



The Effect of Work-Family Conflict and Entrepreneurial Regret on the Subjective Well-Being of Rural Small Business Owners in Nahavand County

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Article Info

ABSTRACT

Article type:
Research Article

Article history:

Received: 10 Jul 2025

Received in revised form:
07 Aug 2025

Accepted: 06 Sep 2025

Available online: 01 Jan 2026

Keywords:

Entrepreneurial Well-Being;
Rural Development;
Rural Entrepreneurship;
Small Businesses.

The aim of this study is to examine the role of work-family conflict and entrepreneurial regret in explaining the subjective well-being of rural small business owners. Given the growing challenges faced by entrepreneurs and business owners in rural areas—such as extensive family responsibilities, ongoing economic pressures, and environmental uncertainties—it is essential to explore the psychological factors that influence their well-being. Understanding these factors can inform the development of supportive interventions and targeted policies aimed at enhancing resilience and ensuring the sustainability of rural businesses. Adopting a quantitative and cross-sectional approach, the study surveyed 100 owners of micro rural businesses in Nahavand County. Data were collected using standardized questionnaires and analyzed through Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS version 4.0. The findings revealed that work-family conflict had a significant positive effect on entrepreneurial regret and a significant negative effect on subjective well-being. Furthermore, entrepreneurial regret was negatively associated with subjective well-being. Mediation analysis showed that entrepreneurial regret partially mediated the relationship between work-family conflict and subjective well-being. These results highlight the importance of psychological support, resilience training, and efforts to help entrepreneurs balance family and work responsibilities. By providing new insights into the psychological dynamics of rural entrepreneurship, this research offers practical implications for policymakers and rural development organizations aiming to improve the quality of life for rural entrepreneurs.

Education and Management of Entrepreneurship, 2026, Vol. 4, No. 4, pp 79-96

Cite this article: Karimi, S., Reisi, S., & Biemans, H. (2026). The Effect of Work-Family Conflict and Entrepreneurial Regret on the Subjective Well-Being of Rural Small Business Owners in Nahavand County. *Education and Management of Entrepreneurship*, 4(4), 79-96. doi: 10.22126/eme.2025.12348.1191.



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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22126/eme.2025.12348.1191>

Publisher: Razi University

Introduction

Entrepreneurship has increasingly been recognized as a key driver of economic growth, social development, and a legitimate career pathway, particularly in developing countries such as Iran (Karimi et al., 2017; Hafeez et al, 2021; Neneh, 2019; Schulte-Holthaus, 2019). In rural areas, entrepreneurship and new venture creation offer a fundamental response to limited employment opportunities, contributing to income generation and the empowerment of local communities (Karimi & Reisi, 2023a; Boleyde et al., 2024; Akbarpour, 2023). Nevertheless, the entrepreneurial journey is fraught with multiple challenges, including emotional pressures and role conflicts that may adversely affect entrepreneurs' subjective well-being. One of the most prevalent challenges is work-family conflict, a condition in which the demands of occupational and family roles are incompatible with one another (Kawai et al., 2024). Entrepreneurs and small business owners—especially in rural contexts—often experience heightened levels of such conflict due to intense business demands, long working hours, and limited access to formal support systems (Schjoedt, 2021; Brieger et al., 2024). In traditional rural societies, prevailing cultural norms and gendered role expectations further exacerbate this conflict, particularly for women entrepreneurs who face compounded expectations related to family care and domestic responsibilities (Karami et al., 2024; Rafiaie et al., 2023). Drawing on the scarcity hypothesis, the simultaneous demands of work and family deplete individuals' limited resources—such as time, energy, and emotional capacity—thereby intensifying inter-role strain and undermining subjective well-being (El-Shoubaki et al., 2022).

In rural settings, where many businesses are small-scale and home-based, the boundaries between work and family roles are often blurred. This role overlap generates additional psychological pressure, especially for women, placing them at greater risk of chronic stress (Rafiaie et al., 2023). One emotional response to such sustained pressures is entrepreneurial regret—a negative affective state arising from unmet expectations or perceived poor decisions along the entrepreneurial path (Kawai et al., 2023; Quach et al., 2021). This feeling may stem from financial instability, failure to achieve professional or family-related goals, or a misjudgment of the suitability of self-employment as a career choice (Hsu et al., 2019). Entrepreneurial regret not only compromises mental health but also negatively influences future decision-making and long-term satisfaction. Within this context, subjective well-being—understood as a combination of life satisfaction and emotional balance—plays a critical role in sustaining entrepreneurial functioning (Kasprzak, 2010; Gashi et al., 2024). Although entrepreneurship offers advantages such as autonomy and self-realization, the pressures associated with managing multiple roles or operating within restrictive cultural environments can erode subjective well-being. Cultural norms, including collectivism and dual gender-role expectations, may thus function both as enablers and constraints on entrepreneurial activity, disproportionately affecting women (Naderi et al., 2025; De Clercq et al., 2022).

