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**Work-Life Balance as a Reputation Signal:  
Shaping sustainable careers for Gen Z women**

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**Abstract**

The contemporary professional landscape increasingly blurs the boundaries between work and personal life, particularly for emerging generations. This study examines the relationship between work-life balance (WLB) and personal reputation among Gen Z women in Malaysia's service sector, with trust as a potential mediator. Drawing on signaling theory, WLB is framed as a high-quality signal shaping perceptions of reputation. Data from 148 professionals analyzed using PLS-SEM reveal a positive relationship, though trust did not mediate. The findings highlight WLB as essential for preparing Gen Z women as future leaders and as an innovative practice supporting workforce sustainability.

**Keywords:** personal reputation; work-life balance; signaling theory; service industry

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**1.0 Introduction**

Personal reputation is increasingly recognized as a critical determinant of professional success, particularly in service sectors where trust, credibility, and interpersonal perceptions strongly influence career outcomes. Defined as the product of prior behaviour, actions, human capital, and social engagement (Gök, 2022), reputation reflects both competence and adaptability in dynamic workplace settings. Beyond technical expertise, it also embodies qualities such as interpersonal sensitivity, reliability, and the ability to sustain positive impressions over time. For Gen Z women, reputation not only signals professional capability but also highlights their adaptability to evolving workplace demands, positioning it as a vital resource for career advancement and long-term employability (Phi & Quoc, 2023). The importance of reputation is heightened in professional environments that require constant interaction with clients, colleagues, and stakeholders. In such settings, reputation becomes both a form of social capital and a mechanism for building trust. Service-sector professionals are often evaluated not only by their performance but also by how they are perceived in terms of dependability and professionalism. Thus, the development of personal reputation is a cumulative process that demands consistency in behaviour, resilience in facing workplace challenges, and the ability to demonstrate both competence and credibility over time.

Within this context, WLB emerges as a reputational cue that extends beyond its conventional association with well-being and organizational sustainability. Drawing on signaling theory, WLB can be seen as an observable behaviour that communicates underlying qualities such as responsibility, professionalism, and resilience to others. Effective management of WLB allows colleagues and

supervisors to infer dependability, thereby enhancing reputational outcomes in competitive environments (Bataineh, 2019). Although research has widely linked WLB to outcomes such as job satisfaction and performance, limited attention has been paid to its potential role in strengthening personal reputation, particularly among younger professionals at the early stages of their careers.

The relevance of these dynamics is especially pronounced in Malaysia's service industry, which comprises diverse subfields including education, healthcare, hospitality, logistics, and business services (MIDA, 2021). Professionals in these sectors often operate in client-facing and knowledge-intensive roles where reputational signals carry significant weight in shaping career trajectories. For Gen Z women, who represent an emerging cohort in the workforce with distinct workplace expectations, balancing personal and professional responsibilities while cultivating reputation is critical to sustaining career growth. Yet, little research has explored this intersection within the Malaysian context. This study addresses the gap by examining the relationship between WLB and personal reputation, with particular emphasis on the mediating role of trust as a mechanism that links behavioural signals to professional outcomes.

## 2.0 Literature Review

### 2.1 Personal Reputation

Career progression in the work environment is strongly influenced by credibility, trust, and interpersonal judgements, with personal reputation recognized as a key determinant of professional success. Reputation reflects colleagues' perceptions of an individual's integrity, competence, and reliability, developed over time through cumulative participation and observation. Scholars note that reputation is not merely an individual attribute but emerges from social interactions and collective assessments. As Phi and Quoc (2023) emphasize, reputation is formed through sustained positive behaviour and effort rather than instantaneous attribution. Signaling theory further explains how observable behaviours and competencies serve as signals, enabling managers and stakeholders to assess credibility and professional ability within organizations.

Personal reputation is particularly important for Gen Z professionals, especially women navigating gender bias and structural barriers. It reflects competence, adaptability, and resilience in responding to organizational demands. Horwitz (2023) highlights that reputation serves as a social cue shaping perceptions of behaviours, skills, and leadership potential. For Gen Z women in Malaysia's service sector, a strong personal reputation grounded in work performance and self-management is essential, with WLB functioning as a critical mechanism that enhances reputational development and supports long-term career progression.

### 2.2 Work-Life Balance (WLB)

Increasingly, academic attention has been growing on WLB, suggesting its emerging importance in the opposite management between professional and personal commitments in the workplace. Where organizations seem to provide supportive practices promoting WLB, employees have been shown to have reduced stress, improved sense of well-being, and increased satisfaction on the job; on the other hand, a lack of such empathy on the part of organizations has shown health issues, less than satisfactory work performance, and a damaging personal reputation (Ihwughwawwe & Shewakramani, 2024; Jamil et al., 2023). Thus, it can be inferred from these findings that WLB is not only a matter of personal well-being, but also a key factor for enhanced professional reputation at work.

