



How work well-being predicts the career intention of social sports instructors in China

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The promotion of nationwide physical fitness in China has increased demand for social sports instructors, but challenges such as a severe shortage of practitioners hinder its development. Drawing on social cognitive career theory, in this study we explored whether work well-being predicts the career intention of social sports instructors. We found that work well-being positively predicted career intention through core self-evaluation. Specifically, job satisfaction and work engagement promoted career intention, whereas job burnout reduced career intention. Additionally, job satisfaction and work engagement enhanced core self-evaluation, whereas job burnout diminished it. The study has expanded research on career intentions in the sports instructor industry, proposing methods to enhance the attractiveness of the social sports profession, and offering recommendations for sustainable human resource development and nationwide physical fitness initiatives.

Keywords

social sports instructor, work well-being, career intention, core self-evaluation, physical fitness, job satisfaction, work engagement, job burnout

Article Highlights

- The key measurement indicators for assessing the work well-being of social sports instructors primarily encompassed job satisfaction, work engagement, and job burnout.
- Work well-being (job satisfaction and work engagement) positively predicted social sports instructors' career intention, whereas job burnout negatively predicted their career intention.
- Work well-being predicted the career intention of social sports instructors through core self-evaluation.

China's sports industry has been experiencing rapid growth alongside improvements in living standards, leading to widespread popularity of fitness activities. However, many individuals lack professional guidance in their sports endeavors, impacting the effectiveness and safety of physical exercise and increasing the risk of injuries. This situation underscores the important role of social sports instructors, who provide essential guidance services. *Social sports instructors* are people responsible for fitness guidance, skill imparting, and organizational management in mass sports activities other than competitive sports, school sports, and military sports.



Unlike in some other countries, such as the United States, where social sports instructors are well-established and recognized professionals (National Athletic Trainers' Association, 2019), in China there is a shortage of qualified instructors, with a significant gap between demand and supply. With approximately 2.5 million social sports instructors nationwide in 2019, and the total population aged between 16 and 59 years totaling 8.96 billion (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020), that equates to 2.79 social sports instructors per thousand people. To address this issue, it is crucial to understand the factors influencing the career intentions of social sports instructors in China. Analyzing these factors can help bridge the gap and improve the overall landscape of mass sports engagement.

The Predictive Effect of Work Well-Being on Career Intention

Warr (1992), a pioneer in exploring workplace happiness, emphasized employees' overall evaluation of their work experience and specific functions, including work emotional well-being, work ambition, competence, autonomy, and integrated efficacy. The focus in previous research on work well-being has often been on a broad sense of happiness, with scholars each defining and measuring well-being at work within their own framework because of the lack of a unified definition. However, an overview of existing research on work well-being reveals that job satisfaction, work engagement, and job burnout serve as key indicators for assessment (Mäkikangas et al., 2007; Narainsamy & Van Der Westhuizen, 2013). In the current research we used job satisfaction, work engagement, and job burnout as three indicators to evaluate the work well-being of social sports instructors.

Wright and Cropanzano (2004) conceptualized *job satisfaction* as employees' positive emotional experiences and cognitive evaluations of their work. LaLopa (1997) demonstrated that low salary and working evening and night shifts reduce employees' job satisfaction, thereby increasing employee turnover intention. Job satisfaction can improve employee job performance, strengthen their loyalty to the organization, and increase retention (Fritzsche & Parrish, 2005).

Career intention is the degree to which people tend to choose or not choose a certain profession (Lv et al., 2023). In social cognitive career theory, Lent et al. (1994) categorized the factors that influence people's career choice behavior as self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals. Social sports instructors with high job satisfaction tend to have harmonious interpersonal relationships with colleagues and students (Alarcon & Edwards, 2011), enabling them to effectively teach and guide students. Feelings of competence and accomplishment act as positive feedback, which can further enhance and reinforce individuals' self-efficacy, ultimately affecting their career decisions. Therefore, we proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Job satisfaction will positively predict the career intention of social sports instructors.

Characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption, *work engagement* refers to the state in which employees actively integrate into their work (Bakker et al., 2008). Employees who are highly engaged in their work are able to achieve their personal work goals, resulting in better job performance (Bakker et al., 2008). Consequently, their intention to leave is lowered, retention rates increase, and they show more willingness to recommend the job to other people (Alarcon & Edwards, 2011). Matz-Costa et al. (2014) found that work engagement manifests as a positive, satisfied, and enjoyable work state for employees. This positive experience can enhance their sense of belonging and loyalty to the organization, and reduce their tendency to resign.

