

Work-life Balance through the Eyes of Gen Z: A Multimodal Analysis of Multilingual Students' Perspectives

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Abstract

This research study investigated how Gen Z multilingual students conceptualize work life balance (WLB) and explored how their academic backgrounds influence these perceptions. Using a multimodal discourse analysis approach, data were collected from video clips on the theme “Work-life Balance on Screen,” created by 180 university students who were learners of Thai, English, and Japanese at a private university in Bangkok, Thailand. Students were given creative freedom to portray their understanding of WLB in a multilingual format. Analysis revealed that participants conceptualized work-life balance in three ways: as personal well-being (55.56%), as a flexible lifestyle (33.33%), and as a struggle (11.11%). The study found that students' fields of study significantly influenced these conceptualizations, with Business Administration students primarily viewing WLB as personal well-being, IT students as a flexible lifestyle, and Engineering students as a struggle. The results reflect Gen Z's prioritization of relaxation, self-care, and mental well-being in their approach to balancing work and life.

Keywords: work-life balance (WLB); Gen Z; multilingual student

1. Introduction

The concept of work-life balance (WLB) has become a widely discussed topic in contemporary research, particularly in response to the evolving nature of work environments and societal expectations. Traditionally, work-life balance refers to an individual's ability to harness professional responsibilities while maintaining personal well-being, social relationships, and leisure activities (Greenhaus & Allen, 2011). However, with rapid globalization, digital transformation, and changing generational values, the meaning of work-life balance is no longer static. Instead, it is being continuously redefined, especially by younger generations who have grown up in an era of digitalized connectivity and shifting workforce expectations (Kossek et al., 2011). As stated by Twenge (2017) and Jayatissa (2023), among these younger individuals, Generation Z (Gen Z), broadly defined as individuals born between the late 1990s and early 2010s, comes up with distinct attitudes towards work, career aspirations, and personal life management. Unlike previous generations, Gen Z has been characterized by digital technology, flexible work environments, and an increased emphasis on mental health and well-being, which are likely to influence their conceptualizations of work-life balance (Schroth, 2019).

One crucial yet underexplored aspect of work-life balance research is how multilingual individuals conceptualize this balance (King, Lulle, & Buzaitė-Bručiunienė, 2021; Kotus & Rzeszewski, 2022). Language is not merely a tool for communication; it plays a crucial role in building cognition, social identity, and worldview (Sapir & Whorf, 1956). Multilingual individuals, owing to their multiple linguistic and cultural backgrounds, may have unique attitudes towards work-life balance that differ from monolingual counterparts. It is also possible that the ways in which work-life balance is understood, defined, and communicated may vary based on linguistic backgrounds, cultural norms, and societal expectations (Dewaele, 2018). For example, some cultures prioritize a strong work ethic and collective responsibilities, while others give importance to personal time and relaxation. As such, multilingual students, by nature, have a greater exposure to different linguistic and cultural factors. They tend to have different viewpoints on their own understanding of the concept of work-life balance, and this makes them a research-worthy demographic for study.

This research aims to investigate how Gen Z multilingual learners conceptualize work-life balance and to explore whether their difference in background influences that. While previous studies on work-life balance have predominantly focused on corporate settings, employee well-being, and organizational policies (e.g., Guest, 2002; Kossek et al., 2011), there remains limited research on how young multilingual students perceive and express their views on this concept. This study addresses two key research questions: (1) How do Gen Z

multilingual students conceptualize work-life balance? and (2) How do their different academic backgrounds influence these conceptualizations? The distinctiveness of this study is its methodological approach. Instead of traditional surveys or interviews, the researcher collected data through video clips created by multilingual students under the theme of Work-life Balance on Screen. This allowed the participants to construct and express their understanding of work-life balance through multiple modes, including spoken language, visual storytelling, and textual information.

This study contributes to the existing body of work-life balance literature by offering insights into the perspectives of multilingual Gen Z students, a demographic that has received limited attention in previous research. Besides, the findings may have practical implications for educators, employers, and policymakers in understanding and addressing the evolving work-life expectations of Gen Z in today's globalized world. In an era where hybrid work models, mental health awareness, and cultural diversity are becoming more focused, understanding this group of new-generation potential workforce conceptualize work-life balance in their own ways can provide valuable guidance for future work-related policies and educational improvements.