Given these dynamics, a deeper understanding of the relationships among work-family conflict, entrepreneurial regret, and subjective well-being among rural entrepreneurs is particularly important—especially in contexts characterized by

economic hardship, heavy family responsibilities, and entrenched traditional norms. Focusing on rural settings and the psychological mechanisms shaping the well-being of small business owners, the present study seeks to address this gap. Hamedan Province was selected as the study context due to its economic diversity and substantial rural population. Within this province, Nahavand County—located in the south and characterized by an economy centered on agriculture, livestock production, and handicrafts, alongside high unemployment and migration rates, yet a notable diversity of small businesses (Karimi & Reisi, 2025)—provides a suitable empirical setting.

The primary objective of this study is to examine the effect of work-family role conflict on the subjective well-being of rural entrepreneurs, with particular attention to the mediating role of entrepreneurial regret. The findings are expected to contribute to the entrepreneurship literature by addressing underexplored contexts, especially in developing countries, and to offer an evidence-based foundation for policies and support programs tailored to the actual needs of rural entrepreneurs.

Theoretical Framework and Hypothesis Development

Social Cognitive Theory

Social Cognitive Theory provides a useful framework for understanding the cognitive processes through which entrepreneurs' experiences—including work-family conflict—are shaped (Kawai et al., 2023). The theory is grounded in the assumption that individuals are active agents who draw on capabilities such as forethought to plan actions and anticipate their consequences (Bandura, 1986). Entrepreneurs facing work-family conflict may employ forethought to weigh the perceived benefits and costs of their entrepreneurial career (Kawai et al., 2023). When experienced outcomes fail to align with prior expectations, such evaluations can trigger regret-related cognitions, which in turn influence attitudes (e.g., job satisfaction) and behavioral intentions (e.g., decisions to exit the business). Accordingly, Social Cognitive Theory helps explain how work-family conflict may give rise to cognitive appraisals that culminate in entrepreneurial regret.

Conservation of Resources Theory

Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory posits that individuals strive to acquire, maintain, and protect valued resources—such as time, energy, and psychological health—and experience stress when these resources are threatened or depleted (Hobfoll, 1989). Work-family conflict substantially drains personal resources, leading to psychological strain and adverse outcomes (EI-Shoubaki et al., 2022). Within this framework, subjective well-being is viewed both as a vital resource and as a desirable psychological state (Wiklund et al., 2019; Ryff, 2019). From a COR perspective, the persistent loss of resources caused by work-family conflict can jeopardize entrepreneurs' well-being (Drnovšek et al., 2024).

In the present study, entrepreneurial regret is conceptualized as a mediating mechanism linking work-family conflict to subjective well-being—an interpretation consistent with COR theory (Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000). The theory further suggests that work-related behaviors, particularly in high-strain environments, are motivated by the desire to protect remaining resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018). When work-family

conflict erodes psychological and physical energy, entrepreneurs may struggle to sustain both their businesses and personal lives simultaneously (Hoobler et al., 2010; Oren & Levin, 2017). These effects are likely to be amplified in highly competitive or challenging environments (De Clercq et al., 2020).

Social Cognitive Theory complements this explanation by emphasizing individuals' cognitive evaluations of discrepancies between expected and actual outcomes. When entrepreneurs fail to achieve their goals due to time constraints, emotional exhaustion, or insufficient family support, they may experience regret about having chosen the entrepreneurial path (Kawai et al., 2023; Hsu et al., 2019). Such regret further depletes psychological resources and undermines subjective well-being.

Drawing on these two theoretical perspectives, it can be argued that entrepreneurial regret serves as a mediator between work-family conflict and subjective well-being. Specifically, higher levels of work-family conflict are expected to intensify regret, which in turn reduces well-being. This pathway captures both the emotional consequences of unmet expectations emphasized by Social Cognitive Theory and the cumulative effects of resource depletion highlighted by COR theory. In line with the COR concept of a "loss spiral," these dynamics may initiate a downward cycle in which regret stemming from work-family conflict diminishes well-being and, consequently, weakens psychological resilience and entrepreneurial performance (Drnovšek et al., 2024). The proposed model illustrates how work-family conflict increases entrepreneurial regret and ultimately affects subjective well-being, with regret positioned as a key mediating variable. Gender is also assumed to play a moderating role, as women entrepreneurs in patriarchal rural contexts often shoulder greater family responsibilities, intensifying the effects of work-family conflict and regret (Kawai et al., 2023; Hafeez et al., 2021).

