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Through the Lens of Fairness: A Qualitative Investigation into Co-workers' Perceptions of I-deals

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ABSTRACT   Amidst the rapidly evolving work environment that increasingly necessitates personalized approaches towards employees, there is a pressing need to broaden our understanding of idiosyncratic deals (i-deals) and their third-party implications in the workplace. Although immediate responses to i-deals often hinge on equity and social comparison, this approach does not fully explain co-workers' perceptions of others' i-deals. By reconciling various theoretical accounts, we propose that co-workers' perceptions of i-deals largely depend on the implementation of i-deals and related justice perceptions of co-workers. However, our understanding of how i-deal implementation shapes co-workers' perceptions of i-deals from a justice perspective remains limited. Therefore, we conducted an inductive multiple-case study through 48 in-depth interviews involving managers, i-deal receivers (i-dealers), and co-workers. Building on our findings, we develop an emergent framework that explains how the implementation of i-deals, when viewed through the lens of organizational justice, can shape co-workers' perceptions of i-deals. This novel perspective enriches the i-deal literature by offering a fresh angle on the third-party implications of i-deals, emphasizing the significance of their implementation and related fairness perceptions.

Keywords: co-workers' fairness perceptions, idiosyncratic deals, i-deal implementation

INTRODUCTION

In their pursuit to attract and retain talent while adapting to the evolving employment landscape, organizations are increasingly accommodating personalized employment

terms, moving away from standard HR practices (Kroon et al., 2015). This shift has led to the prominence of idiosyncratic deals (i-deals) in modern organizations, prioritizing individual needs in their HR practices to gain a competitive advantage (Bal and Rousseau, 2016; Kroon et al., 2015). As organizations increasingly recognize the strategic value of i-deals, it becomes clear that i-deals should no longer be seen as incidental deviations from standardization, occasionally granted by managers, but rather as an integral component of modern organizations' HR strategy (Kroon et al., 2015).

I-deals represent an HR differentiation practice involving personalized arrangements that employees negotiate with employers to customize their employment conditions according to their needs and preferences (Rousseau, 2005). While the scope of i-deals can be broad and about any condition of employment (Conway and Coyle-Shapiro, 2016), the primary resources negotiated are those most needed by employees and enable employers to retain valued employees (Liu et al., 2013). These resources include development and flexibility opportunities, work tasks, workload, pay, and compensation (Rousseau et al., 2016). As such, i-deals are differentiated based on the specific resources allocated to individuals, such as development i-deals, flexibility i-deals, task i-deals, reduced workload-related i-deals, and financial i-deals (Rosen et al., 2013). Research studies reveal numerous positive outcomes associated with i-deals for both their recipients and organizations, including improved organizational commitment and job satisfaction (Ho and Tekleab, 2016; Hornung et al., 2008), heightened employee motivation and engagement (Hornung et al., 2009), reduced stress levels (Las Heras et al., 2017), and turnover intentions (Ho and Tekleab, 2016), as well as enhanced organizational citizenship behaviour (Anand et al., 2010) and increased motivation for continued employment (Bal et al., 2012).

However, as with all HR differentiation practices (Joseph et al., 2017), by personalizing employment terms, i-deals can raise crucial questions about fairness within organizations (Rousseau et al., 2016). When co-workers perceive i-deals as unfair, the resulting costs from demotivation and counterproductive performance among them could outweigh the benefits of granting i-deals to individual employees (Kroon et al., 2015). This indirect cost adds complexity for organizations in harnessing the full potential of i-deals. According to previous research, organizations can only fully realize the benefits of HR differentiation practices if they effectively manage employees' fairness perceptions about these practices (Joseph et al., 2017). Therefore, understanding how co-workers perceive these practices through the lens of organizational justice is crucial for advancing both i-deal research and the broader HRM differentiation field and enabling organizations to capitalize on the strategic value of i-deals effectively.

Empirical evidence within i-deal research shows that co-workers view i-deals as unfair because they cause unequal resource distribution and feelings of disadvantage, stemming from equity and social comparison dynamics (Huang and Tang, 2021; Kong et al., 2020; Marescaux et al., 2019; Ng, 2017; Zhang et al., 2020). Although immediate responses to i-deals often involve equity or social comparison, this perspective is insufficient to fully understand co-workers' perceptions of i-deals (Garg and Fulmer, 2018). Some theoretical accounts suggested that co-workers' perceptions of i-deals depend heavily on how effectively i-deals are implemented (Kroon et al., 2015; Rofcanin et al., 2022; Rousseau et al., 2016). This assertion aligns with the strategic HRM perspective, emphasizing the importance of addressing third-party justice concerns to successfully implement

organizational practices (Novelli et al., 1995). In line with this, Gachayeva et al. (2023) suggested that four key stages of i-deal implementation are instrumental in shaping co-workers' fairness perceptions of i-deals: negotiation, allocation, communication, and the consequences of i-deals. However, our understanding of how i-deal implementation shapes co-workers' fairness perceptions of i-deals remains limited.

To shed more light on this issue, our qualitative study explores how the implementation of i-deals influences co-workers' perceptions, mainly focussing on the stages of negotiation, allocation, communication, and consequences from an organizational justice perspective. Our interest lies in understanding the impact of i-deal implementation on co-workers' perceptions of i-deals holistically rather than temporally. Therefore, we examine these four stages not as sequential but as critical aspects of i-deal implementation. Guided by the four dimensions of organizational justice theory, our research aims to identify the underlying factors related to i-deal implementation that shape co-workers' fairness perceptions of i-deals. To accomplish this objective, we employed an inductive multiple-case design, conducting 48 in-depth interviews with key stakeholders involved in implementing i-deals, including managers, i-dealers, and co-workers. Our data revealed key factors associated with i-deal implementation that influence co-workers' fairness perceptions of i-deals, resulting in positive and negative (overall) perceptions of i-deals.

This study makes several contributions to the literature. First, we build an emergent framework that explains how the implementation of i-deals can shape co-workers' perceptions of i-deals when viewed through the lens of organizational justice. This novel perspective enriches the i-deal literature by introducing a fresh angle to the research of i-deals' third-party implications, emphasizing the importance of i-deal implementation and related justice perceptions. Our study reveals how key factors associated with i-deal implementation shape co-workers' fairness perceptions of i-deals, resulting in either positive or negative perceptions. By doing so, our findings expand upon previous theoretical research on co-workers' perceptions of i-deals (Gachayeva et al., 2023; Garg and Fulmer, 2018; Marescaux et al., 2021; Rousseau et al., 2016), adding empirical rigour to the field. Our data show complex interactions among these factors, indicating that specific triggers for co-workers' fairness perceptions of i-deals do not always result in the anticipated negative or positive perceptions when interacting with other influencing factors. These findings provide important insights for academic enquiry to understand how different aspects of i-deal implementation and related justice perceptions can mitigate or exacerbate co-workers' perceptions of i-deals. This is also crucial for the practical application of i-deals in mitigating potential perceptions of unfairness and reducing backlash effects associated with i-deals, ultimately maximizing their potential benefits.

Second, our research addresses the notably underexplored area of i-deal communication, an empirical lacuna within existing i-deal literature (Simosi et al., 2023). Our findings challenge the assumption that i-deals are strictly confidential, highlighting that the secrecy surrounding i-deals plays a pivotal role in shaping co-workers' perceptions of i-deals. This provides empirical support for prior theoretical claims (Conway and Coyle-Shapiro, 2016; Gachayeva et al., 2023; Garg and Fulmer, 2018; Liao et al., 2016; Marescaux et al., 2021; Rousseau et al., 2016). These findings enhance our theoretical understanding of how co-workers perceive i-deals by demonstrating that the

communication of i-deals cannot be overlooked and provide practical insights for organizations to mitigate negative perceptions of i-deals through proactive communication strategies.

Third, our study employs a qualitative approach, which is relatively uncommon in i-deal research, as shown in Table I. By integrating the perspectives of all stakeholders involved in i-deal implementation in an inductive multiple-case study, our research offers unique and rich insights into fairness perceptions associated with i-deals. Given our research's focus on perceptions of i-deals, qualitative research is particularly relevant as it enables a thorough understanding of individual experiences and their interpretations, adding depth and robustness to the research (Bluhm et al., 2011). Furthermore, the qualitative case study method is an increasingly important tool for examining HR differentiation practices, as implementing differentiated workforce practices in organizations is not yet well-understood and requires illustrative and vivid evidence (Becker et al., 2009).

Finally, we contribute to broader discussions on HR differentiation and organizational justice theory by highlighting the potential implementation challenges of i-deals related to co-workers' justice perceptions. Expanding upon prior research (Huselid and Becker, 2011; Joseph et al., 2017; Karriker, 2007; Schmidt et al., 2018), our study highlights how HR differentiation practices, which are increasingly relevant in the contemporary workplace, can influence individual perceptions of fairness. We demonstrate how adopting an organizational justice perspective can be an effective strategy for navigating these challenges and ensuring the successful implementation of HR differentiation practices. Furthermore, by applying four distinct justice dimensions in an i-deal context, we extend their application beyond traditional settings, offering new insights into how various justice dimensions interact to shape co-workers' perceptions of i-deals.

Co-workers' Fairness Perceptions of I-deals

Research addressing how co-workers perceive i-deals has only recently begun to emerge. These studies have primarily focussed on how i-deals create differences within groups, setting apart the recipients from other employees who perform similar tasks or occupy similar roles (Hornung et al., 2016; Huang and Tang, 2021; Kong et al., 2020; Marescaux et al., 2019; Ng, 2017; Van Waeyenberg et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2020). Table I summarizes recent research studies on co-workers' perceptions of i-deals, highlighting the range of theoretical frameworks and specific findings. The key assumption in this body of research is that co-workers' perceptions are shaped mainly by a sense of unfairness stemming from unequal resource distribution (Huang and Tang, 2021; Marescaux et al., 2019; Ng, 2017) or by feelings of a disadvantage when they compare themselves to i-deal recipients (Kong et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). However, although i-deals may prompt immediate equity or social comparison responses, this approach does not fully capture how co-workers' perceptions of i-deals are shaped (Garg and Fulmer, 2018).