2. Research Questions

By analyzing student-created video clips to unveil their reflections on WLB, this study sought to answer the following research questions.

- 1) How do Gen Z multilingual students conceptualize work-life balance?
- 2) How do their different academic backgrounds influence their perceptions of work-life balance?

3. Objectives

- 1) To investigate concepts of work-life balance perceived by Gen Z multilingual students at a private university in Bangkok, Thailand
- 2) To explore the influences of Gen Z multilingual students' different academic backgrounds on conceptualization of work-life balance

4. Literature Review

4.1 Work-Life Balance (WLB)

Work-life balance (WLB) has been widely discussed in several domains, particularly in psychology, organizational behavior, and sociology. According to Greenhaus & Allen (2011), WLB is an individual's ability to manage and satisfy work and non-work responsibilities without

too much conflict. Clark's (2000) Work-Family Border Theory highlights the need for individuals to make it equal between work and personal life to maintain well-being. Similarly, Frone (2003) conceptualizes WLB as a multidimensional idea that is influenced by work-to-life and life-to-work relation.

Research suggests that WLB is subjective, varying across cultures, professions, and personal priorities (Kossek & Lautsch, 2017). Some scholars argue that WLB should be replaced with work-life integration in order to reflect the increasingly thinner boundaries between professional and personal life (Kreiner, 2006).

4.2 Gen Z and Work-Life Balance

As digital users, Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012) often have outstanding attitudes towards work and life, compared to those in previous generations (Shofiyyah et al., 2024). Studies indicate that Gen Z values flexibility, mental health, and meaningful work over traditional career stability (Schroth, 2019). Unlike Baby Boomers and Gen X, most of whom prioritize job security and upward mobility, Gen Z prefers autonomy and work environments that meet their personal values (Deloitte, 2023).

Several studies highlight that Gen Z perceives work-life balance as a means of achieving personal goals rather than merely reducing stress (Chillakuri, 2020). This generation is also more likely to appreciate remote work, gig employment, and flexible schedules (Schroth, 2019). However, despite their focus on balance, research indicates that Gen Z is confined to work-related anxiety due to hyper-connectivity and high expectations for career success (Jayatissa, 2023).

4.3 Multilingual Students and Work-Life Balance

Multilingual individuals have different cultural and linguistic influences that characterize their perceptions of work-life balance. Sapir & Whorf's (1956) Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis suggests that language can have effect on thought processes; this implies that multilingual individuals may conceptualize WLB differently depending on the language they use as well as some more contributing factors (Dewaele, 2018).

Studies on multilingual professionals indicate that their work-life perspectives are formed by their cultural norms regarding productivity, rest, and well-being. For instance, in cultures that emphasize collectivism, work-life balance is often associated with community well-being, while in individualistic cultures, it may be viewed as personal autonomy (Hofstede, 2001).

4.4 Multimodal Approaches to Studying Work-Life Balance

Traditional WLB research has primarily employed surveys and interviews for data collection, but recent studies are turning into multimodal discourse analysis (Kress & van

Leeuwen, 2006). This approach considers how meaning is conveyed through text, visuals, sound, and digital media.

Video-based methodologies, such as digital storytelling (Hull & Katz, 2006), provide insights into how individuals creatively express complex social issues, including work-life balance. Multimodal studies emphasize that narratives conveyed through video clips can include linguistic, visual, and symbolic elements, offering greater data than written or spoken responses alone (Jewitt, 2013). By analyzing Gen Z's self-created videos, this study aims to contribute to the growing community of research on multimodal representations of work-life balance, which could offer valuable insights into how students in the generation embrace the concept into their academic and professional pursuits.

5. Research Methodology

5.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore how Gen Z multilingual students at a private university in Bangkok, Thailand define and conceptualize work-life balance. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it allows for an in-depth examination of the participants' perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Specifically, this study used multimodal discourse analysis by Kress (2009) to analyze the data collected from student-created video clips. By examining this, it can provide a comprehensive understanding of how work-life balance is represented and reflected.