Exercise can stimulate the secretion of dopamine (Dishman & O'Connor, 2009), making people feel happy, and the spirit of never giving up in sports and always aiming to be "faster, higher, stronger" make people more resilient and not afraid of difficulties. Moreover, teaching and helping others maintain their physical health and recover from illness makes social sports instructors recognize the significance of their job and maintain enthusiasm and pride (Hallberg & Schaufeli, 2006). This heightened engagement positively influences their decision making. Therefore, we proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Work engagement will positively predict the career intention of social sports instructors.

Job burnout refers to a state of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment experienced by employees. Those working in service industries that require a lot of emotional labor are especially prone



to experiencing burnout (Leiter & Maslach, 2005). When employees' emotional resources are excessively consumed, emotional exhaustion occurs, contributing to a higher incidence of turnover intention (Etzion et al., 1998). *Depersonalization* often arises on the basis of emotional exhaustion, which is an attitude and reaction of employees who are overly indifferent and distant toward others. It is a defensive self-protection behavior that people engage in so that they can resist exhaustion (Leiter & Maslach, 2005). In the context of the workplace, *low sense of achievement* refers to employees having a poor perception of their work ability, efficiency, and job competence. Long-term difficulties with work, lack of competence in the job, and lack of recognition from leaders and colleagues can easily lead to a low sense of achievement. Social sports instructors need to provide significant teaching and guidance to their students and communicate well with them; thus, the nature of their work requires a lot of emotional labor, which may lead to excessive consumption of emotional resources and then to emotional exhaustion. This depletion can significantly diminish individual self-efficacy and outcome expectations, thereby negatively affecting instructors' willingness and decision making regarding career choices. Thus, we proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Job burnout will negatively predict the career intention of social sports instructors.

The Predictive Effect of Work Well-Being on Core Self-Evaluation

Core self-evaluation is a higher order construct of self-view, involving the perception of self-definition and intrinsic value (Judge et al., 2003), that is, individuals' basic and comprehensive evaluation of their own abilities and values (Erez & Judge, 2001). Social sports instructors with high job satisfaction typically express contentment with aspects like job content, compensation, and colleague relationships (Fritzsche & Parrish, 2005). These positive work experiences serve as evidence of their abilities, fostering a heightened sense of competence and achievement. This positive reinforcement further strengthens their self-efficacy. Recognition of their abilities and worth also enhances their self-esteem, positively influencing their core self-evaluation (Lv et al., 2024).

Compared with other social sports instructors, those with higher levels of work engagement approach their tasks with confidence and enthusiasm (Narainsamy & Van Der Westhuizen, 2013). They identify with the significance of their profession, and are better equipped to handle work pressures and challenges with a strong sense of control. High levels of work engagement have been linked to better job performance and higher income levels (Xanthopoulou et al., 2009), providing a sense of professional fulfillment for social sports instructor who are highly engaged. Consequently, these instructors may identify with their own worth, which, along with the recognition of their abilities, leads to higher self-esteem, thus positively influencing their core self-evaluation.

Social sports instructors experiencing low levels of job burnout also tend to experience higher levels of achievement in their work (Leiter & Maslach, 2005). This achievement enhances their positive evaluation of their abilities, leading to higher levels of self-efficacy and self-esteem (Wu et al., 2022). Core self-evaluation includes not only self-assessment but also perception of others' assessments (Judge et al., 2003). Therefore, consistent positive external evaluations serve as objective evidence that enhances self-acknowledgment. Additionally, individuals experiencing low levels of job burnout have not overly depleted their emotional reserves, leading to fewer negative emotions at work and increased emotional stability. Conversely, high levels of job burnout have a detrimental prediction on core self-evaluation. Thus, we formed the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 4: Job satisfaction will positively predict social sports instructors' core self-evaluation.

Hypothesis 5: Work engagement will positively predict social sports instructors' core self-evaluation.

Hypothesis 6: Job burnout will negatively predict social sports instructors' core self-evaluation.