Theoretical work within the i-deal literature offers broader insights into how co-workers might perceive i-deals, highlighting the significance of concerns related to

Table I. Research on co-workers' perceptions of i-deals

Authors	Methodology	Theoretical lenses	The main type of i-deals	How/why co-workers perceive/react to i-deals
Lai et al. (2009)	Mixed method (Primary -Quantitative)	Social exchange; organizational justice	General approach/All i-deals	I-deals gain greater acceptance when the i-dealer is a friend, the co-worker perceives a social exchange relationship with the employer, and there is anticipation of future similar opportunities
Hornung et al. (2016)	Quantitative	Organizational justice	Development; flexibility	I-deals are more acceptable when distributive justice in current employment is low, and i-deals are common. For flexibility i-deals, high procedural justice, and commonness of i-deals lead to positive fairness evaluations
Ng (2017)	Quantitative	Equity	Development	Witnessing co-workers receiving i-deals reduces perceived outcome-input ratios, leading to envy
Marescaux et al. (2019)	Quantitative	Distributive justice	Workload reduction; financial; flexibility.	The content of i-deals and the work context influence co-workers' perceived equity balance, subsequently affecting their reaction with voice behaviour
Kong et al. (2020)	Quantitative	Social comparison; conservation of resources	Task	Co-workers' task i-deals trigger upward social comparison, potentially leading to emotional exhaustion and deviant behaviour
Zhang et al. (2020)	Quantitative	Social comparison	Development; flexibility	I-deals may prompt social comparisons among co-workers. Upward comparisons with others' development i-deals result in more contrast effects than comparisons with flexibility i-deals, making development i-deals less acceptable to co-workers

(Continues)

Table I.   (Continued)

Authors	Methodology	Theoretical lenses	The main type of i-deals	How/why co-workers perceive/ react to i-deals
Huang and Tang (2021)	Quantitative	Fairness heuristic; trait activation	General approach/All i-deals	Witnessing co-workers' i-deals leads to perceived distributive unfairness and violation of the psychological contract, increasing the likelihood of employees minimizing creative engagement to restore the psychological contract balance
Van Waeyenberg et al. (2023)	Quantitative	Social comparison; attribution; procedural justice	Flexibility	Social comparison affects how co-workers judge their own competence when attributing another's flexibility i-deal to higher needs or better performance. Need-based attributions positively relate to co-workers' competence feelings and subsequent OCB, while performance-based attributions have a negative impact. These effects are stronger when procedural fairness is high
Pestotnik (2024)	Quantitative	Distributive justice	Development; flexibility; financial	Co-workers' distributive justice perceptions of i-deals are affected by i-deal content, negotiation timing, and co-workers' justice sensitivity. Those highest in sensitivity have the lowest ratings of distributive justice, especially when it involves a co-worker's financial i-deal

various facets of organizational justice. For example, Garg and Fulmer (2018) proposed that co-workers primarily form their perceptions of i-deals based on their self-interest and the recipients' deservingness of the deals. This suggestion aligns with distributive justice theory, where individuals' fairness perceptions are linked to their self-interests in the outcome (Bernerth and Walker, 2012) and recipients' perceived deservingness (Leventhal, 1980). Marescaux et al. (2021) expanded this theoretical

perspective by suggesting that the procedures employed in granting and communicating i-deals influence co-workers' procedural and interactional justice perceptions. Similarly, Lai et al. (2009) underscored the relevance of organizational justice dimensions in shaping co-workers' perceptions of i-deals, although their emphasis was more on the broader context of employment relationships.

The significance of various facets of organizational justice in understanding co-workers' perceptions of i-deals has also been highlighted in association with i-deal implementation. For example, Gachayeva et al. (2023) highlight the importance of addressing co-workers' justice perceptions related to the four stages of i-deal implementation: negotiation, allocation, communication, and consequences of i-deals. I-deal negotiation refers to an employee requesting a personalized arrangement, leading to an exchange between the employee and a manager to reach a mutually beneficial agreement (Vidyarthi et al., 2022). Simosi et al. (2021) suggested that negotiating i-deals while adhering to procedural justice rules enhances the likelihood of co-workers accepting i-deals. Once negotiated, i-deals are allocated, tailoring employment terms to individual requirements and preferences (Ho and Tekleab, 2016). These differences in employment terms may activate distributive justice concerns regarding the allocation of organizational resources (Huang and Tang, 2021; Lee et al., 2022; Marescaux et al., 2019; Ng, 2017). Allocated i-deals may lead to consequences affecting not only the primary stakeholders but also co-workers (Garg and Fulmer, 2018; Vidyarthi et al., 2022), often resulting in negative impacts such as increased workload, disrupted team dynamics, and perceptions of inequality (Anand et al., 2010; Marescaux et al., 2019; Ng, 2017; Vidyarthi et al., 2016). Managing these consequences is crucial in shaping co-workers' fairness perceptions of i-deals (Gachayeva et al., 2023; Marescaux et al., 2021; Rousseau et al., 2016). Although i-deals are typically assumed to be confidential (Liao et al., 2016), co-workers often possess some information about them (Garg and Fulmer, 2018). The communication or lack thereof regarding i-deals can significantly influence co-workers' fairness perceptions of i-deals (Marescaux et al., 2021; Simosi et al., 2023). Gachayeva et al. (2023) proposed that each of these key stages of i-deal implementation impacts co-workers' various justice perceptions related to i-deals. This aligns with the organizational justice perspective that explains how fairness perceptions are influenced not only by the allocation of outcomes (distributive justice) but also by the processes determining these allocations (procedural justice) and the related interpersonal treatment (informational and interpersonal justice) (Greenberg, 1990).

According to strategic HRM literature, one of the key factors influencing the effective implementation of HRM practices is the justice perceptions of those involved (Karriker, 2007; Novelli et al., 1995; Sayyadi Tooranloo et al., 2017). In particular, Novelli et al. (1995) emphasize that managing distributive, procedural, and interactional justice concerns is critical to successfully implementing organizational practices. Building on insights from i-deal, justice, and strategic HRM literature, we contend that co-workers' perceptions of i-deals are shaped by co-workers' justice perceptions related to i-deal implementation. Despite the theoretical advancement, empirical investigations in this domain are significantly lacking, indicating a substantial need for further investigation. Therefore, in this paper, we ask, '*How does i-deal implementation influence co-workers' fairness perceptions, inducing both positive and negative perceptions of i-deals?*'

Organizational Justice and Fairness Perceptions

Organizational justice theory concerns employees' perceptions of whether they are treated fairly or unfairly by the organization (Greenberg, 1990). Initially, researchers suggested that the only criterion against which individuals judged fairness was the equal distribution of outcomes (Adams, 1965). However, Leventhal (1980) introduced the notion of deservingness in addition to equality in his conceptualization of distributive justice. Deservingness concerns whether the receiver deserves the outcome, determined by their contributions and needs. According to Leventhal's (1980) deservingness rules, individuals must have high contributions and high needs to be perceived as deserving and the outcome to be perceived as 'distributively' fair. Later research has shown that fairness perceptions are also influenced by the decision-making and the interpersonal treatment related to those outcomes (Bies, 1986). To that end, researchers in organizational justice literature have identified distributive, procedural, informational, and interpersonal facets of organizational justice that all contribute to individuals' fairness perceptions (Greenberg, 1993). While some researchers view informational and interpersonal facets as a single (interactional) construct, Colquitt (2001) argues that due to their independent effects on fairness perceptions, they should be considered two distinct dimensions of organizational justice. Informational justice is concerned with how decisions are communicated and when executed effectively, can positively influence perceptions of procedural justice. On the other hand, interpersonal justice centres on demonstrating concern and respect for individuals, specifically regarding the distributive outcomes they receive (Bies, 1986; Greenberg, 1990).

Although various conceptualizations of organizational justice exist, the four-factor justice model considers each facet's distinct effect on individuals' fairness perceptions, offering a holistic view (Blader and Tyler, 2003; Colquitt, 2001; Fortin et al., 2020). Therefore, to better understand co-workers' fairness perceptions of i-deals, we employed the four-factor model as a theoretical lens. This model is crucial to our study, as it enables a comprehensive examination of the various justice concerns that may arise in association with different stages of i-deal implementation.

METHOD

Research Design and Research Setting

Given the limited empirical evidence regarding our research question, we utilize an inductive multiple-case method (Eisenhardt, 1989). This method is particularly well-suited for research that aims to explain a focal phenomenon by linking constructs and building theory (Eisenhardt, 2021). Multiple cases are preferable to single cases in theory development, as 'replication' across various cases can facilitate the formulation of theories that are more accurate, parsimonious, and generalizable (Garg and Eisenhardt, 2017). Furthermore, the significance and practicality of the qualitative multiple-case study approach have been emphasized in strategic HRM literature to examine the implications of HR differentiation practices within organizations (Becker et al., 2009).

Our research setting is the manufacturing sector in the Republic of Azerbaijan. The manufacturing industry in Azerbaijan employs 7.4 per cent of the total population, with men more likely to be employed than women (74.8 per cent compared with only 25.2 per cent) (SSCRA, 2022). According to The Global Competitiveness Report (2017), Azerbaijan is one of the top seven countries in terms of flexibility of wage determination (Hampel-Milagrosa and Sibal, 2019). However, Azerbaijan's labour market suffers from skill shortages and a mismatch of education required by employers and offered by educational institutions (Hampel-Milagrosa and Sibal, 2019). According to several reports, this is one of the top problems for doing business in Azerbaijan (Hampel-Milagrosa and Sibal, 2019; Mammadli, 2018). Given this context of labour market challenges, including skill shortages, educational mismatch, and adaptable wage structures, Azerbaijan presents an ideal setting for researching i-deals, as organizations may be more inclined to negotiate personalized arrangements to attract and retain skilled talent. The insights gained here can inform understanding in other sectors and contexts where organizations face similar challenges, making our findings broadly relevant.

Consistent with the theoretical sampling approach of an inductive multiple-case method, we selected organizations where the focal phenomenon of our interest (i-deals) was likely to occur. We also ensured that the selected organizations exhibited similarities and differences, a strategy designed to enhance theory building (Eisenhardt, 2021). This variance among the cases helped broaden the range of perceptions about i-deals, particularly across organizational attributes likely to influence i-deal implementation (Garg and Eisenhardt, 2017). For example, we included organizations with varying levels of HR standardization, anticipating its potential influence on HR differentiation practices. Additionally, given that i-deals are typically negotiated with line managers (Hornung et al., 2009), we sought variation in organizational structures to capture differences in managerial decision-making power. Moreover, we considered variations in employment forms, training and development opportunities, and salary structures to capture the diverse resources involved in i-deals. This methodological approach is instrumental in fostering a more robust and generalizable theory, in line with the principles of multi-case theory building (Graebner and Eisenhardt, 2004). Table II presents a summary of the key characteristics of the organizations in our study.

