

WORK-LIFE BALANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION: ARE WORK INTENSIFICATION AND EMOTIONAL LABOR POTENTIAL JOB STRESSORS?

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Abstract

Although work-life balance (WLB) has been widely researched in organizational settings, the topic remains largely ignored in the context of higher education. There are also limited studies which use a gendered perspective to investigate the concept of WLB within a framework comprising potential job stressors such as work intensification and emotional labor. This paper addresses the identified research gaps by documenting the findings of a survey of 190 academic staff in Malaysian universities. PLS-SEM analysis of the non-gendered-stratified model revealed that both work intensification and emotional labor were significant predictors of self-reported WLB. Interestingly, the gender-stratified analysis showed that work intensification and emotional labor were differentially associated with WLB for both women and men. The analysis also indicated that the proposed model is slightly better at explaining women's experiences than those of men. The findings have important implications for research and policy.

Keywords: Academe, Emotional Labor, Work Intensification, Work-life Balance

1. Introduction

The landscape of global higher education is fast changing amidst the new challenges brought about by the dynamism of globalization, transition to knowledge-based society and rapid technological advancements (Safiah et al, 2015). These developments have sharply increased the work responsibilities of academic staff (Bexley et al, 2013; Ogbonna & Harris, 2004). Exacerbated by the multiple and sometimes conflicting demands of various stakeholders, academics' work practices have moved from being typically characterized by teaching, researching and delivering university-related and society-related services (Boyer, 1990) to becoming more myriad, complex, fluid, and demanding (Coates & Goedebeure, 2012). Bexley et al. (2013) found that indeed most academics felt overwhelmed by their increasing workload and range of roles and responsibilities, thus affirming academics' work intensification. Work intensification can in turn trigger negative consequences such as work-life imbalance, lower job satisfaction, burnout and increased turnover rates (Bexley et al., 2013; Lewis, 2016; Kinman & Jones, 2008).

The existing literature provides substantial evidence for work-life imbalance in organizational settings (Hofmann & Stokburger-Sauer, 2017; Noor & Maad, 2008). On the contrary, there is still a paucity of work-life balance (WLB) research in the context of higher education. Particularly lacking are works which investigate the concept of WLB within a framework comprising of potential job stressors such as work intensification and emotional labor. For example, Mohd Noor's (2011) study only examined the relationship between WLB and outcomes such as intention to leave, job satisfaction and organizational commitment. The current

emotional labor literature is similarly limited in terms of the role of emotional labor techniques such as surface acting and deep acting in influencing perceptions of work-life balance (Hofmann & Stokburger-Sauer, 2017). Also, minimal research focus has been given to academics whose performance of emotional labor may derive from intensifying reforms in their work environment and job nature. Therefore, there are research calls to examine groups of employees which are more or less affected by intensification of work and potential sources of group differences (Chowdhry, 2014; Korunka & Hoonakker, 2014). Chowdhry (2014, p. 554), for instance, identifies two key factors which are absent from the literature: “the voice of lecturers and the critical examination of the ways emotions are utilized and managed.” Typically, lecturers examine these issues in the context of other occupational groups, but have tended to overlook their own academic labor process (Ogbonna & Harris, 2004).

Further, while the literature in the west provides a reasonable amount of examples discussing various aspects of intensification of the academic labor process (Jary & Parker, 1998), the scenario in Malaysia remains sketchy due to limited research in this area. Hence, the current paper aims to bridge the research gaps by considering two potential job stressors i.e. work intensification and performance of emotional labor among academics. Data were drawn from cases in public and private Malaysian institutions of higher learning. Using sex-disaggregated data, the study also hopes to determine whether work intensification and emotional labor influence the perceived WLB of female and male academics differently. In other words, do these job stressors prevail independently of gender? An examination of these issues through a gender lens is warranted because much of the literature on gender differences only assumes that there are typical ‘male’ and ‘female’ behaviors which are reflected partly in the highly sex-segregated workforce (Gutek & Larwood 1987). However, “the systematic relationship between gender and social behavior remains sketchy and is more often anecdotal or ideological than rigorously scientific” (Kennedy & Lawton, 1990, p. 197). Moreover, gender analysis does not only provide understanding of the situation for women, but it is also useful in exploring how uniquely different the experiences, talents and needs of both men and women academics in light of their work intensification. It follows that sex-disaggregated data can lend to a more complete picture of academics’ experience so that policies, practices and programs can identify and meet the different needs of men and women regarding the issues of work-life imbalance.