Work-Family Conflict and Entrepreneurial Regret

Work-family conflict represents one of the most salient challenges faced by entrepreneurs (Gherardi, 2015; Thébaud, 2015; Kawai et al., 2025; Schjoedt, 2021). It arises from the demanding nature of entrepreneurship, long working hours, substantial resource investments, and heavy responsibilities, all of which often generate friction between occupational and family roles (Schjoedt, 2021). Empirical evidence indicates that work-family conflict is associated with reduced career success (Parasuraman et al., 1996), increased intentions to exit entrepreneurship (Hsu et al., 2016), and lower levels of well-being (Nguyen & Sawang, 2016).

According to the scarcity hypothesis, individual resources such as time, energy, and attention are limited. When demands from one life domain spill over into another, inter-role conflict emerges (El-Shoubaki et al., 2022). Women entrepreneurs, particularly in cultures characterized by traditional gender roles, are exposed to higher levels of work-family conflict, as they are often expected to assume primary caregiving and domestic responsibilities (Kawai et al., 2023; De Clercq et al., 2022; Hafeez et al., 2021). These pressures frequently result in psychological distress, including stress, depression, and dissatisfaction with work, family, and life overall (Brieger et al., 2024). Work-family conflict has consistently been linked to burnout,

reduced job satisfaction, and diminished subjective well-being, with these effects being more pronounced among women entrepreneurs who face greater caregiving demands (Kawai et al., 2023; Brieger et al., 2024).

Regret is a form of self-critical emotion with a strong affective component, often manifesting as self-blame and, in some cases, severe self-reproach or psychological punishment (Pieters & Zeelenberg, 2005). It is typically understood as a reaction to a poor decision that has led to an unfavorable outcome—one that might have been avoided had the individual chosen differently or refrained from acting. Consequently, counterfactual thinking—the comparison between what actually occurred and imagined alternatives that could have produced better outcomes—constitutes the core mechanism underlying regret (Khanin et al., 2021; Zeelenberg et al., 1998). Entrepreneurial regret refers to the negative emotional response arising from unfavorable outcomes or unmet expectations in the self-employment journey (Kawai et al., 2023). Despite extensive examination in the decision-making literature, regret remains relatively underexplored in entrepreneurship research, particularly among active business owners (Quach et al., 2021).

Entrepreneurial regret typically emerges when personal or professional goals remain unfulfilled and is shaped by cultural values, gender expectations, social norms, and family dynamics (Yaghoob, 2020; Hsu et al., 2019). Consistent with Social Cognitive Theory, individuals use forethought to evaluate potential outcomes (Kawai et al., 2023). When the lived experience of entrepreneurship—especially in managing work-family balance—falls short of expectations, individuals may develop counterfactual thoughts and regret (Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007; Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998). Research shows that even financially successful entrepreneurs may experience regret, often due to personal sacrifices or unmet non-financial goals (Hsu et al., 2019; Markman et al., 2005). Women, in particular, are more vulnerable to such experiences because prevailing gender norms intensify family-role pressures, increasing the likelihood of regret (Hafeez et al., 2021; Eddleston & Powell, 2012). For example, Kawai et al. (2023) reported a positive relationship between work-family conflict and entrepreneurial regret among Japanese women entrepreneurs. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 1: Work-family conflict is positively related to entrepreneurial regret.

Entrepreneurial Regret and Subjective Well-Being

Subjective well-being refers to an individual's overall psychological state, encompassing life satisfaction and happiness (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Shir et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2020). For entrepreneurs, it represents not only an important outcome but also a critical resource, as it plays a central role in performance, sustainability, and business-related decision-making (Drnovšek et al., 2024). Negative emotions, including regret, pose a serious threat to this psychological state. Regret, as a negative emotion, has been linked to increased dissatisfaction, reduced happiness, heightened risk of depression, and impaired mental health (Jokisaari, 2003; Marikyan et al., 2023; Kuhl & Helle, 1986).