5.2 Participants

The participants in this study included 180 multilingual university students who were enrolled in an English compulsory course at a private university in Bangkok, Thailand. These students, speaking and learning subjects in Thai, English, and Japanese, were from different fields of study: business administration, information technology, and engineering. They belonged to Generation Z, having been born between the late 1990s and early 2010s. A purposive sampling method (Patton, 2015) was used to recruit the participants, who were then divided into groups of nine to eleven to co-work on the assigned video clips.

Table 1 Participants of the study

Fields of Study	No. of Individual Participants	No. of Participant Groups
Business Administration	78	8
Information Technology	63	6
Engineering	39	4
Total	180	18

5.3 Data Collection

The primary data source for this study consisted of video clips created by the participants under the theme Work-life Balance on Screen. The students were given creative freedom to design, script, and produce their own videos to express their understanding of the concept of work-life balance. Approximately 10 minutes in length, these videos included spoken narratives, dialogues, animations, and some visual effects. The multimodal nature of video data allowed for a deeper exploration of meaning-making beyond verbal language alone (Jewitt, 2013).

To ensure consistency in data collection, the participants were reminded that the video must clearly reflect their personal understanding of work-life balance. They were also allowed to use any language, with English being the default, they were comfortable with. The content included either real-life experiences, hypothetical scenarios, cultural reflections, or creative storytelling.

Totalling 18 clips, all video submissions were collected through Google Drive, whose only owner and editor was the researcher alone, ensuring privacy and confidentiality.

5.4 Data Analysis

A multimodal discourse analysis framework (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) was employed to qualitatively examine how work-life balance was conveyed through linguistic, visual, and symbolic representations in the students' video clips. The analysis began when the verbal content was manually transcribed by the researcher and analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), by which key themes related to work-life balance were identified in order to reveal how the term was defined and perceived among the Gen Z participants. Following that, comparisons were drawn between the students with different backgrounds to explore variations in conceptualization of work-life balance. At this stage, a panel of three English-speaking lecturers were recruited as inter-raters and verified the data to ensure the reliability.

5.5 Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to ethical research guidelines to protect the participants' rights and confidentiality (BERA, 2018). To maintain anonymity, all identifying details, for instance, names and majors of study were removed from the data. The participants also had the option to withdraw from being part of the study at any stage without penalty.

6. Research Finding

6.1 Conceptualization of Work-life Balance

By seeking the answer to Research Question 1: *How do Gen Z multilingual students conceptualize work-life balance?*, the analysis revealed that the participants conceptualized

work-life balance in three different ways. Most of these were according to their personal experiences, expectations, and future career aspirations. Three outstanding concepts were found, as follows.

1) Work-life Balance as Personal Well-being

The majority (100 participants or 55.56%) associated work-life balance with mental and emotional well-being. Phrases such as “finding time to relax” and “not letting work consume your life” were frequently mentioned in their video clips. This perspective aligns with previous research highlighting Gen Z’s increased emphasis on self-care and quality of mental health (Twenge, 2017). Some participants illustrated this balance visually by contrasting scenes of relaxation (e.g., spending time with friends and family) with stressful work situations (e.g., a lot of assignments, tight deadlines, and late-night shifts).

2) Work-life Balance as a Flexible Lifestyle

A second major theme was the idea that work-life balance is about flexibility and integration. 60 participants (33.33%) expressed the view that achieving work-life balance does not necessarily mean working less but rather having control over their time. One group of these students stated in their video, “Work-life balance is when I feel energetic and have some time to take a rest as I need.” Visual elements supporting this view included split-screen comparisons of traditional office work hours versus digital nomad lifestyles, flexible study schedules, and work-from-home scenarios. This reflects previous findings that Gen Z values autonomy and adaptability in their work-life arrangements (Schroth, 2019).