Though the study by Waworuntu et al., (2022) is specifically on work-life balance (WLB) and work performance among millennials and Gen Z, the results can still be generalized in terms of reputational results. A sound work-life balance leads to employees' ability to juggle duties efficiently, deliver steadily, and carry themselves with a level of professionalism. This particular study on flexible work arrangements and environments implies that workers who balance work and life efficiently tend to be perceived as credible individuals. This implies that work-life balance affects not only work performance but also personal reputation within the work environment.

Research indicates that WLB improves personal reputation and noticeably results in heightened responsibility, adaptability, and professionalism, needless to say, highly valued both in organizational and social settings. Employees who effectively manage competing objectives are viewed as reliable and competent, resulting in beneficial reputational capital. Further, persons with exceptional WLB tend to comport themselves as organizational brand ambassadors, disseminating positive word-of-mouth 'messages' that improves both the employee's personal and the organization's reputation.

For the young generation of Gen Z's in the burgeoning years of their careers, WLB is considered to be of great importance. This age group prioritises balancing personal and professional development, and in the process demonstrate resilience, credibility, and potential in the workplace. Particularly for Gen Z women, an appropriate WLB is not only associated with their well-being, but also benefits as a reputational asset, and reflects their competence and adaptability in navigating multiple roles within their domestic and the dynamic service-sector environments.

### 2.3 Trust

Trust is accepted as a keystone of effective interpersonal and organizational relationships, which goes on to empowering cooperation, reducing ambiguity, and promoting open communication (Rousseau et al., 1998). In the professional work place, trust is a bed stone, underpinning credibility and teamwork, reducing interpersonal barriers and facilitating informal exchanges that enhances overall work performances within the organization. Individuals who unceasingly display honesty, fairness, and reliability are more likely to be seen as trustworthy, boosting their positive reputations at work. Trustworthiness not only supports the perception of the individual's integrity, also enhances social capital, a critical factor for career advancement and advancement to potential leadership positions, more so in service-oriented and knowledge-intensive settings.

Research suggests that trust acts as a mediator between workplace behaviours and the consequent credibility, recognition and personal reputation. Previous studies have indicated that trust enhanced the impact of positive workplace practices such as WLB, functioning as a dynamic evolution after repeated encounters and consistent behavioural indicators (Nygard et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2023). Cultivating trust is considered to be especially important for younger professionals, such as Gen Z women in Malaysia's service sector, because it assists in the integration at workplace networks, increases reputation building, and contributes to both individual career growth and organizational sustainability.

#### *2.4 Generation Z*

Gen Z refers to individuals born between 1995 and 2010 who are now beginning to enter the global workforce and bring along with them strong digital skills, a global outlook, and distinctive expectations about work (Maloni et al., 2019). Unlike previous generations, they emphasize purposeful careers, inclusivity, in addition to organizational environments that promote personal well-being. In Malaysia, this generation represents the largest age grouping and plays an ever more significant role in the service sector, one in which adaptability, interpersonal competence, and credibility, criteria increasingly seen as essential for career advancement. As their presence grows in knowledge-based and client-oriented industries, comprehending how they nurture and sustain their professional reputations has become an important area of analysis in the context of today's dynamic workplace.

Research specifies that Gen Z workers value WLB relative to previous generations, considering flexibility and fulfilment as being critical to their long-term career continuation (Sánchez-Hernández et al., 2019). Sari et al. (2025) further emphasize that WLB significantly affects work engagement, with Gen Z prioritizing balance more than Millennials, highlighting the need for adaptive work environments that support their engagement and productivity. Any imbalance may frequently result in stress, disengagement, or staff turnover, thereby emphasizing the importance of WLB as a reputational compass of responsibility, resilience, and professionalism. In Malaysia's service business, good WLB practices not only promote well-being but also improve personal reputation, placing Gen Z women in particular for long-term career paths and leadership chances (Ariffin et al., 2024). This connection highlights the importance of investigating WLB as a signal that impacts reputation and career outcomes for young professionals.

#### *2.5 Service Industry in Malaysia*

The service industry, often perceived as a tertiary sector, is however crucial to Malaysia's economic growth, accounting currently for more than the combined GDP of the agriculture and manufacturing sectors. With a wide range of subsectors that include retail, hospitality, education, healthcare, logistics and finance sectors, they are driven by intangible outputs and a great deal of high client engagement. As one of the largest employment sectors, it offers a wide range of professional prospects which require high levels of interpersonal ability and reputational integrity. Service professionals are evaluated not just for their technical skill but also for their ability to provide their customers consistent quality and enhanced trust with clients, which needless to say signposts a sound reputation and is an important criterion of career success.