The Predictive Effect of Core Self-Evaluation on Career Intention

Core self-evaluation includes four dimensions: generalized self-efficacy, self-esteem, neuroticism, and locus of control (Erez & Judge, 2001). Social sports instructors whose core self-evaluation is positive (vs. negative) have more confidence in their work abilities, higher job satisfaction, and a greater sense of achievement and competence; therefore, they have higher levels of self-efficacy, self-esteem, and control (Erez & Judge, 2001). According to social cognitive career theory, self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals are the three major factors influencing

individuals' career-choice behavior (Lent et al., 1994). Therefore, social sports instructors with a positive, compared to negative, core self-evaluation have greater self-efficacy and more positive outcome expectations, positively influencing their career-choice intentions. In addition, social sports instructors with a positive core self-evaluation are able to set challenging work goals that are realistic, ultimately affecting their career intentions (Song & Chon, 2012). In summary, we proposed the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 7: Core self-evaluation will positively predict social sports instructors' career intention.

Hypothesis 8: Core self-evaluation will mediate the relationship between social sports instructors' job satisfaction and their career intention.

Hypothesis 9: Core self-evaluation will mediate the relationship between social sports instructors' work engagement and their career intention.

Hypothesis 10: Core self-evaluation will mediate the relationship between social sports instructors' job burnout and their career intention.

Our research model is shown in Figure 1.

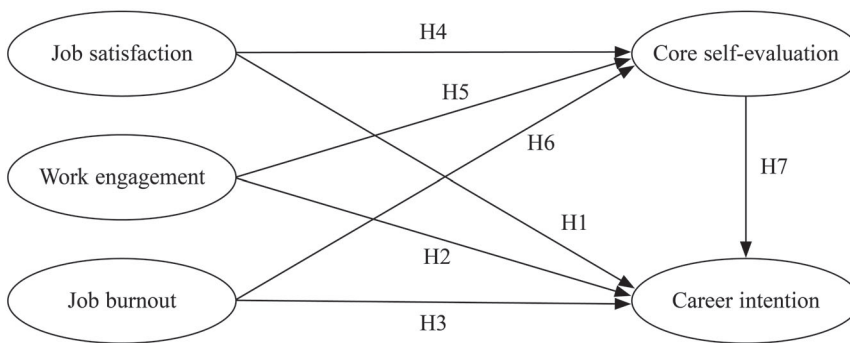


Figure 1. *Hypothesized Model*

Method

Participants and Procedure

The study proposal was reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Business Administration at Southwestern University of Finance and Economics (committee approval number: SWUFE20221115). We conducted a survey in two batches on the Wenjuanxing survey platform (www.wjx.cn). The first batch targeted interns majoring in sports instruction at universities. To compensate for their limited work experience, in the second batch we targeted professionals with formal work experience as social sports instructors who possessed certification in the field.

The first batch yielded 312 responses and the second batch 306 responses. Among these, 291 and 275 responses, respectively, were deemed valid, with effective response rates of 93.27% and 89.87%. The basic demographic statistics of the intern and formal instructor groups are shown in Tables 1 and 2, respectively.

Table 1. Basic Demographic Information of Intern Group

Indicator		<i>n</i>	%
Gender	Male	153	52.58
	Female	138	47.42
Age (years)	18–22	167	57.39
	23–25	103	35.40
	26 and above	21	7.21
Education	Junior college and below	32	10.99
	Bachelor’s degree	178	61.17
	Master’s degree and above	81	27.84
Monthly income (RMB)	≤ 1,000	19	6.53
	1,001–5,000	208	71.48
	5,001–8,000	61	20.96
	≥ 8,001	3	1.03
Internship duration (months)	< 3	26	8.94
	3–6 months	121	41.58
	> 6	144	49.48

Note. RMB 1,000 = USD 137; RMB 1,001–5,000 = USD 138–688; RMB 5,001–8,000 = USD 689–1,101; ≥ RMB 8,001 = ≥ USD 1,102.

Table 2. Basic Demographic Information of Social Sports Instructor Group

Indicator		<i>n</i>	%
Gender	Male	142	51.64
	Female	133	48.36
Age (years)	18–25	112	40.73
	26–35	128	46.54
	36–45	29	10.55
	46 and above	6	2.18
Education	Junior college and below	86	31.27
	Bachelor’s degree	132	48.00
	Master’s degree and above	57	20.73
Monthly income (RMB)	≤ 1,000	0	0.00
	1,001–5,000	49	17.82
	5,001–8,000	117	42.55
	8,001–17,000	83	30.18
	≥ 17,001	26	9.45
Work experience (years)	< 3 years	86	31.27
	3–5 years	125	45.46
	> 5	64	23.27

Note. RMB 1,000 = USD 137; RMB 1,001–5,000 = USD 138–688; RMB 5,001–8,000 = USD 689–1,101; RMB 8,001–17,000 = USD 1,102–2,341; ≥ RMB 17,001 = ≥ USD 2,342.