Sampling and Data Collection

Our data collection strategy employed a multi-stakeholder approach, integrating perspectives from all parties involved in i-deal implementation. This aspect represents a significant advantage of our study, as it is uncommon in i-deal literature to conduct qualitative interviews encompassing managers, i-dealers, and co-workers even within a single organization. The data we collected across multiple cases from diverse stakeholders (various informant sources) contribute to the richness and accuracy of our emergent theoretical framework (Eisenhardt, 1989; Jick, 1979).

We collected the data through 48 semi-structured, in-depth interviews over eight months. We conducted 16 interviews in O1, 17 in O2, and 15 in O3. In each organization, we continued our interviews until reaching a point of theoretical saturation, where

Table II. Summary of sample organizations' attributes

Organizational attributes	O1	O2	O3
Size	Large	Large	Large
Age	<20	<5	<10
Ownership forms	State-owned	Part-state-owned	Private
Organizational structure	Centralized	Decentralized	Centralized
HR practices	Standardized HR practices	Standardized HR practices, with some policies under development	HR practices with limited standardization
Employment form	Full-time and shift-based, limited flexibility	Full-time and shift-based, with moderate flexibility	Full-time and shift-based, limited flexibility
Training and developmental opportunities	Diverse training and development opportunities	Diverse training and development opportunities	Limited training and development opportunities
Starting salary level	Double national average	Double national average	National average
Interview scope	Across several departments in Head Office (HO)	Across several departments	Across several departments

no new major patterns or insights emerged, indicating that the collected information was sufficient to understand the phenomena under study effectively. (Eisenhardt, 1989). Given that the term 'i-deal' may not be widely recognized in organizational contexts, we ensured clarity for the respondents by referring to i-deals as person-specific work arrangements concerning various conditions of employment that employees negotiated with their managers. This description aligned with the existing literature on the definition of i-deals and was employed to guarantee a consistent understanding of the phenomenon among the participants.

At the managerial level, we interviewed ten managers to understand the organizational perspective on i-deals and their implications. At the individual level, we interviewed 38 employees to understand their perceptions and experiences of i-deals. Among these participants, 34 had a co-worker whose manager had granted an i-deal, while 29 had been recipients of an i-deal. One participant (P48) had not yet received an i-deal but was contemplating negotiating a development i-deal. Our interview protocol for employees was structured into two segments to effectively capture both co-worker and i-dealer perspectives. In the first segment, we gathered insights into the participants' perceptions of their co-workers' i-deals. Subsequently, the focus shifted to the participants' personal experiences with i-deals. This sequential approach was intentionally adopted to mitigate the potential for anchoring bias, which could be intensified if participants first reflected on their own i-deals (Lieder et al., 2018). By prioritizing observations of others' i-deals consistent with the study objectives, we aimed to minimize the influence of participants' own i-deal experiences on their perceptions of their co-workers' i-deals. We designed our

interview questions based on our research objectives, drawing extensively from i-deal and organizational justice literature to capture all aspects of i-deal implementation and the four types of justice perceptions. At the same time, we kept the questions open, broadly defined, and responsive to emerging themes.

We approached initial participants from each of the three organizations through personal contacts. From this starting point, snowball sampling was used to recruit additional participants (Leighton et al., 2021). To mitigate potential response bias, we intentionally avoided recruiting employee participants through the managers involved in our study. The sample involved white-collar professionals occupying various roles, all highly educated, most holding postgraduate degrees. Our sample was predominantly male, with only 17 female participants, which mirrors the gender distribution within Azerbaijan's manufacturing industry. The tenure of these participants in their respective organizations varied, ranging from three months to 11 years. Notably, those with shorter tenures, particularly from the recently established O2 (see Table III for detailed participant information), demonstrated varying awareness about i-deals in their workgroups. The exception was Participant P28, with a tenure of three months, who showed less awareness. Nevertheless, this participant's experiences were still valuable to the study, offering a unique perspective on i-deals and i-deal implementation from an i-dealer perspective as someone who had negotiated a financial i-deal.

The interviews were conducted in Azerbaijani by the first author, a native speaker, lasting between 40 and 100 minutes. Interviews were conducted online via video calls using Teams. Apart from one respondent from the second organization, all interviews were video-recorded. We could not record this interview due to the participants' concerns about confidentiality. Instead, the first author took extensive notes during the interview, including verbatim quotes from the interviewee. Subsequently, we validated these notes with the respondent to ensure accuracy and completeness (Corden and Sainsbury, 2006). For confidentiality purposes, the first author transcribed the recorded interviews and anonymized all identifiable information about the participants and their organizations. These transcripts were then translated into English by a professional translator. Subsequently, certain sections of the English transcriptions were retranslated to the original language and then back to English, either by an external translator or the first author, to ensure that the intended meaning remained intact after the translation (Twinn, 1997).

Analysis

We began our analysis by examining each case to identify factors related to i-deal implementation and their impact on co-workers' perceptions of fairness (Eisenhardt, 2021). To achieve this, we first employed an inductive coding approach without predefined codes (Miles and Huberman, 1994). We minimized potential informant biases and enhanced data quality by integrating perspectives from multiple informants in each case (Bluhm et al., 2011). We then conducted axial coding to integrate first-order codes into emerging sub-themes, allowing us to discern patterns, relationships, and connections within each case in alignment with our research objective (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). As a result of this process, we identified the preliminary vision about

Table III. Role of participants

Participant code	Role	Gender	Organizational tenure	Organization	Presence of a co-worker, who received an i-deal	Presence of own i-deal
P1	Manager	Male	11 y	O1	–	–
P2	Specialist (administrative field)	Female	3 y	O1	Yes	Yes
P3	Senior specialist (administrative field)	Female	3 y	O1	Yes	Yes
P4	Senior specialist (administrative field)	Male	18 m	O1	Yes	Yes
P5	Senior specialist (administrative field)	Male	3 y	O1	Yes	Yes
P6	Senior specialist (administrative field)	Male	18 m	O1	Yes	Yes
P7	Manager	Male	11 y	O1	–	–
P8	Senior engineer (administrative field)	Female	11 y	O1	Yes	Yes
P9	Senior engineer (administrative field)	Female	11 y	O1	Yes	Yes
P10	Senior engineer (administrative field)	Female	2 y	O1	Yes	Yes
P11	Senior engineer (administrative field)	Male	1 y	O1	Yes	Yes
P12	Manager	Male	11 y	O1	–	–
P13	Senior specialist (administrative field)	Male	11 y	O1	Yes	Yes
P14	Senior specialist (administrative field)	Female	9 y	O1	Yes	Yes
P15	Senior specialist (administrative field)	Female	7 m	O1	Yes	Yes
P16	Senior specialist (administrative field)	Female	4 y	O1	yes	Yes
P17	Manager	Male	2 y	O2	–	–
P18	Manager	Male	2 y	O2	–	–
P19	Senior specialist (quality assurance)	Female	8 m	O2	Yes	Yes
P20	Manager	Male	2 y	O2	–	–
P21	Specialist (administrative field)	Male	4 m	O2	Yes	No
P22	Specialist (IT)	Male	2 y	O2	Yes	Yes
P23	Specialist (administrative field)	Female	2 y	O2	Yes	Yes

(Continues)

Table III. (Continued)

Participant code	Role	Gender	Organizational tenure	Organization	Presence of a co-worker, who received an i-deal	Presence of own i-deal
P24	Specialist (administrative field)	Female	6 m	O2	Yes	Yes
P25	Specialist (administrative field)	Female	4 m	O2	Yes	No
P26	Specialist (project management)	Female	2 y	O2	Yes	Yes
P27	Specialist (administrative field)	Female	20 m	O2	Yes	Yes
P28	Senior specialist (procurement)	Male	3 m	O2	No	Yes
P29	Coordinator (administrative field)	Male	16 m	O2	Yes	Yes
P30	Specialist (IT)	Male	18 m	O2	Yes	No
P31	Accountant	Male	1 y	O2	Yes	Yes
P32	Senior specialist (quality assurance)	Male	1 y	O2	No	Yes
P33	Manager	Male	18 m	O2	–	–
P34	Manager	Male	10 y	O3	–	–
P35	Senior specialist (procurement)	Male	6 m	O3	Yes	No
P36	Manager	Male	10 y	O3	–	–
P37	Engineer (electric)	Male	10 y	O3	Yes	Yes
P38	Manager	Male	2 y	O3	–	–
P39	Engineer (maintenance quality)	Male	9 y	O3	Yes	No
P40	Senior accountant	Male	3 y	O3	Yes	Yes
P41	Accountant	Male	3 y	O3	Yes	Yes
P42	Specialist (metrology)	Male	5 y	O3	Yes	Yes
P43	Specialist (administrative field)	Female	3 y	O3	Yes	No
P44	Specialist (quality assurance)	Male	10 y	O3	Yes	No
P45	Engineer (welding)	Male	5 y	O3	No	Yes
P46	Engineer (isolation)	Female	8 y	O3	Yes	Yes
P47	Specialist (administrative field)	Female	4 y	O3	Yes	No
P48	Coordinator (maintenance)	Male	6 y	O3	No	No

major factors influencing co-workers' fairness perceptions of i-deals associated with the four stages of i-deal implementation. Upon gaining this early understanding, we revisited the data to establish connections among emerging sub-themes and themes (Eisenhardt, 1989).

To increase the credibility of our study further, we shared our preliminary findings with two participants from each organization to verify the accuracy and resonance of our interpretations (Langley and Abdallah, 2011). We also used the insider–outsider approach to triangulate our data and perspectives (Smets et al., 2015). We benefitted from the insider knowledge of our first author, who had worked in the manufacturing sector in Azerbaijan for ten years, while the two other authors were outsiders. The second and third authors critically examined and assessed the codes and interpretations on multiple occasions, ensuring objectivity. This approach minimized bias and allowed for an analysis that blended in-depth sector-specific insights with broader, impartial perspectives. We then proceeded to cross-case analysis, where we compared the insights emerging from each case to identify consistent patterns and sub-themes across the cases (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). Inconsistencies and agreements in the emerging sub-themes were noted and investigated further by revisiting the data. This process involved iterations between data, theory, and existing literature to refine our findings. The data analyses took another five months, culminating in theorizing about the formation of co-workers' fairness-induced perceptions of i-deals in association with i-deal implementation (Figure 1). Table IV summarizes how we grouped the first-order codes to build sub-themes and themes with added supporting quotes.

