.853			
	ZZ4	0.804			
Social Exchange	SH1	0.914	0.863	0.917	0.786
	SH2	0.907			
	SH3	0.836			

Job Burnout	JD1	0.841	0.765	0.826	0.615
	JD2	0.826			
	JD3	0.675			
Proactive Work Behavior	XW1	0.896	0.833	0.891	0.672
	XW2	0.826			
	XW3	0.804			
	XW4	0.747			

Table 2 shows the means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients of the variables in the model. The correlation results initially verified some of the hypotheses proposed in this study and provided support for the subsequent hypothesis testing.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and correlation coefficients for each variable

	1	2	3	4	5
Idiosyncratic Deals	(0.906)				
Autonomy Need Satisfaction	0.691**	(0.853)			
Social Exchange	0.649**	0.714**	(0.887)		
Job burnout	- 0.574**	- 0.665**	- 0.501**	(0.784)	
Proactive work behavior	0.596**	0.658**	0.512**	- 0.388**	(0.820)
M	5.380	5.250	5.080	3.520	5.870
SD	1.081	1.071	1.157	1.271	0.834

Note: The values in parentheses on the diagonal of the correlation coefficient matrix indicate the square root of the AVE.

Hypotheses testing

We use the Amos 20.0 software to estimate the relationships posited in our hypotheses. As shown in Table 3, i-deals is positively associated with autonomy need satisfaction ($\beta = 0.825$, $p < 0.001$), which supports Hypothesis 1. The path coefficients of autonomy need satisfaction on job burnout ($\beta = -0.770$, $p < 0.001$) and proactive work behavior ($\beta = 0.302$, $p < 0.001$) are also significant, supporting Hypothesis 2a and 2b. The direct paths from i-deals to job burnout and proactive work behavior are also significant.

Table 3 Path coefficients and hypothesis testing results.

Paths	Path coefficients	S.E	t	p
I-deals→Autonomy need satisfaction	0.825	0.071	11.687	0.000
Autonomy need satisfaction→Job burnout	-0.770	0.131	-5.895	0.000
Autonomy need satisfaction→Proactive work behavior	0.302	0.068	4.425	0.000

I-deals→Job burnout	-0.757	0.095	-7.937	0.000
I-deals→Proactive work behavior	0.427	0.055	7.756	0.000

Next, we test the mediating effect using the bootstrap test. The indirect effects of i - deals on job - burnout ($\beta = -0.635$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [- 0.994, - 0.385]) and proactive work behavior ($\beta = 0.249$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.114, 0.430]) through autonomy need satisfaction are significant respectively, supporting Hypothesis 3a and 3b. As shown in Table 4, the confidence intervals do not include zero, indicating a significant mediating effect. Hypothesis 3a and 3b are supported.

Table 4 Significance test of mediation effect

Variables	Path Coefficient	S.E.	Z-value	95%confidence interval (CI)	
				lower bound	lower bound
Total effect					
I-deals → Job burnout	-0.752	0.103	-7.301	-0.962	-0.561
I-deals → Proactive work behavior	0.439	0.074	5.932	0.308	0.594
Direct effect					
I- deals → Job burnout	-0.117	0.059	-1.985	-0.372	-0.226
I- deals → Proactive work behavior	0.190	0.097	1.959	0.018	0.406
Indirect effect					
I-deals → Autonomy need satisfaction → Job burnout	-0.635	0.151	-4.205	-0.994	-0.385
I-deals → Autonomy need satisfaction → Proactive work behavior	0.249	0.080	3.113	0.114	0.430

We used SPSS 22.0 statistical software to conduct hierarchical regression analysis, and several models were employed to test the moderating effect. In Model 1 and Model 4, only control variables (age and gender) were entered into the analysis. In Model 2 and Model 5, social exchange was added to the previous models. In Model 3 and Model 6, the interaction term was added based on the previous models.

As shown in Table 5, the results from Model 3 and Model 6 demonstrate that the interaction term of i - deals and social exchange significantly affects job burnout ($\beta = 0.089$, $p < 0.05$), rather than proactive work behavior ($\beta = 0.031$, $p > 0.05$). Thus, Hypothesis 4a is supported (see Figure 2), and Hypothesis 4b is not supported.

Table 5. Regressive analysis results of moderating effects

Variable	Job Burnout			Proactive Work Behavior		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Main effect						
I-deals		-0.515***	-0.698**		0.348***	0.061
Social Exchange		-0.254**	-0.490*		0.174***	-0.159
Interactive effect						

I-deals* Exchange	Social			0.089*			0.031
F	1.152	20.859***	25.515***	0.833	22.603***	24.961***	
R ²	0.024	0.387	0.501	0.018	0.407	0.495	
ΔR ²	0.003	0.369	0.481	-0.004	0.389	0.475	