From a COR perspective (Hobfoll, 1989), subjective well-being constitutes a psychological resource that may gradually erode under stressors such as regret and work-family conflict. This erosion of resources fosters negative affect, disrupts

decision-making, and diminishes motivation and psychological energy (Koekemoer & Olckers, 2025; Quach et al., 2021; Drnovšek et al., 2024). Entrepreneurial regret represents a distinct emotional and cognitive burden, typically accompanied by counterfactual thinking, self-blame, disappointment, and emotional turmoil (Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007). When left unresolved, this experience undermines life satisfaction and mental health. Although regret can sometimes facilitate learning, its chronic or unresolved form intensifies its detrimental effects on subjective well-being (Quach et al., 2021).

Empirical studies have consistently linked regret to lower life satisfaction (Jokisaari, 2003), higher levels of depression (Kuhl & Helle, 1986), and reduced happiness (Brieger et al., 2024). The subjective well-being judgment model (Dijkstra & Bareld, 2008) further suggests that unresolved past experiences can shape current emotional states. In rural contexts, where business owners face heightened uncertainty, limited support resources, and greater environmental pressures, the psychological consequences of regret tend to be deeper and more persistent (Hsu et al., 2019). Regret may foster self-doubt, diminish purposefulness, and erode perceived control, ultimately affecting job satisfaction and overall well-being. Findings by Kawai et al. (2023) indicate that entrepreneurial regret reduces job satisfaction, while Quach et al. (2021) report a negative effect on subjective well-being. Therefore, based on both theoretical and empirical evidence, the following hypothesis is advanced:

Hypothesis 2: Entrepreneurial regret is negatively related to subjective well-being.

Work-Family Conflict and Subjective Well-Being

The detrimental impact of work-family conflict on entrepreneurs' subjective well-being is well documented in the organizational and entrepreneurship literature. Work-family conflict arises when the demands of work and family roles are incompatible, leading to tension, strain, and psychological fatigue (Parasuraman et al., 1996; El-Shoubaki et al., 2022). The scarcity hypothesis (Goode, 1960) posits that personal resources such as time, energy, and attention are finite, and that excessive investment across multiple roles results in inter-role conflict. Entrepreneurs, due to long working hours and high emotional investment in their ventures, are particularly vulnerable to work-family conflict (Nordenmark et al., 2012; Annink et al., 2016).

Although entrepreneurship can offer autonomy and flexibility, these very features may blur the boundaries between work and personal life (Ashforth et al., 2000). Inadequate role separation can destabilize psychological equilibrium and reduce subjective well-being (Grant-Vallone & Donalson, 2001; Jennings & McDougald, 2007). As work-family conflict intensifies, entrepreneurs may experience anxiety, fatigue, and emotional imbalance, all of which diminish life satisfaction and happiness (Brieger et al., 2024; De Vita et al., 2019). Women entrepreneurs, particularly in societies with more traditional cultural expectations, are more susceptible to the negative effects of work-family conflict on well-being (Jennings & McDougald, 2007). Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 3: Work-family conflict is negatively related to subjective well-being.

The Mediating Role of Entrepreneurial Regret

In their efforts to balance professional and family roles, entrepreneurs frequently

encounter work-family conflict. Consistent with the scarcity hypothesis, such conflict depletes personal resources such as emotional energy and time (El-Shoubaki et al., 2022; Parasuraman et al., 1996). From a Social Cognitive Theory perspective, these conditions stimulate cognitive evaluations and counterfactual thoughts regarding career decisions, which form the basis of regret (Kawai et al., 2023; Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007). At the same time, COR theory conceptualizes regret as a form of psychological resource loss that contributes to emotional exhaustion, reduced resilience, and diminished motivation (Drnovšek et al., 2024; Quach et al., 2021).

Consequently, entrepreneurial regret functions as a psychological mechanism through which work-family conflict leads to reduced subjective well-being (Figure 1). When regret becomes chronic—particularly when individuals perceive their sacrifices as futile—the likelihood of depression, reduced happiness, and lower overall life satisfaction increases (Dijkstra & Barelds, 2008; Jokisaari, 2003; Quach et al., 2021). Even in cases of financial success, regret can undermine psychological satisfaction (Hsu et al., 2019). These effects are intensified in rural and resource-constrained environments due to limited social support (Hafeez et al., 2021; Hsu et al., 2019). Empirical evidence supports the mediating role of regret (Kawai et al., 2023; Quach et al., 2021). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 4: Entrepreneurial regret mediates the relationship between work-family conflict and subjective well-being.