Considering the manufacturing industry's typical reliance on structured, process-driven tasks necessitating strict adherence to schedules and physical presence, our interview data indicated limited availability of flexibility i-deals in the organizations. Nevertheless, in all three cases examined, there were accounts of such i-deals being granted to office employees operating in less rigid work environments. Financial i-deals were more common in the second and third organizations than in the first, which had more standardized HR practices. Development and task i-deals were reported more frequently in the first and second organizations, where training and developmental opportunities were more prevalent than the third organization. In contrast, the third organization had only one reported development i-deal. All ten managers in the study reported granting various types of i-deals to their current employees. Accounts from managers and employees revealed that in all three cases, employees typically negotiate i-deals with their line managers irrespective of variance in organizational structures. However, depending on the type of i-deal and the organizational context, line managers might consult with senior managers before allocating the deal. I-deals were more prevalent in O1 and less so in O3. The i-deals reported in O1 were financial, development, task, reduced workload, location flexibility, and schedule flexibility ideals. Development and task i-deals were the most common. The i-deals reported in O2 were financial, development, task, reduced workload, and schedule flexibility ideals, with financial i-deals being the most reported type of i-deals. The i-deals reported in O3 were mainly financial i-deals. Participants reported only two schedule flexibility ideals, indicating that the extent of organizational resources influences the type of i-deals allocated to individuals.

We found consistent similarities across all cases in emergent themes and sub-themes regarding how co-workers form their fairness perceptions of i-deals despite variations in organizational attributes, the prevalence of i-deals, and the types of i-deals granted. This consistency enhances the strong transferability of our findings (Eisenhardt, 2021). We highlight the similarities and differences by presenting factors influencing co-workers' perceptions of i-deals within our emergent framework.

FINDINGS

Our findings demonstrate how i-deal implementation and co-workers' related justice perceptions shape their (overall) perceptions of i-deals. We identify key factors influencing co-workers' fairness perceptions associated with the four stages of i-deal implementation: negotiation, allocation, communication, and consequences. Using narratives from co-workers, managers, and i-dealers, we illustrate how each factor might raise distinctive justice concerns among co-workers and result in positive or negative perceptions of i-deals.

I-deal Negotiation

Past success or future confidence in similar i-deal negotiations. Given that i-deal negotiation fundamentally represents a decision-making process about resource allocation in the form of an i-deal, our findings indicate that adhering to the procedural justice principles, specifically the bias suppression rule, is crucial to minimize unfairness perceptions among co-workers and cultivating positive perceptions about i-deals. Across all three cases, our findings show that past success or future confidence in negotiating similar i-deals enhances co-workers' fairness perceptions of i-deal negotiations. When co-workers had previously succeeded in negotiating similar i-deals or believed they could do so in future, they viewed the i-deal negotiation as impartial and consistent, aligning with the bias suppression rule of procedural justice (Colquitt, 2001; Leventhal, 1980). A participant in O1 commented:

> 'If tomorrow I am in the same situation, he will grant it to me, and to someone else in the same situation, then that is ok. No, if he grants to some and not others…if it is an unfounded decision, then no.' (P15, co-worker)

This also aligns with the self-interest model of procedural justice (Lind and Tyler, 1988), which suggests that individuals are more likely to perceive a decision-making process as fair if it leads to beneficial outcomes for themselves (Greenberg, 1990). In such cases, favourable outcomes generally suppress concerns over the fairness of the procedures. As one participant in O3 articulated, when speaking about financial deals:

> 'They [co-workers] support someone's salary raise because they know that if someone gets a raise, we will be in a position to have a say [to request a similar deal]. From that point of view, no one here objects.' (P42, co-worker)

Managers also echoed this viewpoint, further validating the significance of this factor. One manager in O1 explained that co-workers generally held positive views of flexibility i-deals, primarily because they were aware they had the opportunity to negotiate similar arrangements:

'They [employees] know that if they need [a flexibility i-deal], I will give them too. I have yet to see a negative reaction. I have never seen anyone get upset when providing flexible work opportunities.' (P1, manager).

The significance of this factor becomes even more evident when co-workers have experienced unsuccessful negotiations for similar arrangements. When their requests for similar i-deals were rejected, participants perceived inconsistency and bias in the manager's decision-making, resulting in reported feelings of unfairness and heightened frustration. For example, one participant in O2 shared her disappointment after being denied a flexibility i-deal similar to her co-worker, stating: 'I was very disappointed. They [the manager] say that everyone is treated equally, but when it comes to me, the legislation requires it [strict schedule]' (P23, co-worker).

In summary, insights from various stakeholders across all three case studies revealed that past success and future confidence in similar i-deal negotiations significantly influence co-workers' fairness perceptions of i-deal negotiations. This finding expands upon the existing i-deal literature by highlighting the importance of procedural justice principles (Lai et al., 2009; Simosi et al., 2021) and the self-interest in shaping co-workers' fairness perceptions of i-deals (Garg and Fulmer, 2018; Marescaux et al., 2021).

I-deal Allocation

Consistent with previous theorizations (Garg and Fulmer, 2018; Marescaux et al., 2021), our analysis revealed two important factors influencing co-workers' fairness perceptions about i-deal allocation: co-workers' perceptions of the i-dealer's deservingness of the deal and co-workers' interest in the resources involved in the i-deal. Additionally, we found that the relationship between an i-dealer and their manager has a complex influence, as it not only shapes how co-workers perceive the i-dealer's deservingness of the arrangement but also impacts their belief in negotiating similar i-deals in future (Figure 1). These findings were consistent across all three case studies, further reinforcing our conclusions.

Perceptions of i-dealer's deservingness. Our findings align with Leventhal's (1980) view of distributive justice, indicating that co-workers' views on whether the i-dealer deserves the i-deal play a significant role in shaping their fairness perceptions about i-deal allocation. The term 'deserve' was explicitly used by nine participants to articulate their feelings towards the i-deal allocation. For instance, one co-worker in O2 commented, 'If they really deserve it, I will be happy for them' (P27, co-worker). In line with distributive justice, co-workers assessed i-dealers' deservingness of i-deals based on their contributions and needs (Leventhal, 1980).

Perceptions of i-dealer's contributions. Our findings highlight the significant impact that co-workers' perceptions of an i-dealer's contributions exert on their evaluations of whether the i-deal is deserved. When i-dealers receive special arrangements without any discernible extra effort, co-workers deem them undeserving, triggering negative emotions and demotivation within the team. For example, one participant in O1 who received a financial deal voiced this sentiment by saying:

'The team… they might perceive the situation as unfair, a reaction I can understand. From my angle, the decision does not seem unjust, given that my previous salary was higher than what I was offered here. Additional payment was provided to avoid a pay cut for me. However, from the team's perspective, they may believe that extra pay should be awarded based on additional knowledge, skill, and effort rather than past salary. Therefore, I can allow that this could be perceived as an unfair arrangement.' (P5, i-dealer)

Attributes such as high levels of expertise, skills, performance, and organizational tenure stand out as salient factors that co-workers widely accept as justifying an i-dealer's deservingness of their special arrangement. One participant in O2 explained:

'But I do not think that there is any injustice, injustice towards anyone … capable employees are valued, be it salary, position, or development' (P21, co-worker)

However, our findings offer a nuanced view of the role of organizational tenure in shaping co-workers' perceptions of i-deal deservingness. Organizational tenure was often (11 participants across all three cases) seen as a way of 'adding value' (P15, co-worker) to the organization, thereby leading co-workers to perceive i-dealers with long tenures as deserving of such arrangements. However, some participants questioned the merit of relying solely on long organizational tenure as grounds for deserving an i-deal. One participant in O3 (P43, co-worker) articulated this scepticism in the context of a financial i-deal awarded to a co-worker with long-standing tenure in the organization:

'For example, when someone gets a [pay] raise, and you ask why, the reason given is that they have worked here longer than you have. An employee may have been here for several years before me, but do they have the same potential as mine? They have nothing more to give to this company than I do; they just came before me. You may have worked here for many years and done nothing, but you may have contributed a lot in a short time.' (P43, co-worker)

This perspective suggests that while long organizational tenure can positively impact co-workers' perceptions of an i-dealer's deservingness, it is insufficient to deserve an i-deal. Instead, it gains more weight when paired with meaningful organizational contributions. Given that veteran employees are often cited as one of the primary beneficiaries of i-deals in existing literature, our findings offer new insights into how co-workers might perceive this practice (Rosen et al., 2013; Rousseau et al., 2016).