Note: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001

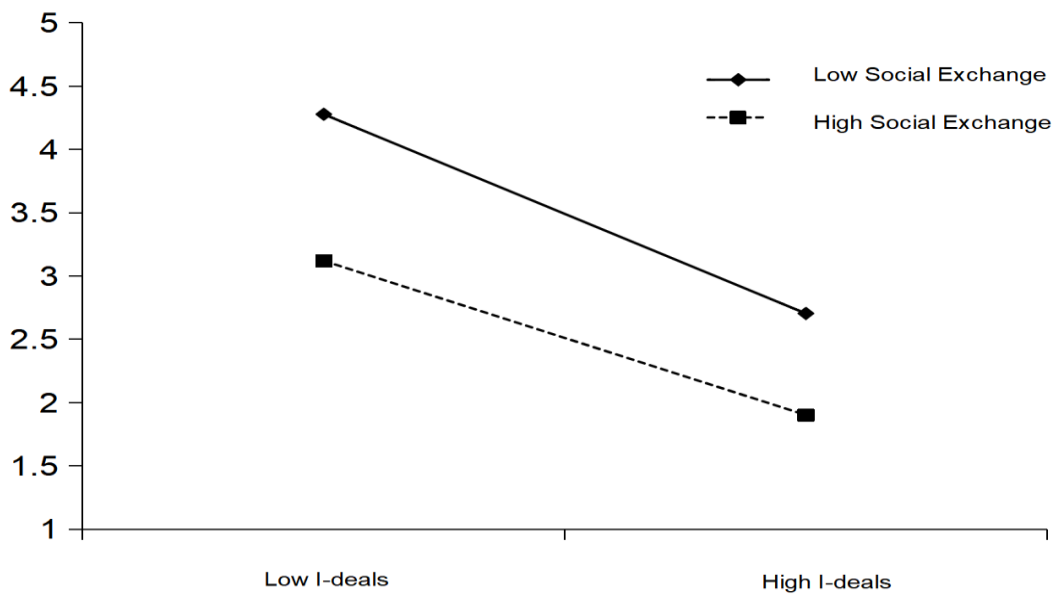


Figure 2. Moderating effect of social exchange between i-deals and job burnout

DISCUSSION

This study examines how i-deals influence job burnout and proactive work behavior among vocational e-commerce graduates, and whether autonomy need satisfaction and social exchange affect these relationships.

First, i-deals demonstrate a significant positive relationship with autonomy need satisfaction among vocational education graduates. Rousseau (2015) suggested that flexible scheduling and customized training empower graduates volition over their work methods and career paths. This customization directly satisfies the fundamental need for autonomy (Van den Broeck et al., 2021). When employees negotiate personalized arrangements, they perceive greater control over job demands and resources (Hasselgren & Jonsson, 2024). This perception of control is the essence of autonomy satisfaction. The result is consistent with previous studies that employees who obtain i - deals report higher autonomy need satisfaction than those with standardized contracts (Karakitapoğlu-Aygün et al., 2024). The individualized nature of i-deals captures organizational recognition of graduates' unique circumstances, further enhancing their sense of autonomy needs (Anand & Rofcanin, 2022).

Second, autonomy need satisfaction fully mediates the relationship between i-deals and both outcomes. It is consistent with self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017), which posits that autonomy satisfaction protects employees from emotional exhaustion and stimulates intrinsic motivation. When individuals have a higher level of i-deals, they experience reduced stressors that contribute to burnout (Van den Broeck et al., 2021). In line with Luo et al.'s (2020) findings, autonomy satisfaction enhances proactive behavior by fostering efficacy and work engagement. Graduates who feel autonomous initiate improvements and take charge of tasks more readily. Skill-enhancing i-deals further strengthen this effect by building competence and self-efficacy (Bindl & Parker, 2010).

Third, social exchange amplifies the effects of i - deals. When there is a higher level of social exchange, graduates perceive i - deals as genuine organizational investments rather than transactional exchanges (Liao et al., 2016). This perception strengthens reciprocal obligations and encourages graduates to make the most of i - deals to reduce burnout and engage in proactive behavior (Cropanzano et al., 2017). Consistent with the result of Li et al. (2024), lower level of social exchange undermines these benefits because of a lack of motivation in utilizing i - deals effectively.

Theoretical Implications

Our findings advance i-deals research in two ways. First, we integrate self-determination theory to explain the psychological mechanisms underlying the effects of i-deals. Our study provides a distinct explanatory mechanism regarding how i-deals influence job burnout and proactive work behavior. Second, we identify social exchange quality as a critical boundary condition that determines when i-deals translate into quality employment. This responds to calls for research on contextual factors moderating the effectiveness of i-deals (Anand & Rofcanin, 2022). Organizations cannot simply offer i-deals without building supportive relationships. The quality of the employee - organization exchange plays an important role in shaping the success of i-deals.

Practical Implications

For vocational educators, our results underscore the importance of preparing graduates to negotiate i-deals effectively. Career services should train students in negotiation skills and help them identify which arrangements best support their needs. For e-commerce employers, i-deals reduce burnout and increase proactive behavior, but only when paired with high level of social exchange. HR practitioners should train supervisors to build trust and demonstrate genuine investment in graduate development.

Organizations should also create transparent i-deals policies to ensure equitable access. While i-deals are inherently individualized, perceptions of fairness among peers influence their effectiveness (Marescaux et al., 2019). Finally, employers should monitor burnout among new hires and use i-deals as targeted interventions rather than universal benefits.

Limitations and future research directions

This present study has several limitations. First, our cross-sectional design limits causal inference. Future research should employ longitudinal or experimental designs. Second, all measures were self-reported, raising common method concerns. Multi-source data would strengthen validity. Third, our focus on vocational e-commerce graduates limits generalizability. Testing our model in other industries would broaden applicability.

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