3) Work-life Balance as a Struggle

The other 20 participants (11.11%) presented a more realistic and critical perspective; they emphasized the challenges of maintaining work-life balance. However, they did not conceptualize it as positive but instead struggles such as academic pressure, financial concerns, and social expectations, which often disrupt their ability to balance responsibilities. In one video, a student role-played a PhD student who constantly tried to balance coursework, part-time jobs, family obligations, and personal time. This theme suggests that while work-life balance is idealized, some young multilingual learners feel it remains difficult to achieve in practice.

6.2 Influences of the Students’ Different Academic Backgrounds on Conceptualization of Work-life Balance

For Research Question 2: *How do their different backgrounds influence their perceptions of work-life balance?*, the comparisons drawn between the students with different academic backgrounds indicate some significant variations across their fields of study.

According to the analysis, the students’ academic backgrounds significantly influenced their conceptualization as well as perceptions of WLB. Among the 180 students who participated in this study, their conceptualization of WLB varied according to their fields. This difference reflects the values and expectations carried along with their majors. The majority

of Business Administration students mostly regarded WLB as a means of achieving personal well-being; that of Information Technology (IT) students perceived it as a flexible and adaptable lifestyle, while a number of Engineering students largely saw it as a struggle due to the demands of their field.

For Business Administration students, WLB was frequently seen as a state of balancing between professional responsibilities and personal well-being. Many of their video clips portrayed individuals engaging in activities such as exercising and spending quality time with family and friends, suggesting that they associated the concept of balance with self-care and emotional stability. Their narratives often focused on stress management techniques and the importance of work efficiency to boost personal fulfillment. This perspective went in accordance with contemporary business models that prioritize corporate wellness programs, emotional intelligence, and strategic work-life policies to increase productivity. The recurring use of relaxation scenes in the clips reiterated their belief that maintaining a sense of well-being can lead to better professional performance.

In contrast, most of the IT students identified WLB as a fluid and flexible concept, giving importance to the interplay between work and various aspects of life rather than a fixed separation between professional and personal matters. Their video clips frequently illustrated individuals working remotely from cafes, co-working spaces, or even on the way to destinations. This subtly implies the idea that technology plays a great role in enabling a more adaptable work-life routine. Among the IT students, the benefits of digital tools, such as productivity apps, AI-powered software, and cloud-based platforms were mentioned. Their inclusion of such ideas advocates that they perceive technology as a means of enhancing autonomy in both work and personal life. This perspective reflects the explicit characteristics of IT careers, which are often concerned with flexible schedules, remote work situations, and project-based employment structures.

On the other hand, Engineering students predominantly referred to the concept of WLB as a type of challenge, often presenting it as a daunting goal to achieve rather than a realistic one. Their video narratives conveyed a high degree of struggle and several scenes of late-night work sessions, tight deadlines, and stress-inducing situations. Many of their clips showed alarm clocks, fast-paced montages of assignments and exams, and mocking situations in which individuals experienced burnout; this was a clear picture of how demanding the nature of engineering education and professional practice can be in reality. Unlike Business Administration and IT students, who generally considered WLB as attainable through proper time management or technological knowledgeability, Engineering students seemed to find it as a complex issue that required much effort. This attitude is, nevertheless, not a surprise because the rigorous workload and high expectations are usually given to engineers in both academic and professional settings, where long hours and high-pressure problems are often the norm they cannot avoid.

Briefly stated, the results suggested that these Gen Z multilingual students' conceptualizations of WLB were more or less affected by the difference in academic backgrounds, cultural and professional norms of their fields of study, as well as their prospective career paths. Business Administration students, who are regularly exposed to discussions on corporate well-being and efficiency, tended to consider WLB with self-care and work optimization. As for IT students, who are mostly passionate about a technology-powered field that prioritizes remote and flexible work environments, WLB was conceptualized as an adaptable and personalized way of balancing life. Meanwhile, Engineering students, accustomed to a demanding academic workload and industry expectations of long working hours, were of an idea that WLB was a struggle. These various reflections from the students indicate that even before entering the reality of working life, students' academic environments did have impacts on their expectations of work-life balance, partially anticipating how these Gen Z multilingual learners may prepare themselves for tackling it in their future careers.