Measures

Following a review of the literature on work well-being, we adopted three indicators from the studies by Narainsamy and Van Der Westhuizen (2013) and Schaufeli et al. (2002) to assess the job satisfaction of social sports instructors: job satisfaction, work engagement, and job burnout.

To measure job satisfaction, we utilized the Job Satisfaction Survey developed by Larwood et al. (1998), comprising five items ($\alpha = .891$). A sample item is “I am very satisfied with my current job.” Job burnout (nine items; $\alpha = .959$)

and work engagement (11 items; $\alpha = .947$) and were assessed using scales adapted from Leiter and Maslach (2005) and Schaufeli et al. (2002), respectively, and modified based on the context of our research. Examples of items are “The work makes me feel like I’m on the verge of a breakdown” and “I feel energized while working.” To measure core self-evaluation (13 items; $\alpha = .963$), we employed a scale developed by Judge et al. (2003). A sample item is “I am capable of handling most of the problems I encounter.” Career intention was measured by with one question used by Lent et al. (1994): we asked respondents if they were willing to pursue a career as a social sports instructor. All items were rated on a Likert 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).

Results

Common Method Bias

As all the survey items used in this study were self-reported, common method bias may have occurred (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Therefore, we conducted Harman’s single-factor test, and the results showed that the first component explained 37.6% of the variance, which is below the standard of 40%, indicating that common method bias was within the acceptable range.

First-Order Confirmatory Factor Analysis

We performed a confirmatory factor analysis of the sample data using Amos 22.0 software. The results showed a good fit to the data, $\chi^2 = 1868.758$, $df = 652$, $\chi^2/df = 2.866$ (< 3), root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .049 ($< .08$), comparative fit index (CFI) = .953 ($> .90$), normed fit index (NFI) = .936 ($> .90$). Standardized factor loadings for all items were significant, ranging from .743 to .869. Average variance extracted values ranged from .626 to .694, exceeding .50, and composite reliability values ranged from .890 to .964, exceeding .80, indicating high convergent validity. The correlation coefficients between all constructs were consistently smaller than the square roots of the average extracted variance (see Table 3), indicating high discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Thus, the scales for job satisfaction, work engagement, job burnout, and core self-evaluation demonstrated good reliability and validity.

Table 3. *Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Coefficients of Study Variables*

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Cronbach’ α	CR	AVE	1	2	3	4	5
1. Job satisfaction	5.676	1.142	.891	.890	.629	[.793]				
2. Work engagement	5.415	1.201	.947	.945	.626	.683	[.791]			
3. Job burnout	5.018	1.147	.959	.955	.694	.471	.467	[.833]		
4. Core self-evaluation	5.233	1.186	.963	.964	.661	.472	.451	.702	[.813]	
5. Career intention	5.615	0.989	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—

Note. *N* = 566. CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted. As career intention was a single item, there are no Cronbach’s alpha, composite reliability, or average variance extracted values for this variable. Square roots of AVE are shown in square brackets on the diagonal.

Structural Equation Model Evaluation

Using Amos 22.0 and the maximum likelihood estimation method, we built a structural equation model to evaluate the model fit indices and calculate path coefficients. The overall fit of the structural model was satisfactory, $\chi^2 = 1734.506$, $df = 652$, $\chi^2/df = 2.660$, RMSEA = .043, goodness-of-fit index = .862 ($> .85$), CFI = .964, NFI = .932.

We then performed a path analysis using Amos 22.0 to test the proposed hypotheses. The mediating effect of core self-evaluation in the relationship between job satisfaction and career choice intention was examined using the method proposed by Holmbeck (1997). The path analysis results are illustrated in Figure 2. Hypotheses 1 to 7 were all supported. Job satisfaction and work engagement both positively predicted career intention, and job burnout negatively predicted career intention. Job satisfaction and work engagement positively predicted core self-evaluation, and job burnout negatively predicted core self-evaluation. Core self-evaluation positively predicted career intention.