Table IV. Themes and representative data

Themes	Sub-themes	First-order codes	Descriptions	Quotes
I-Deal negotiation	Past success or future confidence in similar i-deal negotiations.	Past successful negotiations of similar i-deals	Past success in negotiating a similar deal reduces negative perceptions about others' i-deals	'Many times, I leave early – my child is sick, I am out, I need to take my child from nursery, I am out, my car broke down, I am out, so you let go of these things [coworkers' i-deals] because of that [of their own flexibility-deal]'. (P29, co-worker)
		Past unsuccessful negotiations of similar i-deals	Failure to negotiate a similar deal in the past creates negative perceptions about others' i-deals	'They [the management] told me that it [pay raise] was not in their power […] But then you learn they hired someone… with a very high salary'. (P23, co-worker)
		Uncertainty about the success of future similar i-deal negotiations	Lack of confidence in negotiating a similar deal in future creates negative perceptions about others' i-deals	'It [a need for flexibility] could happen to you too, but he will not grant it to you [flexibility]' (P9, co-worker)
		Certainty about the success of future similar i-deal negotiations	Confidence in successfully negotiating a similar deal in future creates positive perceptions about others' i-deals	'He [the manager] can give as much flexibility [to others] as he wants. On the contrary, it will comfort me that when I need flexibility, he will give it to me too.' (P15, co-worker)
I-Deal allocation	Perceptions of i-dealer's deservingness	I-dealer's contributions	An i-dealer's high skills, knowledge, and performance create positive perceptions about the i-deal	'It is not for nothing. In fact, he is very smart, very talented […] it feels like the has earned it'. (P24, co-worker) 'I used to get angry about why he is paid so much money [but] recently […] I saw that he deserves every penny given to him'. (P23, co-worker)
		Organizational tenure	Employees with longer organizational tenures are perceived as deserving i-deals when they are seen as contributing value to the company and the team	'If he has worked in this company for several years and did not create any value, then it is a problem for me, but if he has worked for many years and added value, he gave his life here, I will not object at all'. (P16, co-worker)

Table IV. (Continued)

Themes	Sub-themes	First-order codes	Descriptions	Quotes
		Reasonable i-dealer needs	Perceiving an i-dealer's needs as reasonable creates positive perceptions about the i-deal	'For example, if someone or their family member is seriously ill, both the company and the employees need to help [them]. There is a co-worker whose father has cancer, and that employee constantly has to take his father to the hospital. [...] They [the management] permitted him to take his father to the doctor, and sometimes he cannot come to work at all'. (P43, co-worker)
		Unreasonable i-dealer needs	Perceiving an i-dealer's needs as unreasonable creates negative perceptions of the i-deal	'But, for example, someone's spouse does not work, they have two children, and they give him a [extra] project for extra money, this does not seem like a reasonable need to me, and I consider this situation unfair'. (P2, co-worker)
	Managerial relationships and perceived deservingness	The impact of good relations between a manager and an i-dealer	Attributing an i-deal primarily to good relations between a manager and an i-dealer creates the perception that the i-dealer is undeserving of the deal	'There are probably some personal reasons here … there are people closer to the manager [...] somehow, they have stood out in his [the manager's name] eyes at some point'. (P24, co-worker)
	Co-workers' interest in the i-deal	Enhanced feelings about i-deals of interest	I-deals involving resources of interest can create more negative perceptions than those involving resources of less interest	'Frankly, I am not interested in personal matters, for example, someone's salary increases, etc. The things that interest me are business trips, training, and learning'. (P32, co-worker)

'For example, [...] if someone takes extra days off or works from home, I do not care much. But compensation is important to me … That is why things related to compensation have more impact on me'. (P10, co-worker) |

(Continues)

Table IV. (Continued)

Themes	Sub-themes	First-order codes	Descriptions	Quotes
I-Deal communication	Secrecy vs openness	Secret arrangements	Financial i-deals are kept secret	'Everyone is instructed separately not to share this information with anyone… that your salary has increased and how much it has increased. This remains confidential'. (P46, co-worker)
				'[…] This [pay] is a very sensitive and confidential matter in the company. […] This topic is taboo, and we really do not talk about it'. (P20, manager)
		Exposure of i-deals	I-deals are exposed through organizational gossip, personal observations, work task completion, or directly by the i-dealers	'Everything spreads very fast … it spreads at lightning speed … everyone knows who gets what… anyway if they are sitting in the same room… it will come out after a while'. (P36, manager)
				'[…] people talk, […] and sometimes a word can just slip out' (P24, co-worker)
				'He thinks he is hiding them, but they all come out. It comes out casually, in conversations, for example, there is a disgusting issue here, and you do not even know about it, you go and talk to someone from another department […] and it comes to light. It all comes out in such conversations' (P29, co-worker)
				'For example, there was a recent assignment where I compared our company's salaries to the general labor market… […] I became aware (about co-workers' payments)' (P5, co-worker)
				'[…] their behavior seemed suspicious, so I started to make inquiries [about] what is going on.' (P10, co-worker)
				'There was an employee who exposed it himself… told somewhere. He bragged about it and said I had granted him this [a financial i-deal] even though I had told him better to keep it confidential'. (P7, manager)

Table IV. (Continued)

Themes	Sub-themes	First-order codes	Descriptions	Quotes
		Co-workers' perceptions of secrecy	The secrecy surrounding i-deals creates negative perceptions of i-deals	'[…] secrecy causes aggression and anxiety in a person. And inevitably, you start reacting'. (P8, co-worker)
				'For example, if they have told me that two people from the department were getting a raise to their salaries … I would not have a problem with it… if they had told it openly' (P4, co-worker)
	Managerial role in communicating i-deals.	Expected explanations from managers	Managers are expected to provide explanations for granted i-deals	'… I was waiting for him to explain, but he did not'. (P29, co-worker)
				'I think he [the manager] should [explain], but it [the explanation] should be justified. Not like because I like him/ her… it should not be like that. There should not be any black market'. (P9, co-worker)
		Unwanted explanations from i-dealers	I-dealers are not expected to provide explanations	'I do not think my coworkers have a duty, to put it bluntly, to come and explain something to me. The manager should do this, and he did not'. (P26, co-worker)
				'[…] and I do not expect the same from employees because an employee does not give themself authority, the manager gives. And if the manager thinks it is necessary to explain it to me, I prefer him to do it himself'. (P14, co-worker)
		Insincere explanations from managers	Managers' insincere explanations create negative perceptions	'Even if he explained, I would call it more of an excuse than a genuine explanation… because it would not be an explanation'. (P25, co-worker)

(Continues)

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Table IV. (Continued)

Themes	Sub-themes	First-order codes	Descriptions	Quotes
I-Deal consequences	Interdependency of work	The impact of interdependent work	Interdependent work creates direct i-deal burdens, e.g., extra workload	'Do you know when it could be important to me, for example, if we are working on an important task with an employee… but if we do not have any interconnected task, I do not care [about coworker's flexibility i-deal]' (P3, co-worker)
	Direct vs. indirect consequences	Extra workload/teamwork disruption	I-deals causing extra workload or disrupting teamwork create negative perceptions of the i-deals	'When I was involved in that project, I was not coming to work, and it was causing problems. People were displeased about this matter. But the displeasure was not because I am not there, but because our work was lagging'. (P15, i-dealer)
		Psychological burdens	I-deals causing psychological burdens for co-workers create negative perceptions of the i-deals	'I think that I do the same things, but I am not recognized … many people lose motivation […]' (P10, co-worker) 'There is no motivation left; you just work and spend a certain amount of time looking for a job'. (P42, co-worker)
	Recognition of i-deal burdens	Appreciation towards co-workers	I-dealers are expected to appreciate the burdens arising from their deals	'Like you think: "Am I doing it for someone who appreciates or not?" Because if the manager grants it to someone who appreciates it […], it hurts less … than to someone who thinks very highly about themself […]'. (P2, co-worker) '[…] says thank you for covering me. This is important for me, greatly, because you become too aggressive [of extra workload]' (P22, co-worker) 'You are together for 8–9 hours daily, and you spend more time with them than your family. That's why appreciation matters… at least you will not be heartbroken'. (P9, co-worker) 'A person who understands … a good person tries to do something […] to support us'. (P2, co-worker)

Perceptions of i-dealer's needs. Another crucial aspect that co-workers use to evaluate whether an i-dealer deserves the deal hinges on the perceived legitimacy of the i-dealer's needs. Co-workers had more positive feelings towards i-deals when they believed the beneficiary's needs were genuine. Conversely, their perceptions were more negative when they doubted the authenticity of those needs. One participant in O1 elaborated:

> 'Two employees have flexibility. One's need is real. She is old and takes care of her elderly mother. The other one has no real need [for a flexibility i-deal]. I am irritated by arrangements that are not fair.' (P2, co-worker).

According to our data, co-workers generally consider needs related to health, family, and children as more reasonable to deserve a flexibility i-deal. However, not every need related to these matters is considered a good cause to be granted an i-deal. The need must be 'real' (P2, co-worker), 'urgent' (P11, co-worker), 'important' (P9, co-worker), and 'have serious consequences if they are not granted special arrangements' (P10, co-worker) to be 'approved' (P10, co-worker) by co-workers. Furthermore, our data reveal a notable distinction in co-workers' attitudes towards different types of i-deals based on the nature of the need. Specifically, personal needs were generally deemed reasonable grounds only for flexibility i-deals. In contrast, co-workers were less amenable to the idea that personal needs could justify financial i-deals. This sentiment was captured succinctly by one participant in O1 who stated:

> 'For example, let us say that someone has the same performance as me, but he is married, has a child […], I empathize with him; I can understand him but cannot approve it [receiving a financial deal]' (P15, co-worker).

By shedding light on how perceptions of individual needs contribute to perceptions of i-deal deservingness, these insights have far-reaching implications for broader conversations about accommodating individual differences in the workplace. Specifically, they raise critical questions about the boundaries of fairness when addressing diverse personal circumstances in organizational settings.

Managerial relationships and perceived deservingness. Our analysis revealed that the relationship between an i-dealer and their manager significantly shapes co-workers' perceptions of the i-dealer's deservingness. For some participants, i-dealers' good relations with the manager completely undermined their belief that the i-dealer deserved the arrangement. For instance, one participant in O3 viewed managerial favouritism as a pivotal factor in receiving financial i-deals, thereby casting a shadow over the legitimacy of i-deals:

> 'No, I think it is because of good relations with the management. It has nothing to do with performance. Whoever has a better relationship with the management, they [the manager] give them a pay raise.' (P44, co-worker)

These findings suggest that i-dealers' good relationships with managers may provoke scepticism and negative perceptions among co-workers, causing them to question the legitimacy of i-deals. This scepticism often leads co-workers to associate i-deals with personal interests, evoking parallels to cronyism and favouritism. These negative perceptions consequently doubt the fairness and integrity of i-deals, as they come to be viewed as arrangements 'based on close relationships, not professional decisions' (P32, co-worker). This sentiment is supported by previous research indicating that co-workers respond negatively to i-deals when associating them with special treatment (Garg and Fulmer, 2018). Co-workers also expressed scepticism about the likelihood of successfully negotiating similar i-deals in future when they perceived i-deals as stemming from good relations between i-dealers and their managers. As one participant in O1 expressed: 'If I had a good relationship [with the manager], I would get it too' (P9, co-worker).

On the other hand, four O2 and O3 employees who had successfully negotiated financial i-deals and eight managers across all three cases who had approved such arrangements indicated that these deals were granted based on merit for various reasons. For example, a participant in O3 explained his financial i-deal:

> 'In the organization where I work, no one possesses full knowledge in my field. While my boss is knowledgeable, his expertise does not match my own. Let us talk openly. [Name of the company] is currently undertaking big projects. And the essence of the work in the production process is welding. And we have inefficiencies in our welding procedures, there is inexperience. I came here to write [down] all those welding procedures for each production. This was a problem for them, and I think I became an opportunity that fell into their laps.' (P45, i-dealer).