7. Conclusion and Discussion

7.1 Conclusion

By placing an emphasis on Gen Z multilingual students' reflections on the concept of work-life balance, it was revealed that the participants conceptualized it in three various ways, encompassing personal well-being, a flexible lifestyle, and a struggle. The majority of the participants, regardless of their fields of study, found WLB related to mental and emotional stability and balancing; and they also obviously prioritized the importance of relaxation and self-care. A significant portion of these Gen Z learners considered WLB as a matter of flexibility and control over their time. This reflection is in accordance with modern trends in remote work and skyrocketing digital literacy of this generation of individuals. Notwithstanding, a smaller yet indispensable group perceived this concept as an unbeatable challenge, which mostly results from academic pressures, financial concerns, and societal expectations.

These conceptualizations suggest that the students' perceptions of WLB were influenced not only by their personal experiences but also by generational characteristics and their prospective career paths. Besides, their different academic backgrounds were revealed in the study to play a role in their conceptualizations. While Business Administration and IT students have a shared view of WLB as a practical flexibility, Engineering students considered this concept a challenge that could be impractical in reality. Throughout the present study, while some of them believed that the idea of balance could be an achievable goal through self-care or flexible work, the others kept skeptical about its feasibility in real life situations. This concern reiterates the complexities of the WLB concept, particularly for young

multilingual learners who are on journeys to multiple academic, cultural, and professional demands with countless contributing factors.

7.2 Discussion

In this study, as previously discussed, most of the participants considered WLB related to mental and emotional well-being; they focused considerably on the importance of relaxation, self-care, and time for personal growth. This revelation is in line with previous studies indicating that Gen Z typically prioritizes mental health and work-life integration over traditional work structures (Schroth, 2019; Chillakuri, 2020). Gen Z students in this study differ from those in other Gens in that they deemed flexibility and self-managed autonomy to be crucial for achieving balance, not simply following the norms so strictly that they were delayed under overwork. Furthermore, a significant number of the participants were of preference for remote work, digital tools, and non-linear career paths, which supports the assertion that Gen Z students, in general, value control over their work schedules and environments (Deloitte, 2023).

However, a smaller but indispensable group of participants perceived WLB as a struggle due to high academic expectations, financial concerns, and societal pressures. This perception essentially highlights the challenges faced by young multilingual students who are supposed and expected to overcome academic, cultural, and linguistic demands simultaneously. Previous studies indicate that multilingual individuals often experience cognitive and emotional stress resulting from their diverse linguistic and cultural commitments, which may further complicate their WLB expectations (Hofstede, 2001; Dewaele, 2018).

The results of this study also support the idea that multilingual individuals are more likely to conceptualize WLB differently from their monolingual counterparts, given their greater exposure to diverse cultural factors. According to the Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis (Sapir & Whorf, 1956), language has substantial influences on cognitive processes, which could explain why multilingual students in this study had varying attitudes towards the WLB concept.

8. Limitations

While this study provided insights into multilingual Gen Z students' perspectives on work-life balance, several limitations must be acknowledged. First of all, the present study focused on a specific group of multilingual undergraduate students at a private university in Bangkok, Thailand, and the results may not be generalized to all multilingual individuals or other generations. Furthermore, it was conducted as a qualitative study; thus, the analysis was interpretive and may have been influenced to some extent by the researcher's own perspectives. Efforts were made, however, to improve its validity through inter-rater reliability with those experienced in working closely with Gen Z individuals.

Despite these limitations, this study came up with an innovative approach to understanding how multilingual students conceptualized work-life balance, contributing new perspectives to work-life balance research and multimodal discourse analysis.

9. Recommendations for Further Studies

Future research may delve deeper into how these conceptualizations, as presented in this study, evolve over time as the students' transition into the workforce. Additionally, investigating the role of cultural and linguistic diversity in WLB perceptions could be beneficial in offering deeper insights into how multilingual individuals apply work-life interplay. By understanding these perspectives, educators and employers can better seek effective means to support Gen Z professionals in developing sustainable and meaningful solutions to balancing work and life at their workplaces.

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