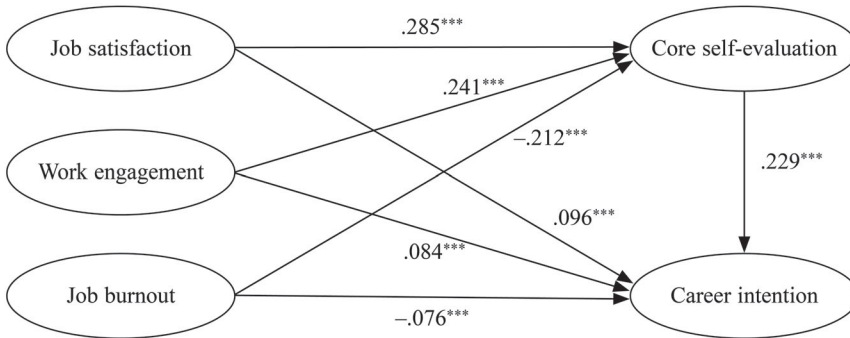


Figure 2. *Path Analysis Results*

The direct effect, indirect effect, and total effect values are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. *Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects*

	Effect	Job satisfaction	Work engagement	Job burnout	Core self-evaluation
Core self-evaluation	Direct effect	.285	.241	-.212	—
	Indirect effect	—	—	—	—
	Total effect	.285	.241	-.212	—
Career intention	Direct effect	.096	.084	-.076	.229
	Indirect effect	.065	.055	-.049	—
	Total effect	.161	.139	-.125	.229

Test of Mediating Effect of Core Self-Evaluation

Following the methodology outlined by Hayes (2018), we conducted a bootstrapping analysis to examine the mediating effect of core self-evaluation. Job satisfaction was set as the independent variable, core self-evaluation as the mediating variable, and career intention as the dependent variable. Model 4 of the PROCESS macro was selected for this test, with 5,000 resamples and 95% confidence intervals.

The results of the mediation effect test are presented in Table 5. The results indicate that core self-evaluation significantly mediated the relationship between job satisfaction and career intention. Similarly, core self-evaluation exhibited a significant mediating effect in the relationships between work engagement and career intention, and between job burnout and career intention. Therefore, a mediating effect of core self-evaluation was present, supporting Hypotheses 8 to 10. In sum, core self-evaluation played a mediating role in the relationship between job satisfaction and career intention.

Table 5. The Mediating Effect of Core Self-Evaluation in the Relationships of Job Satisfaction, Work Engagement, Job Burnout, and Career Intention

Independent variable	Effect type	Effect	SE	t	p	95% CI	
						LL	UL
Job satisfaction	Mediating effect	.065	0.230	15.326	< .001	0.525	1.001
	Direct effect	.097	0.245			0.605	1.520
Work engagement	Mediating effect	.055	0.114	11.521	< .001	0.362	0.848
	Direct effect	.084	0.172			0.561	1.432
Job burnout	Mediating effect	-.049	0.108	-6.562	< .001	-0.772	-0.121
	Direct effect	-.077	0.128			-1.144	-0.032

Note. CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit.

Group Analysis

We divided the participants into two groups based on their work experience: the intern group ($n = 291$) and the workplace group ($n = 275$). An analysis was performed to examine whether the model was valid in the two different groups, and to identify differences in path coefficients of the groups.

Measurement Invariance Test

We used Amos software to compare the unconstrained model and the full metric invariance model (see Table 6). The results showed that both models had RMSEA values below .05, and CFI and NFI values above .90, indicating a good level of fit. The test for differences between the two models indicated no significant overall difference (see Table 6), suggesting that grouping by work experience did not affect the applicability of the model, allowing for subsequent path difference analysis based on work experience grouping.

Table 6. Measurement Invariance Test Results

Group	Model	χ^2	df	RMSEA	CFI	NFI	$\Delta\chi^2$	Invariance
Workplace group	Nonconstrained model	979.506	623	.043	.964	.932	$\Delta\chi^2(18) = 3.228$	Supported
	Constrained model	982.734	641	.046	.965	.927	$p = .997 > .2$	

Note. RMSEA = root-mean-square error of approximation; CFI = comparative fit index; NFI = normed fit index.