Nevertheless, despite multiple accounts from both i-dealers and managers asserting the merit-based nature of these arrangements, scepticism among co-workers was persistent, fuelling negative perceptions. This perception appears rooted in the person-specific nature of i-deals and emphasizes the complex dynamics accompanying i-deals in organizational settings. In summary, the relationships between i-dealers and managers play a crucial role in shaping co-workers' perceptions of i-dealers' deservingness and affect their confidence in negotiating a similar deal in future. This suggests that i-deals are not evaluated in isolation but within a broader organizational context, where employment relationships significantly influence how i-deals are perceived and interpreted.

Co-workers' interest in the i-deal. Another critical factor influencing co-workers' fairness perceptions of i-deal allocation is their interest in the resources entailed in the i-deal. Our analysis revealed that co-workers have enhanced distributive fairness perceptions about i-deals that involve resources in which they are interested. As one participant in O1 explained:

> 'What matters to me in this job is learning and development … not the salary […] That is why these kinds of arrangements [development i-deals] are more important to me.' (P3, co-worker).

Another participant in O2 (P27, co-worker) 'openly admitted' that she 'envied' other people's education most of all, and therefore, she was sensitive to the developmental prospects that her co-workers receive. Conversely, when co-workers had little interest in the resources offered by i-deals, they generally showed indifference towards such deals and little inclination towards negotiating similar arrangements. A participant commented: 'For example, day offs are unimportant to me. If someone takes extra days off or works from home, I do not care much' (P10, co-worker).

This finding suggests that co-workers' fairness perceptions of i-deal allocation are influenced not only by the extent to which the i-deals are distributed fairly but also by their own interests and priorities within the organization (Bernerth and Walker, 2012).

I-deal Communication

One of our study's most important findings is that how i-deals are communicated within an organization significantly impacts co-workers' fairness perceptions, consistent with informational justice (Bies, 1986). It is crucial to clarify that when referring to i-deal communication, we are not referring only to the direct communication of i-deals, as communication in the i-deal context is very complex and may take multiple forms. Drawing from participant narratives, our study identifies two central factors influencing co-workers' fairness perceptions of i-deal communication: secrecy versus openness of i-deals and managerial role in communicating i-deals:

Secrecy versus openness of i-deals. Across the three cases examined, our findings reveal that financial i-deals are kept as closely guarded secrets, irrespective of the absence of formal confidentiality agreements. One i-dealer in O1 explained:

'[…] whether it is an extra pay or a project someone joins, especially if they [i-dealers] get extra payment for it [the project], it is definitely, strictly not talked about.' (P15, i-dealer).

Managers' justifications for keeping financial and development i-deals secret were that 'it is not possible to grant them [i-deals] to everyone' (P1, manager) and 'it can demotivate [other] employees' (P36, manager). I-dealers generally agreed with this perspective by expressing the possibility of 'demotivation' (P8, P16, i-dealers) or 'dissatisfaction' (P15, i-dealer) if their co-workers revealed their secret arrangements. Co-workers expressed similar descriptions for the reasons for secrecy, but some of them added managers' unwillingness to grant similar i-deals to other employees as a reason for secrecy:

'I would like them [i-deals] to be open, but if they are open, everyone will claim. It is probably a secret, so tomorrow, someone will not come and say, "Give me too" (P10, co-worker).

Contrary to the ostensibly confidential nature of financial i-deals, as characterized by managers and i-dealers, co-workers' perspectives unveil a different view. In all three cases studied, co-workers were often implicitly aware of these i-deals, despite not being formally

apprised. While the details remained undisclosed, most participant accounts suggest a tacit awareness of financial i-deals among co-workers. Across the three cases, participants described uncovering 'secret' i-deals through accidental discoveries during work tasks, through workplace gossip, or even by i-dealers themselves revealing their arrangements. For instance, some co-workers stumbled upon i-deals while completing assignments that involved salary comparisons (P5, co-worker), while others heard about them through casual conversations with colleagues from different departments (P29, co-worker).

Additionally, some co-workers intentionally sought out this information due to suspicions of hidden arrangements (P29, co-worker), and there were instances where i-dealers openly disclosed their i-deals, contravening explicit instructions to keep them confidential (P7, manager). These findings not only challenge managerial assumptions and existing i-deal literature that often posits i-deals as 'secret' (Liao et al., 2016; Simosi et al., 2021) but also demonstrate that efforts to keep i-deals concealed might not be as successful as commonly believed. Echoing this sentiment, one participant in O1 stated emphatically: 'Nothing remains secret' (P9, co-worker). Our findings suggest that uncovering i-deals through these means negatively influences co-workers' informational justice perceptions and creates negative perceptions of i-deals among co-workers. The secrecy surrounding i-deals fosters a climate of suspicion and concern. As one participant in O1 said:

'Whether it is a financial or a flexibility arrangement, if it is hidden, one is inevitably worried about it. My motivation is impacted by the fact that something is going on secretly.' (P11, co-worker).

Consistent with previous theoretical work (Liao et al., 2016; Rousseau et al., 2016), our findings also reveal that the secrecy surrounding i-deals is often equated with favouritism by co-workers, further exacerbating negative perceptions. One co-worker in O1 stated:

'When I hear about it [i-deals] from somewhere else, I feel bad. I imagine… if this is hidden from me, then there is some bias here, or why do they hide it?' (P8, co-worker).

These descriptions suggest that despite the assumed confidentiality of i-deals, co-workers often have varying degrees of awareness about them. As a result, the secrecy surrounding i-deals can create negative perceptions and raise doubts about their legitimacy.

Managerial role in communicating i-deals. For co-workers, a simple acknowledgment of the existence of i-deals by managers was insufficient to enhance their fairness perceptions. The prevailing narrative among our participants indicated that co-workers are more likely to accept i-deals if managers proactively communicate and explain the reasons behind these arrangements. One participant in O1 poignantly expressed: 'I would have accepted it more easily if I had been informed and explained in advance' (P3, co-worker).

Despite the prevailing sentiment among co-workers that explanations from managers would enable positive perceptions of i-deals, managerial perspectives diverged. Across all three cases, managers generally showed a disinclination to explain the i-deals they granted. This reluctance extended beyond financial i-deals that could potentially demotivate the team if exposed; it was also evident in other types of i-deals. For example, one manager in O2 succinctly put it regarding a development i-deal: '[…] why should I share it with the whole team? It has nothing to do with them' (P18, manager). Similarly, another manager in O1 commented on a flexibility i-deal: 'I'm not trying to hide it. […] I just think that there is no need to let everyone know' (P1, manager). This dichotomy between managerial reluctance to disclose i-deals and co-worker expectations for transparency and explanation highlights an important disconnect between managerial and co-worker perceptions about what is necessary to improve perceptions of i-deals among co-workers. This disconnect could exacerbate negative perceptions surrounding i-deals.

It is important to note that co-workers did not generally expect, and in many instances did not even want, explanations from i-dealers themselves. This perspective was commonly justified by the belief that i-dealers were not the 'decision-makers' (P16, co-worker), and therefore co-workers 'did not expect' (P37, co-worker) any explanation from them.

Adding another layer of complexity to our findings, our data indicate that managerial explanations may not always improve co-workers' negative perceptions of i-deals, particularly when co-workers perceive i-dealers as 'undeserving' of their deals. For instance, one participant said, 'There is no such justification that would satisfy me in this situation' (co-worker, P39). Another co-worker similarly suggested that any provided explanation would be viewed more as an 'excuse' rather than a genuine explanation (P25, co-worker). One participant labelled such managerial explanations 'laughable' (P29, co-worker), suggesting that merely communicating i-deals might not be enough to ensure positive fairness perceptions of i-deals. This finding highlights the need for managers to use more thoughtful communication strategies to mitigate negative perceptions of i-deals.

I-deal Consequences

Our analysis identifies two critical factors that significantly influence co-workers' fairness perceptions regarding i-deal consequences and shape their view of i-deals: direct and indirect consequences and recognition of i-deal burdens. Additionally, we observed that the level of work interdependency determines whether co-workers experience these consequences directly or indirectly.

The interdependency of work. Reinforcing previous research in i-deal literature (Marescaux et al., 2019), our findings showed that in high-interdependency environments, the effects of i-deals, such as flexibility i-deals, are immediate and palpable. For instance, one participant in O1 illustrated this by stating:

'Tasks are so interconnected that […] whoever is absent from work even for an hour or two, their absence is felt' (P13, co-worker).

In contrast, in settings where tasks are independent and co-workers are less reliant on each other, the consequences of i-deals are less prominent, illustrated by a comment from one participant in O1 who, when asked about the effects of a co-worker's flexibility i-deal, remarked:

'[…] I have worked alone on all the projects I have worked on so far. There was no teamwork. That is why I did not have any dependence on anyone. Therefore, it was unimportant for me that someone got flexibility [arrangement]' (P4, co-worker).

Thus, the level of work interdependency acts as a contextual factor that magnifies or mitigates the consequences of i-deals on co-workers.

Direct and indirect consequences of i-deals. Direct consequences were primarily associated with flexibility, task, and development i-deals, often manifesting as an increased workload for co-workers. Participants frequently emphasized this impact, with statements like, 'the consequence was that our workload was increased' (P11, co-worker) and 'it created extra workload for us' (P10, co-worker).

I-dealers were acutely aware of the direct consequences their i-deals imposed on their co-workers. For instance, an i-dealer in O1 who secured a development i-deal to participate in an international training programme explicitly acknowledged, 'My co-workers had to do a lot of extra work. When I am not there, someone must do my tasks' (P3, i-dealer).

The indirect consequences were psychological burdens for co-workers and predominantly resulted from financial and development i-deals. Although these i-deals did not result in added workload, participants repeatedly expressed feeling 'demotivated' (P5, co-worker; P8, co-worker; P10, co-worker) and 'worthless' (P46, co-worker) because of them. Notably, some managers also recognized the indirect consequences of these types of i-deals for co-workers, suggesting that they can substantially influence employee psychological well-being within the team. One manager in O1 stated:

'There are different consequences. […] For some, it creates a gap. They lose motivation…get disconnected from work.' (P12, manager).