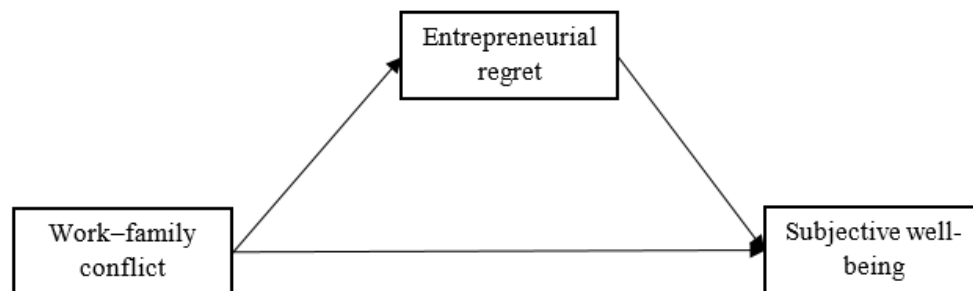


Figure 1. Conceptual model of the study.

Research Method

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional research design. The target population consisted of owners of small rural businesses in Nahavand County, located in Hamedan Province in western Iran. Nahavand County covers an area of approximately 1,535 square kilometers and comprises four districts, nine rural sub-districts, and 168 villages, with a population of around 186,000. Approximately 48.5% of the population resides in rural areas, and women account for about 55% of the rural population (Statistical Center of Iran, 2016). The county is recognized as one of the regional hubs for agriculture and livestock production and holds strategic importance for rural entrepreneurship, particularly in agro-processing, handicrafts, and rural tourism.

A convenience sampling method was used, and 120 owners of small rural businesses—defined as enterprises employing fewer than 50 workers—were selected. Due to the absence of a clear sampling frame and the lack of precise statistics on the number of rural entrepreneurs and business owners in the region, the required sample size for partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was determined

based on the rule of thumb proposed by Barclay and Smith (1995). According to this rule, the minimum sample size should be at least ten times the maximum number of structural paths directed at any latent construct. In the present study, the construct of “subjective well-being” had the highest number of incoming paths (two), resulting in a minimum required sample size of 120 respondents.

Between October and December 2024, 120 questionnaires were distributed among rural business owners, of which 107 were completed and returned (response rate: 89%). Participants voluntarily completed the questionnaires at their workplaces. Each questionnaire was accompanied by an introductory letter explaining the purpose of the study and the procedure for responding while also assuring respondents of the confidentiality of their answers. After excluding incomplete questionnaires, 100 valid responses were retained for statistical analysis. The use of relatively small samples is common in entrepreneurship research (Cardon & Kirk, 2015; Karimi & Reisi, 2023b; Karimi et al., 2022).

The questionnaires used in this study were standardized instruments that have been widely applied in prior national and international research and have demonstrated acceptable levels of validity and reliability. Face validity was established through consultations with academic experts and field practitioners, and reliability was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha. Subjective well-being was measured using the five-item Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) developed by De Vita et al. (2019). This scale is one of the most widely accepted instruments in positive psychology and assesses individuals’ overall cognitive evaluation of their life satisfaction (Newman et al., 2018). Given that subjective well-being is a broad, multidimensional construct (Binder, 2014) that extends beyond material conditions or physical health, this study focused on life satisfaction as one of its core dimensions. Life satisfaction is considered the most valid and commonly used indicator of subjective well-being (Pavot & Diener, 2008; Gashi et al., 2024). A sample item from this scale is: “So far, I have gotten the important things I want in life.”

Entrepreneurial regret was measured using two key items adapted from previous studies (Hsu et al., 2019; Kawai et al., 2023). The first item assessed the extent to which respondents felt regret about their entrepreneurial decision, while the second captured their willingness to recommend entrepreneurship as a career path to others. Work-family conflict was measured using a four-item scale developed by Gutek et al. (1991), which has been widely applied in previous research (De Clercq et al., 2022). Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with statements such as: “My family is unhappy because I am often preoccupied with my business even when I am at home.” All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

To analyze the data and test the conceptual model, structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed using the SmartPLS software (version 4.0). Given the complexity of the model, the predictive orientation of the study, and the relatively small sample size, this analytical approach was deemed appropriate (Hair et al., 2021). In the first step, the reliability and validity of the measurement model were assessed, followed by an evaluation of the structural model. Because all data were collected through self-reported questionnaires from a single source, the potential presence of

common method bias was examined. Harman's single-factor test was conducted to statistically assess this issue (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The results indicated that no single factor accounted for more than 50% of the total variance, suggesting that common method bias was not a serious concern in this study.