Path Difference Test Between Intern Group and Workplace Group

The constrained model was used to compare the paths between the groups, examining the differences in the predictive paths of job satisfaction, core self-evaluation, and career intention. The results showed that there were significant differences between the intern group and the workplace group in the predictive effect of work engagement on career intention, $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 3.924, p < .05$, the predictive effect of job burnout on career intention, $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 8.654, p < .01$, the predictive effect of work engagement on core self-evaluation, $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 4.389, p < .05$, and the predictive effect of job burnout on core self-evaluation, $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 7.751, p < .01$. Specifically, compared to the workplace group ($\beta = .076, t = 2.291$), the predictive effect of work engagement on career intention was greater in the intern group ($\beta = .191, t = 4.518$); and compared to the workplace group ($\beta = .246, t = 2.495$), the predictive effect of work engagement on core self-evaluation was greater in the intern group ($\beta = .355, t = 5.846$). However, the relationship between job burnout and career intention was stronger in the workplace group ($\beta = -.284, t = -4.384$) than in the intern group ($\beta = -.055, t = -2.062$); similarly, the relationship between job burnout and core self-evaluation was stronger in the workplace group ($\beta = -.358, t = -6.624$) than in the intern group ($\beta = -.164, t = -2.287$).

There were no significant differences between the two groups in terms of the predictive effect of job satisfaction on career intention, $\Delta\chi^2(1) = .635, ns$, or the predictive effect of core self-evaluation on career intention, $\Delta\chi^2(1) = .541, ns$ (see Figure 3).

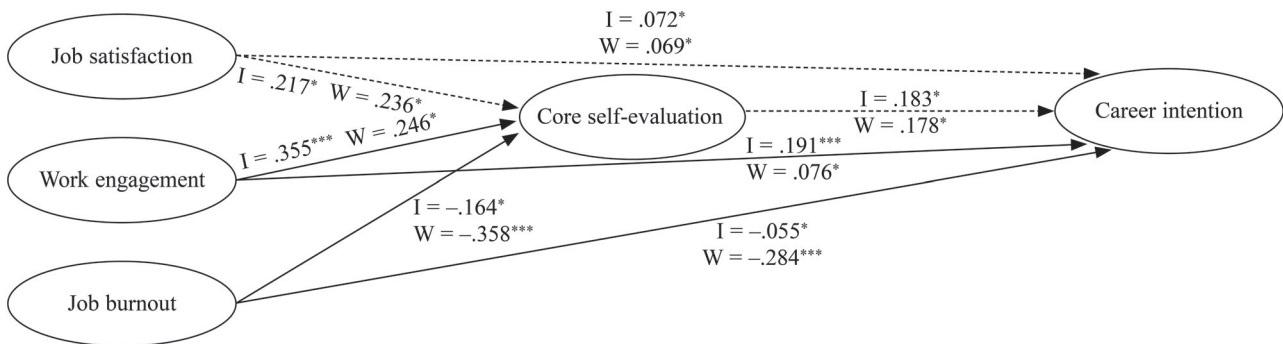


Figure 3. *Model Differences Between Intern and Workplace Groups*

Note. I = intern group; W = workplace group.

* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

Discussion

Theoretical Contributions

In the context of Chinese society, the insufficient number of social sports instructors significantly impedes the long-term development of universal physical fitness. Through sorting and summarizing the literature on work well-being, and combining this with the professional characteristics of social sports instructors, we identified the following key evaluation and measurement indicators of work well-being for social sports instructors: job satisfaction, work engagement, and job burnout (Lemay et al., 2024; Narainsamy & Van Der Westhuizen, 2013). In addition, from the psychological perspective, we discovered new factors that influence the career intention of social sports instructors, enriching the research on this topic. Finally, we analyzed how work well-being predicts the career intention of social sports instructors, filling a gap in existing research on the psychological aspects of social sports instructors, and enriching the theoretical system of the formation mechanism of career intention.

Practical Implications

In this study we found ways to enhance career attractiveness beyond common means such as salary. Our results revealed the importance of work well-being in predicting career intention, thus providing a reference and suggestions for improving the work well-being of social sports instructors and increasing the number of people working in the industry. Moreover, we proposed methods to enhance the work well-being of social sports instructors, comprising job satisfaction and work engagement. This effectively enhanced their job happiness and reduced their negative emotions. At the same time, research by staff in government departments and in enterprises in the sports industry on how to enhance the career intention of social sports instructors can help to address the serious shortage of these instructors in China, and provide methods of sustainable development of human resources in the sports industry.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

There are some limitations in this study. First, the sample was drawn from graduates of sports-related majors with internship experience and from individuals already engaged in the profession of social sports instructor. Although



graduate interns are familiar with job content and the work environment and have gained some practical experience, they may not have a deep understanding of the industry because they have had only a short work-experience tenure. Second, we studied the career intention of social sports instructors. Future researchers could further explore the predictive effect of work well-being on the turnover intention of social sports instructors.

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

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