Although both direct and indirect consequences adversely affect co-workers' perceptions of i-deals, the direct consequences notably exacerbate feelings of unfairness as direct consequences further distort the input–output balance, thereby worsening perceptions of distributive justice. One participant in O1 said:

'Those who work from home, work less [than us]. […] It irritates me when the work of those people comes to us. That is, not only do they stay at home, but their work is also divided between us.' (P2, co-worker)

However, a contrasting layer to this finding emerges when co-workers are beneficiaries of similar i-deals or anticipate such arrangements in future. In these cases, co-workers

displayed decreased negative perceptions towards i-deals, even if these arrangements imposed burdens upon them. One participant in O1 articulated this by stating:

> 'But generally, the team's perspective was such that each of us considered the situation in terms of our own benefit. The thinking was: "If this employee received this special term, then I could get the same too." Even if it was negative, even if productivity decreased, we looked at it from our own good and took it as a positive. [Because] the same accommodation can be made for me too.' (P5, co-worker)

These findings again reflect the self-interest perspective of justice perceptions, wherein co-workers are more amenable to overlooking the negatives associated with i-deals, driven by the prospect of receiving similar arrangements.

Recognition of i-deal burdens. Our analysis showed that when i-dealers openly recognized the burdens imposed by these arrangements, expressed appreciation towards co-workers, and offered support, it positively influenced co-workers' interpersonal justice perceptions (Greenberg et al., 2004) and created positive perceptions of i-deals. Our findings were consistent in O1 and O2; however, this did not emerge as a theme in O3. We attribute this disparity to the prevalence of financial i-deals in the third organization. Participants in O3 largely framed their responses based on experiences with financial i-deals. As discussed above, financial i-deals were primarily linked to indirect consequences in the form of psychological burdens. Consequently, there were no narratives describing experiences concerning the direct burdens imposed by i-deals in this case. However, many positive sentiments were expressed by O1 and O2 participants, emphasizing the importance of recognizing the burdens that i-deals can place on co-workers. When i-dealers were sensitive to co-workers' additional burdens caused by i-deals and recognized these troubles, co-workers expressed feelings such as 'This relaxes my tension' (P2, co-worker) or 'at least this shows that one values a co-worker' (P31, co-worker). These narratives highlight that when i-dealers openly acknowledge and show support towards the burdens that i-deals create, they can positively influence co-workers' overall perceptions of i-deals.

A Framework of Co-workers' Fairness-Induced Perceptions of i-deals

Building on these findings, we develop an emergent theorization of how i-deal implementation and co-workers' related justice perceptions shape their (overall) perceptions of i-deals. We present a flow chart in Figure 1 that synthesizes the narratives from our interviews, providing a visual summary of how the factors influencing co-workers' fairness perceptions of i-deals result in either positive or negative (overall) perceptions of i-deals.

As depicted in the flow chart, each factor (*depicted within rectangles*) associated with i-deal implementation triggers a specific type of justice perception, resulting in (*depicted with solid arrows*) either positive or negative perceptions of i-deals. Two factors (*depicted within ovals*) emerged as contextual factors *influencing* (*depicted with dotted arrows*) the factors associated with i-deal implementation. One such factor is the relationship between i-dealers
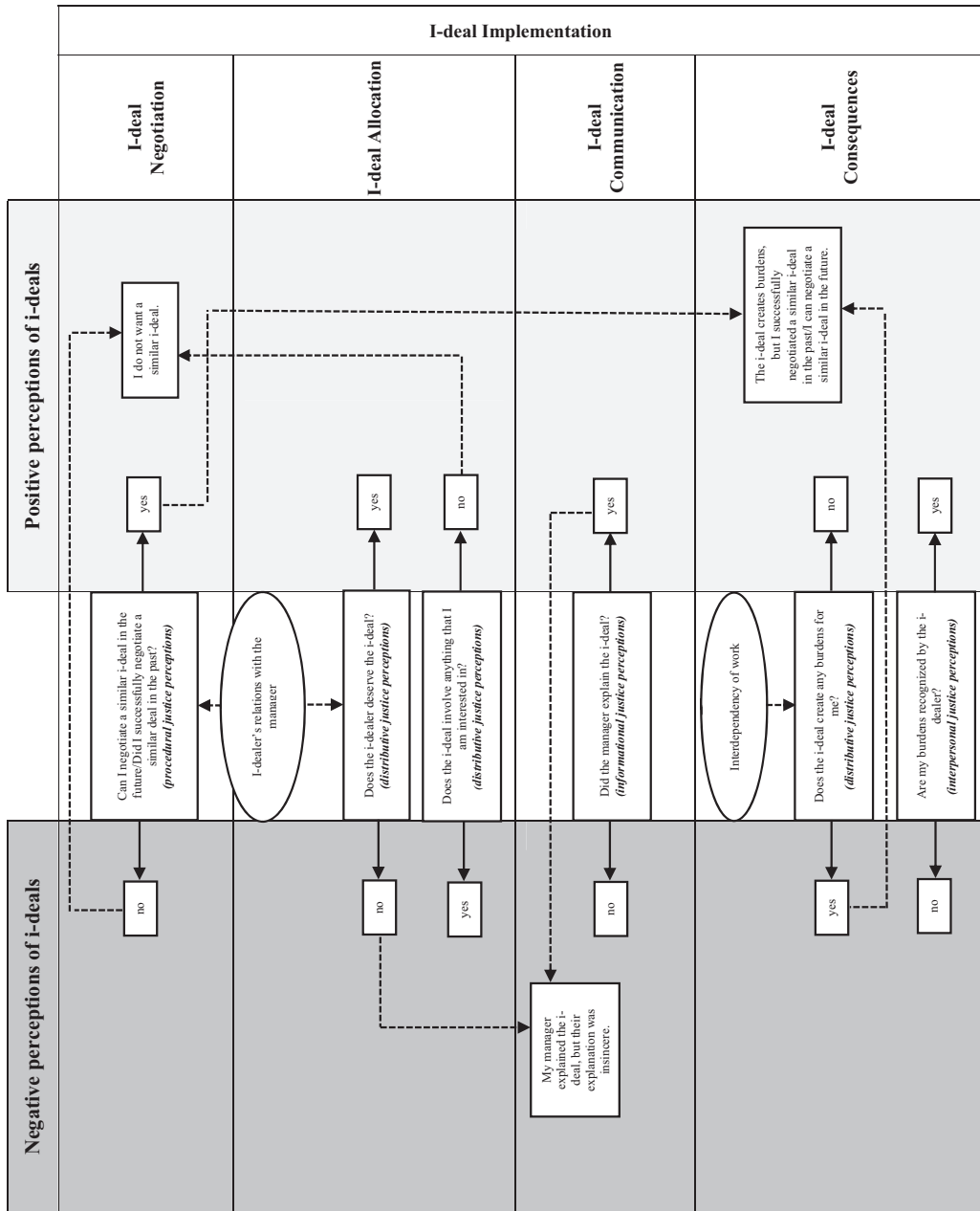
Figure 1. A framework of co-workers' fairness-induced perceptions of i-deals.

and their managers, which plays a significant role in shaping co-workers' views on the i-dealers' deservingness of their deals and co-workers' belief in negotiating similar i-deals in future. The other is work interdependency, which significantly influences how co-workers experience the consequences of i-deals.

Furthermore, Figure 1 illustrates how the *interaction (depicted with dotted arrows)* of certain factors associated with i-deal implementation may alter the anticipated negative

or positive (overall) perceptions of i-deals. For instance, when co-workers have no interest in the resources involved in an i-deal, the lack of opportunity to negotiate a similar arrangement does not necessarily result in negative perceptions. Conversely, the anticipation of negotiating similar arrangements in future can offset potential negative perceptions arising from the burdens associated with i-deals. This divergence in co-workers' perceptions of i-deals can be attributed to the self-interest aspect of justice perceptions. When co-workers have no personal stake in the allocated outcome, they are less concerned about the outcome fairness and are less likely to scrutinize its procedural fairness (Greenberg, 1990; Skitka et al., 2003). Conversely, when co-workers see a personal benefit in the outcome, they become more willing to overlook its potential downsides (Skitka et al., 2003).

Another layer of complexity emerges when considering the deservingness of i-dealers and managerial communication. Our findings indicate that when co-workers perceive i-dealers as 'undeserving' of their arrangements, even managerial explanations fail to mitigate negative perceptions of i-deals. This observation resonates with the principles of informational justice, which indicate that when individuals consider provided information as insincere, they are likely to deem it inadequate (Shapiro et al., 1994).

Overall, our study shows how key factors associated with i-deal implementation influence co-workers' fairness perceptions of i-deals, resulting in positive and negative (overall) perceptions of i-deals. Our findings reveal complex interactions among these factors, suggesting that co-workers' perceptions of i-deals are influenced by how different aspects of i-deal implementation and various related justice concerns are managed, which can either mitigate or exacerbate co-workers' perceptions of i-deals. Contextual factors also play a crucial role, indicating that organizational context surrounding i-deal implementation significantly influences co-workers' justice perceptions and perceptions of i-deals.

DISCUSSION

Theoretical Implications, Future Research, and Limitations

Our study makes several contributions to the literature. First, we theorize how i-deal implementation and co-workers' related justice perceptions shape their (overall) perceptions of i-deals. Prior empirical work on co-workers' perceptions of i-deals has primarily focussed on immediate equity or social comparison perceptions triggered by i-deals (Huang and Tang, 2021; Kong et al., 2020; Marescaux et al., 2019; Ng, 2017; Zhang et al., 2020), which does not fully capture how co-workers' perceptions of i-deals are shaped (Garg and Fulmer, 2018). In contrast, our study shifts the attention towards i-deal implementation and related justice perceptions, encompassing procedural, distributive, informational, and interpersonal justice perceptions. This approach provides a more comprehensive view of how co-workers' perceptions of i-deals are formed.

Moreover, by demonstrating how key factors related to i-deal implementation shape co-workers' perceptions of i-deals, we expand upon previous theoretical research (Gachayeva et al., 2023; Garg and Fulmer, 2018; Marescaux et al., 2021; Rousseau et al., 2016), adding empirical rigour and deepening the understanding of these perceptions.