Results

The results indicated that 60% of the rural business owners were male, and that 40% were female. The mean age of respondents was 39.75 years. Approximately, 64% were married, while 36% were single. In terms of education, 51% of the entrepreneurs held a university degree. Most respondents reported working between 10 and 15 hours per day. The majority had no prior entrepreneurial experience and typically employed fewer than five workers in their businesses. Work experience ranged from a minimum of one year to a maximum of 55 years, with an average of 11 years. Regarding entrepreneurial training, 53% had never participated in training workshops, whereas 47% reported having attended such programs. In terms of sectoral distribution, 44% of businesses operated in production, 45% in services, 4% in finance/insurance, and 7% in other sectors.

As noted earlier, subjective well-being was measured using a five-point Likert scale, with a mean score of 2.78 (SD = 0.81), indicating a relatively low level of subjective well-being among respondents. Work-family conflict, also measured on a five-point scale, had a mean of 3.37 (SD = 0.75), reflecting a relatively high level of conflict between work and family roles. Entrepreneurial regret was assessed using a three-point scale, yielding a mean score of 1.88 (SD = 0.53), which suggests a moderate level of regret regarding entrepreneurial decisions. Overall, these descriptive results provide an initial picture of the psychological conditions and personal challenges faced by rural business owners.

Measurement Model Assessment

The reliability of the constructs was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR). As shown in Table 1, all constructs exceeded the acceptable threshold of 0.70. Convergent validity was assessed by examining the average variance extracted (AVE), and all AVE values were close to or above the recommended threshold of 0.50. Discriminant validity was evaluated using the heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) (Henseler et al., 2015). As reported in Table 1, all HTMT values were below the conservative threshold of 0.85, indicating adequate discriminant validity (Kline, 2015).

Table 1. Results of the Measurement and Structural Model Assessment

Variables	Measurement Model						Structural Model	
	α	CR	AVE	HTMT			R ²	Q ²
				1	2	3		
1. Work-family conflict	0.87	0.91	0.82	—	—	—	—	—
2. Entrepreneurial regret	0.78	0.90	0.72	0.31	—	—	0.06	0.04
3. Subjective well-being	0.87	0.91	0.67	0.40	0.50	—	0.25	0.14

Notes: α = Cronbach's alpha; CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted; HTMT = heterotrait-monotrait ratio; R² = coefficient of determination; Q² = Stone-Geisser's predictive relevance.

Structural Model Assessment

After confirming the reliability and validity of the measurement model, the structural model was evaluated. Prior to examining the structural paths, overall model fit was

assessed using the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) (Henseler et al., 2016). The PLS analysis yielded an SRMR value of 0.088, which is below the recommended threshold of 0.09, indicating an acceptable model fit (Hair et al., 2021).

Next, the coefficient of determination (R^2) was examined for the endogenous constructs, namely entrepreneurial regret and subjective well-being. According to Cohen (1988), R^2 values of 0.60, 0.33, and 0.19 represent strong, moderate, and weak explanatory power, respectively. In this study, the R^2 value for entrepreneurial regret was 0.06, while that of subjective well-being was 0.25, suggesting a moderate level of predictive power. Additionally, the Stone-Geisser Q^2 test indicated that all Q^2 values for the latent variables were greater than zero, confirming the predictive relevance of the model (Cohen et al., 2013).

To test the structural paths, a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples was employed (Hair et al., 2019). The results of the hypothesis testing, along with effect sizes, are presented in Table 2. According to Cohen (1988), effect sizes of 0.35, 0.15, and 0.02 are considered large, medium, and small, respectively. The findings revealed that work-family conflict had a significant positive relationship with entrepreneurial regret ($\beta = 0.25, p < 0.05$). Work-family conflict also exerted a significant negative direct effect on subjective well-being ($\beta = -0.27, p < 0.01$). Entrepreneurial regret was found to have a significant negative relationship with subjective well-being ($\beta = -0.35, p < 0.01$). Accordingly, Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 were supported.

To test the mediation hypothesis, the PLS mediation analysis guidelines proposed by Nitzl et al. (2016) were followed. According to these guidelines, the significance of the indirect effect ($a \times b$) should be assessed through bootstrapping. The presence of a significant indirect effect, even when the direct effect remains significant, indicates mediation. The bootstrapping results showed that the indirect relationship between work-family conflict and subjective well-being through entrepreneurial regret was significant ($\beta = -0.09, CI = [-0.18, -0.02]$), as the bias-corrected confidence interval did not include zero. Thus, entrepreneurial regret mediates the relationship between work-family conflict and subjective well-being, providing support for Hypothesis 4. Given the significance of both the direct and indirect effects, entrepreneurial regret functions as a partial mediator in this relationship.