These underlying forces create substantial demands on employees who must devote time, effort and emotional investment to attain client-facing expectations. In this sort of climate, the capacity to reconcile professional responsibilities with personal well-being is of paramount importance. For the young Gen Zs, maintaining WLB reduces stress in addition to being as well as a symbol of responsibility, resilience, and adaptability. Effective balance not only improves human well-being but also boosts personal reputation, establishing the Gen Z work force as reputable contributors in a field where customer views and intangible assets are considered critically. This emphasizes the significance of assessing WLB as a vital aspect determining personal reputation in Malaysia's service industry.

### **3.0 Methodology**

This research utilized a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to examine the influence of WLB on personal reputation, with trust tested as a mediating variable. The cross-sectional approach enabled data to be collected in one stint, and proffered an efficient way of analyzing the relationships between the criteria within a defined population. The respondents comprised professional full-time employed service sector Gen Z, who were aged between 19 and 29 years, and holding at least a diploma qualification. These criteria were deliberated upon to ensure that the sample represented a young and educated workforce, actively engaged in career development and organizational partaking (Maloni et al., 2019; Ariffin et al., 2024). By focusing on this demographic group, the study was able to capture the perceptions and experiences of a generation that is increasingly shaping Malaysia's labour market and redefining workplace expectations.

Data was collected using a structured online questionnaire administered through Google Forms. To improve the response rate and ensure wider participation, five trained enumerators assisted in distributing the survey link across professional and social networks, studies suggesting that such a strategy was used to enhance participation in large-scale survey research. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and respondents were assured of confidentiality, which in turn helped to reduce social desirability bias and encouraged more candid responses.

The survey instrument comprised three main constructs, each measured using well-established scales. WLB was assessed with eight items developed by Taşdelen-Karçay and Bakalim (2017), which allows investigation of the ability to manage the interface between work and personal domains. Additionally, the instruments were also adopted by various researchers including Bhattaru, Kokkonda and Challa in 2024, as the study looked into the relation job burnout and work-life balance. Trust was measured with seven items adapted from Tyler (2003) and conceptualized as the belief that others act in fair, reliable, and trustworthy ways in professional settings (Jager, Born and Molen, 2021). Personal reputation was assessed with 12 items adapted from Hochwarter et al. (2007), that

sought to analyze behavioral consistency, personality traits, and social competencies that shape how individuals are perceived in the workplace.

To establish the strength of these measures, a reliability analysis was conducted, and all constructs demonstrated high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding 0.70. In fact, alpha values above 0.90 were recorded for WLB, trust, and personal reputation, endorsing the strength and reliability of the measurement instruments. These results provided assurance in the accuracy of the data and support the validity of the subsequent statistical analyses.

#### 4.0 Findings

The results of the structural model offer valuable insights into the relationships among WLB, trust, and personal reputation. The analysis confirms that WLB exerts a positive influence on personal reputation (H1;  $\beta = 0.162$ ,  $t = 2.216$ ,  $p = 0.013$ ). This indicates that professional Gen Z women employees in Malaysia's service industry who are able to maintain balance between their professional and personal responsibilities are more likely to be perceived as dependable and competent. Such findings highlight that WLB extends beyond its role in promoting individual well-being and serves as an important signal of credibility and reliability, ultimately strengthening personal reputation within organizational settings.

In addition, the findings reveal that WLB is positively related to trust (H2;  $\beta = 0.257$ ,  $t = 2.885$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ), indicating that individuals who manage competing responsibilities effectively are viewed as more trustworthy by colleagues and supervisors. Trust itself also demonstrates a positive association with personal reputation (H3;  $\beta = 0.118$ ,  $t = 1.660$ ,  $p = 0.049$ ), further supporting the argument that trustworthiness is an important contributor to how professionals are evaluated in the workplace. However, the mediation analysis shows that trust does not serve as a significant pathway between WLB and personal reputation (H4;  $\beta = 0.030$ ,  $t = 1.393$ ,  $p = 0.082$ ). This finding implies that while trust and WLB both positively influence reputation, the effect of WLB operates more directly rather than being transmitted through trust.

The results underscore the central role of WLB in shaping reputation outcomes for young women professionals in Malaysia's service sector. Although trust is positively related to both WLB and reputation, its inability to mediate the relationship suggests that, the reputational standing of Gen Z women is more closely tied to their ability to demonstrate self-regulation, adaptability, and balance, rather than relying on established trust networks. This highlights WLB as a critical and direct driver of personal reputation, offering fresh insights into how Gen Z women professionals can build credibility in service-oriented environments.