Furthermore, our findings demonstrate that the interactions among these factors can mitigate or exacerbate co-workers' perceptions of i-deals, indicating that specific triggers for fairness perceptions of i-deals do not always result in anticipated negative or positive (overall) perceptions. For instance, we found that when co-workers have no interest in the resources involved in an i-deal, the lack of opportunity to negotiate a similar arrangement does not necessarily result in negative perceptions. Conversely, the anticipation of negotiating similar arrangements in future can offset potential negative perceptions arising from the burdens associated with i-deals. These findings provide novel insights into the roles of similar opportunities (Lai et al., 2009; Rousseau et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2020) and i-deal-related burdens (Marescaux et al., 2019; Rousseau et al., 2016) in shaping co-workers' perceptions of i-deals that have been explored in previous research. Moreover, when co-workers perceive i-dealers as 'undeserving' of their arrangements, even managerial explanations fail to mitigate negative perceptions of i-deals. This finding extends previous theoretical work on the importance of i-dealers' deservingness in shaping co-workers' perceptions of i-deals (Garg and Fulmer, 2018; Marescaux et al., 2021) by offering new insights into how this factor interacts with other aspects of i-deal implementation. The interactions among these factors suggest that co-workers' perceptions of i-deals are influenced by how different aspects of i-deal implementation and related justice concerns are managed, highlighting the importance of investigating co-workers' perceptions of i-deals considering their implementation through the lens of organizational justice. Future research could further this line of enquiry by investigating the combined effects, including mediation and moderation among these factors, to deepen our understanding of their impact on co-workers' perceptions of i-deals. We encourage quantitative methods, particularly field experiments, to further investigate this line of enquiry. Understanding these effects can reveal how different aspects of i-deal implementation work together to shape co-workers' (overall) perceptions of i-deals.

Our second contribution is investigating the relatively unexplored territory of i-deal communication, thereby addressing a notable empirical lacuna in the extant i-deal literature (Simosi et al., 2023). Numerous calls have been made for research on how the secrecy versus transparency of i-deals shapes co-workers' perceptions (Liao et al., 2016; Marescaux et al., 2021; Simosi et al., 2023). Our findings reveal that i-deals are not as confidential as often desired or presumed. This discovery adds empirical rigour to prior assertions suggesting that co-workers are likely to possess some degree of awareness of i-deals (Garg and Fulmer, 2018; Marescaux et al., 2021; Rousseau et al., 2016). It also supports the theoretical assertion that the communication of i-deals may play a critical role in shaping co-workers' perceptions of these arrangements (Conway and Coyle-Shapiro, 2016; Gachayeva et al., 2023; Liao et al., 2016; Marescaux et al., 2021). Our findings broaden the theoretical understanding of how co-workers perceive i-deals and provide actionable insights for organizations to mitigate negative perceptions through proactive communication strategies. These findings open several promising avenues for future research. One area to explore is the

effects of various managerial communication strategies on co-workers' perceptions of i-deals. We encourage conducting experimental studies to manipulate the level and type of i-deal disclosure (e.g., full transparency, partial disclosure, and complete confidentiality) and measure resulting fairness perceptions of i-deals. Additionally, qualitative studies involving in-depth interviews in various contexts could uncover the nuances of how such communications are received and interpreted by co-workers and how this affects their perceptions of i-deals. Another promising avenue for investigation is exploring the long-term consequences of co-worker awareness of i-deals on workplace dynamics, such as team cohesion, trust in management, and overall workplace morale. Longitudinal studies could track changes in these dynamics over time, while mixed-method approaches combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews could provide deeper insights into the reasons behind these changes.

We also extend i-deal literature by employing a qualitative approach, which is relatively uncommon in i-deal research, particularly the research on co-workers' perceptions of i-deals. By integrating the perspectives of all stakeholders involved in i-deal implementation in an inductive multiple-case study, our research offers critical insights into fairness perceptions associated with i-deals. Our qualitative approach is particularly relevant given our focus on perceptions of i-deals, enabling a thorough understanding of individual experiences and their interpretations, making our findings vivid and relatable (Bluhm et al., 2011). Furthermore, the qualitative case study method is an increasingly critical tool for examining HR differentiation practices, as the implementation of differentiated workforce practices in organizations is not yet well-understood and necessitates illustrative and detailed evidence (Becker et al., 2009). In this regard, our study provided rich evidence that deepens the understanding of how differentiated workforce practices are implemented and perceived in organizations. Future qualitative research could expand this understanding by exploring how various factors related to i-deal implementation and contextual influences shape co-workers' perceptions of i-deals across different organizational settings.

Finally, our study offers significant insights into the broader debates on workforce differentiation practices (Huselid and Becker, 2011; Joseph et al., 2017). Given that all HR differentiation practices can potentially reduce perceptions of fairness (Schmidt et al., 2018), our research highlights the critical role of fairness perceptions in successfully implementing these practices, extending beyond i-deals. Our findings demonstrate that managing various aspects of i-deal implementation concerning third-party justice concerns is crucial for fostering positive co-worker perceptions of these arrangements. This perspective supports previous arguments in SHRM literature that organizations can fully realize the benefits of HR differentiation practices only if they effectively manage employees' fairness perceptions (Joseph et al., 2017; Schmidt et al., 2018). Additionally, it underscores that adopting an organizational justice perspective can be a strategic approach to successfully implementing HR differentiation practices (Karriker, 2007; Novelli et al., 1995). This demonstrates that, even though justice literature often views fairness as a reactive construct, organizational justice can play a proactive role in strategic HRM approaches (Greenberg and Wiethoff, 2003). Our study opens avenues for further investigation into strategies organizations can employ to effectively manage employees' fairness concerns in the context of HR

differentiation. Specifically, future research can explore how principles of organizational justice can be integrated into HR policy development to enhance the perceived fairness of differentiation practices.

Our study also has some limitations. Our study's first limitation is the absence of a temporal dimension in our theorizing about co-workers' perceptions of i-deals in association with i-deal implementation. We adopt a synthetic approach to i-deal implementation, focussing on key characteristics rather than the sequential stages (Eisenhardt, 2021). A quantitative longitudinal study would be more advantageous for capturing the evolving nature of the i-deal implementation and its consequent effects on co-workers' perceptions over time. This approach could allow for more robust conclusions about the causal relationships between the different stages of i-deal implementation and their subsequent effects on co-workers' perceptions.

Furthermore, we used a qualitative study to examine co-workers' fairness perceptions of i-deals. As with most qualitative studies, we used snowball sampling to recruit participants, and only interested participants participated. However, our participants represented a range of occupations, had varying organizational tenures, and brought diverse experiences related to i-deals. This diversity alleviated initial concerns about self-selection bias, contributing to the variety and richness of our data and confirming that our sample was sufficiently heterogeneous.

We also cannot determine how much our findings can be generalized to other organizational settings. However, our study employed an inductive multiple-case study design, strategically selecting cases where i-deals were prevalent and where sufficient similarities and differences between cases could aid in robust theory-building (Eisenhardt, 2021; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). Given the careful methodological design, our findings offer valuable insights that should be highly relevant in various organizational contexts.

Practical Implications

Our study offers significant implications and actionable insights for practice. To begin with, our findings suggest that co-worker perceptions of i-deals significantly depend on their implementation, which must be managed carefully considering related fairness concerns. By providing empirical evidence on how various factors associated with i-deal implementation influence co-workers' fairness perceptions, our study guides managers and i-dealers in anticipating and more effectively managing potential backlash.

First, it may be beneficial for managers to aim for greater consistency in i-deal negotiations. Although i-deals are inherently tailored to individual needs and every i-deal is unique, they often revolve around similar resources, such as flexible work opportunities, financial incentives, task assignments, or development opportunities. This clustering of requests around common resources can help managers identify patterns in employee needs, guiding more consistent decision-making when granting i-deals. Maintaining detailed records of i-deals, including the type of request and its status (approved or denied), can support the fair treatment of similar employee requests. It also provides a solid foundation for justifying decisions when necessary, ensuring consistency in i-deal negotiations.

Such transparency and record-keeping could mitigate perceptions of bias, often at the root of fairness concerns related to i-deals.

Second, the deservingness of i-dealers emerged as one of the most prominent themes in our research. Managers should ensure that i-deals, particularly development, task, and financial i-deals, are based on visible contributions such as skills, performance, and expertise. Establishing a mutual understanding of acceptable needs, particularly for flexibility i-deals, is also essential. Taking these factors into account when allocating i-deals can help in two ways: It reduces the likelihood of perceived unfairness and demotivation among team members, and it aids individuals in evaluating their chances to negotiate similar arrangements, thus reducing potential disappointment and perceptions of unfairness when their contributions or needs criteria are not met.

Another substantial practical implication of our research centres on the complex roles that secrecy and transparency play in implementing i-deals. Managers should navigate this delicate balance with care, as each approach has advantages and drawbacks. While secrecy may alleviate immediate concerns and prevent potential backlash, it carries long-term risks. Specifically, secrecy can enable informal channels, such as workplace gossip, to shape the framing and interpretation of i-deals and may also cultivate perceptions of systemic inequality. Additionally, in highly interdependent work environments, keeping i-deals confidential is challenging. Conversely, transparency fosters a sense of procedural fairness but may not be effective in all circumstances, especially when co-workers view the i-deal recipient as 'undeserving'. Therefore, managers should carefully consider disclosure strategies and the influence of informal communication channels when implementing i-deals. By tailoring their approach to the unique organizational context and setting the right tone about i-deals (e.g., the purpose, criteria, and conditions of i-deals) in their organizations, they can better manage the i-deal implementation and co-worker perceptions of i-deals over time, making the most of the insights provided by our research.

Finally, i-deals can burden others, especially in interdependent work environments. Before implementing i-deals, managers should evaluate the level of interdependency in their work settings, focussing on those i-deal types that might affect the workload. In highly interdependent environments, managers must consider the potential direct impacts of i-deals on other team members, perhaps redistributing workloads or providing additional resources to alleviate these effects. Additionally, our research shows that when i-dealers proactively recognize and address potential burdens their arrangements might place on others, it positively impacts co-workers' perceptions of i-deals, highlighting the critical role of i-dealers in enhancing both the fairness and overall effectiveness of i-deals in the workplace.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, for i-deals to be an effective tool, organizations must manage them carefully. A crucial aspect of successful i-deal implementation lies in addressing the justice concerns of other employees. This research presented an emergent framework explaining how i-deal implementation can shape co-workers' fairness perceptions of these arrangements,

inducing positive and negative perceptions of i-deals. We encourage future research to extend the understanding of co-workers' perceptions of i-deals, building on the insights offered in this study.

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