Table 2. Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects

Path	Path coefficient (β)	t-value	Confidence interval (CI)	f^2	Test result
Direct effects					
Work-family conflict → Entrepreneurial regret	0.25*	2.54	[0.03, 0.43]	0.16	Hypothesis 1 is supported.
Entrepreneurial regret → Subjective well-being	-0.35**	3.18	[-0.35, -0.004]	0.07	Hypothesis 2 is supported.
Work-family conflict → Subjective well-being	-0.27**	2.61	[-0.46, -0.04]	0.09	Hypothesis 3 is supported.
Indirect effects					
Work-family conflict → Entrepreneurial regret → Subjective well-being	-0.09*	2.17	[-0.18, -0.02]	—	Hypothesis 4 is supported.
Total effects					
Work-family conflict ← Subjective well-being	-0.36	3.58	[-0.54, -0.14]	—	—

Note: * $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$.

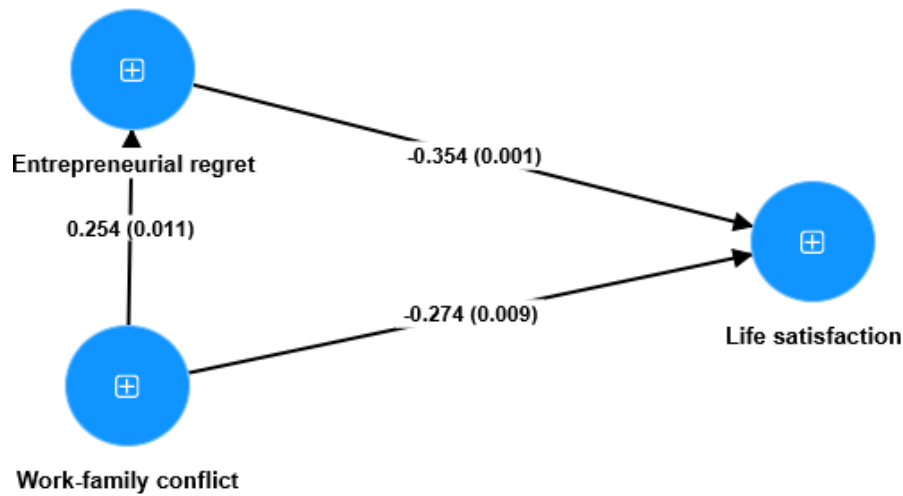


Figure 2. Structural model of the study.

Discussion and Conclusion

The main objective of this study was to examine the effect of work-family conflict on subjective well-being and the mediating role of entrepreneurial regret among owners of small rural businesses in Nahavand County. The results of the structural equation modeling analysis indicated that work-family conflict has a significant, negative, and direct effect on subjective well-being and simultaneously increases entrepreneurial regret. Moreover, entrepreneurial regret itself exerts a significant negative effect on subjective well-being and partially mediates the relationship between work-family conflict and well-being. These findings can be interpreted from several perspectives and show both convergence with and distinctions from prior research.

The first key finding—that work-family conflict negatively affects subjective well-being—is consistent with a substantial body of previous research (Brieger et al., 2024; De Vita et al., 2019). In rural contexts, where entrepreneurship and business management often involve long working hours, resource constraints, and economic pressures, conflicts between work and family roles can become a major source of stress and life dissatisfaction. This result aligns with studies such as Kalantari (2024), which demonstrate that when social support is insufficient and multiple roles are imposed on business owners, subjective well-being declines markedly. In such environments, imbalance between work and family demands not only threatens individual quality of life but may also undermine the sustainability of small rural businesses.

The second major finding confirms a positive relationship between work-family conflict and entrepreneurial regret. This result is consistent with studies suggesting that family and social pressures can lead to negative evaluations of the entrepreneurial career path (Hafeez et al., 2021; Kawai et al., 2023; Hsu et al., 2019). In the entrepreneurship psychology literature, career-related regret is understood as a negative emotion arising when individuals perceive that their decision to pursue entrepreneurship has produced unfavorable outcomes in other life domains (Kawai et al., 2023). When social and familial support for entrepreneurs is limited, the likelihood of experiencing such regret increases.