Overall, these results offer key solutions to address the research questions by demonstrating WLB as having a direct and positive effect on improving the reputation results for professional Gen Z female individuals by underlining the significance and roles of self-regulation and work life balance in producing reliable and career-ready young professionals. In summary from a policy perspective, the research results verify Malaysian Government policies for the workforce and equality between genders focusing on sustainable work careers and female workforce engagement by illustrating the effectiveness of work life balance and improving workforce resilience within the service industry.

Hypothesis	Relationship	Std. Beta	Std. Deviation	t-value	p-value	PCI LL	PCI UL
H1	WLB → PR	0.162	0.073	2.216	0.013	0.044	0.287
H2	WLB → TR	0.257	0.089	2.885	0.002	0.099	0.395
H3	TR → PR	0.118	0.071	1.66	0.049	0.006	0.239
H4	WLB → TR → PR	0.03	0.022	1.393	0.082	-0.001	0.069

(Source: Compiled by the author based on PhD thesis data (2025))

#### 5.0 Discussion

The findings reinforce the critical role of WLB in shaping personal reputation among professional Gen Z women in Malaysia's service industry. Individuals perceived as dependable and competent demonstrate an ability to integrate professional and personal responsibilities, thereby strengthening reputational capital. Effective WLB reduces stress, enhances psychological well-being, and supports sustainable career progression, contributing to both individual reputation and organizational credibility. The strong representation of female respondents may accentuate this relationship, reflecting women's capacity to manage multiple roles through resilience and boundary management. WLB was also positively associated with trust, suggesting that individuals with healthier balance are viewed as more transparent and cooperative in professional settings.

However, trust did not mediate the relationship between WLB and personal reputation, indicating that WLB exerts a direct influence on reputation rather than operating through relational mechanisms. This may be explained by the early career stage of many respondents, whose professional trust networks are still developing. For Gen Z professionals, WLB appears to function primarily as a self-regulatory signal of autonomy, responsibility, and adaptability rather than as an outcome of established trust relationships.

Overall, the results show that effective WLB directly enhances personal reputation among Gen Z employees in Malaysia's service sector. This highlights the importance of balance and self-management as core reputational drivers. Organizations should therefore prioritize WLB-supportive initiatives, such as flexible work arrangements, wellness programs, and supportive leadership practices, to strengthen employee well-being, workforce credibility, and long-term organizational sustainability.

## 6.0 Contribution of the Findings to Existing Policies in Malaysia

The results have relevance to existing literature on employment, workforce development, and gender policies in Malaysia in terms of offering empirical evidence on the strategic importance of WLB as a reputational and developmental tool for professional Gen Z women in the services sector. Aligning with the National Policy frameworks that priorities on the welfare of employees that include well-being and sustainable employment practices to ensure that the workforce is well-engaged and included, this paper finds that WLB has strategic value that goes beyond the welfare agenda.

The link between WLB and reputation lends support to the Malaysian government's gender inclusion and talent retention policies. The results confirm that optimal WLB helps working women coordinate multiple roles without compromising their professional development, thus amplifying their reputational capital. The implications of the argument stretch the debate in the direction of including WLB in the strategic talent management portfolio, as opposed to its treatment as a welfare issue.

In relation to the research question, the absence of a mediating role of trust has a number of implications for policies concerning early-career practitioners in general, and Gen Z employees in particular, since being flexible at work seems to mean self-regulation for Gen Z employees, as opposed to trust as a social networking instrument for getting work done.

## 7.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

This study shows that well managed WLB plays a significant role in shaping personal reputation among professional Gen Z women in Malaysia's service sector. Individuals who balance personal and professional responsibilities effectively are perceived as more competent and dependable. Although WLB was positively related to trust, its mediating effect was not supported, indicating that WLB influences personal reputation directly. This underscores the importance of self-regulation, boundary management, and resilience for sustaining career development in competitive service environments.

From a practical perspective, organizations should prioritize WLB supportive initiatives such as flexible work arrangements, wellness programs, and balanced leadership practices to enhance employee well-being, workforce reputation, and organizational credibility. For Gen Z women, WLB functions as a reputational signal reflecting adaptability, resilience, and long-term career potential, while future research may examine longitudinal effects of WLB on career progression and alternative mediators across broader industry and cultural contexts.

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## Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study and Policy

This paper contributes to Education and Training for Future Leaders by conceptualizing WLB as a reputational signal that enhances the credibility and employability of Gen Z women, with direct relevance to Malaysia's workforce and gender policy agenda. Consistent with the Twelfth Malaysia Plan and the Malaysian Labour Force Blueprint, the findings position WLB as a strategic workforce mechanism supporting sustainable employment and female participation. The study further advances Innovations for Sustainable Development by demonstrating how WLB oriented practices foster sustainable careers, workforce resilience, and early leadership potential among young women professionals in Malaysia's service sector.

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