The third finding highlights the negative impact of entrepreneurial regret on

subjective well-being, in line with recent psychological research (Kawai et al., 2023; Quach et al., 2021). Regret, particularly when experienced repeatedly or chronically, can foster rumination, reduce motivation, heighten anxiety, and ultimately diminish life satisfaction. In the present study, this relationship was also confirmed in a mediating form, indicating that work-family conflict affects subjective well-being not only directly but also indirectly by intensifying entrepreneurial regret. This finding supports the theoretical model grounded in conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989), which posits that work-family conflict depletes individuals' psychological resources, with regret representing one manifestation of this depletion.

Overall, the findings of this study have important implications for theory development in rural entrepreneurship, subjective well-being, and work-family balance. From a theoretical perspective, by integrating social cognitive theory and conservation of resources theory with insights from positive psychology, this study helps clarify the mechanisms through which inter-role pressures can lead to psychological strain among small business owners. In particular, introducing entrepreneurial regret as a mediating construct in the rural entrepreneurship literature contributes to theoretical enrichment and provides a foundation for designing targeted psychological interventions.

From a practical standpoint, the results underscore the urgent need for educational, supportive, and counseling programs for rural small business owners, especially in the areas of role conflict management, psychological resilience, and enhancement of social support. Extension and rural development institutions can play a crucial role by offering training programs focused on stress management, work-family balance, and psychological self-care. Furthermore, improving access to career and psychological counseling services—particularly for women entrepreneurs—may help reduce psychological pressures and prevent the development of entrepreneurial regret. Policymakers, in turn, can design more precise and responsive policies by assessing the vulnerability of rural businesses to psychological, economic, and family-related stressors. This requires identifying structural barriers, such as complex business regulations, limited access to financial resources, and restrictive cultural norms, which affect both well-being and business sustainability. Revising existing policies and procedures to facilitate entrepreneurship in rural areas, especially for vulnerable groups, can have a substantial impact on improving both the psychological and economic conditions of entrepreneurs. In addition, fostering local support networks, entrepreneurial associations, and gender-sensitive empowerment programs can strengthen social capital and enhance a sense of belonging among rural entrepreneurs. Leveraging the capacity of local and community-based institutions to raise awareness about the importance of entrepreneurs' psychological well-being and to support them in coping with multiple challenges represents another complementary strategy.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the use of convenience sampling and the focus on a single county (Nahavand) may limit the generalizability of the findings to other rural regions in Iran or beyond. Second, the reliance on self-reported, cross-sectional data may introduce common method bias or response bias, although Harman's test indicated that such biases were adequately controlled. Third, the study focused on only one dimension of subjective well-being—

life satisfaction—thereby overlooking other important facets such as positive affect, meaningfulness, flourishing, or social connectedness. Moreover, potentially influential variables such as social support, psychological capital, or cultural differences were not included in the model.

Based on these limitations, several directions for future research can be suggested. Future studies could replicate this research in other rural regions to enhance comparability and generalizability. Longitudinal designs would allow for a more nuanced examination of the dynamic relationships among work-family conflict, regret, and well-being over time and provide stronger evidence of causality. Mixed-methods approaches combining quantitative and qualitative data could yield deeper insights into entrepreneurs' lived experiences and their interpretations of regret and role conflict. Incorporating variables such as family support, resilience, or meaningfulness of work could also result in more comprehensive and realistic models.

In conclusion, this study sheds light on an important psychological pathway influencing the subjective well-being of rural business owners. The findings demonstrate that work-family conflict and entrepreneurial regret exert substantial negative effects on the well-being of rural entrepreneurs, with regret serving as a mediating mechanism that intensifies this relationship. These results highlight the importance of managing multiple role conflicts and mitigating feelings of regret in order to promote entrepreneurs' mental health. Given the critical role of rural entrepreneurs in economic and social development, policymakers and support institutions should prioritize the design of targeted programs aimed at reducing psychological pressures and enhancing resilience. Future research that extends this theoretical framework and examines diverse cultural contexts can further deepen understanding of these complex dynamics.

Author Contributions

All authors contributed equally to the conceptualization of the article and writing of the original and subsequent drafts.

Acknowledgements

The authors extend their sincere gratitude to all participants who contributed to this study.

Funding

The authors declare that no financial support was received for the research and/or publication of this article.

Conflicts of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The authors declare that AI is not used in this study.

Data availability statement

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Ethical Considerations

The authors avoided data fabrication, falsification and plagiarism, and any form of misconduct.

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