This paper proceeds as follows. With a focus on Malaysian higher education, the ensuing sections provide a review of the related literature which shapes the formulation of the research hypotheses. Specifically, the discussion in section two helps to frame the issues of WLB in the context of academic work intensification. The third section presents the literature concerning the concept and effects of emotional labor and argues how emotional labor can possibly impact perceptions of WLB. The methodology used in this study is then briefly discussed. The fifth section reports and also discusses the findings of the descriptive and PLS-SEM analyses. The concluding section deals with the implications of the findings from the theoretical and practical perspectives. It also offers some suggestions for future research opportunities in this area.

2. Work Intensification and Work-Life Balance in Higher Education

The higher learning institutions in Malaysia can be broadly categorized as public and private universities. The private universities came in much later in the Malaysian education scene just as when the demand for tertiary education outstripped the availability in the public university system (Arokiasamy et al, 2009). Today, Malaysia offers 20 public and 80 private universities (Wikipedia, 2018). March 2004 signifies a significant milestone in the country’s academic developments with the establishment of the Ministry of Higher Education. This initiative represents a progressive move in further developing and strengthening the higher education sector in Malaysia. One key priority of this new ministry is to improve the quality of academics (Abd. Rahman, 2004) which means increasing demands are placed on academics to

continuously improve their core job elements like teaching and instruction, research work, administrative duties and community value-added services among other new expectations. These job demands vary based on types of universities (e.g., research, comprehensive, focused, private, public), academic leadership appointment, seniority and academic specialization (Maimunah & Roziah, 2008).

The complexity of academic work continues to heighten as a result of other reforms in higher education such as systematic strategic plans and policies of the Malaysian government in creating a culture of academic excellence. The higher education system in the country subscribes to the higher education policy that comprises three main agendas: establishing a world class university system in the country; making Malaysia a regional educational hub; and transforming Malaysia into a knowledge-based economy (Regel et al, 2007). The pursuit of these agendas has directly resulted in an increase in the number of public and private universities, a substantial growth in student enrolments, an expansion of courses in various fields particularly science and technology, and escalated use of ICT and web-based teaching and learning (Hassan, 2001). Academic work is further intensified by the implementation of more stringent assessment systems, bigger classes and the availability of government and private funding for research efforts (Mohd-Noor, 2011). Academics in Malaysia, like academics in other countries, are also expected by the industry and policy makers to shift from their traditional roles of teaching and research to adopt a more pivotal role in economic development and regeneration via industry-linked partnerships (Hagen, 2002). Ogbonna and Harris (2004) similarly argue that the intensification of academic work is not merely a consequence of the demands made by the government and universities. They posit that academics, unlike many other professions, are subjected to multiple and sometimes conflicting demands from other stakeholders, including students and external agencies such as society at large. Of particular relevance are the increasing demands from students, who as “customers” are aware of their rights to demand greater levels of service from the lecturers. This is so true of students from private universities who pay much higher tuition fees than their counterparts in public universities and as such expect more. Hence, universities have to ensure “lecturer quality” by introducing more changes in the nature of academic work such as student teaching quality assessments, teaching quality reviews, research assessments and other quality measures. These changes and increasing demands on academic work will directly contribute to work intensification. A meta-analysis in the context of Australia, US and UK public sector (Burchielli, Pearson & Thanacoody, 2005) confirms that work intensification among academics have increased and their roles have expanded. The same can be surmised about academics in Malaysian universities given the recent developments and reforms in the Malaysian higher education sector.

As a concept, work intensification refers to employees working more than they have before (Burchielli et al., 2005). While work intensification typically characterizes labor markets in many developed countries, it is becoming increasingly prominent in many developing economies such as Malaysia. As noted by Burchell, Ladipo and Wilkinson (2002), work intensification has reached epidemic proportions worldwide for many professionals, craft workers and other occupations and it is said to have “far reaching effects for individuals and implications for communities and organizations” (Burchielli et al., 2005, p. 95). For individuals, the subsequent outcome is extended working hours and work overload (Burchell et al., 2002). Hence, when this happens, other aspects of work such as work-life balance (WLB) will be affected. Deery (2008) notes that the issues relating to maintaining WLB has received much attention over the past years. However, data from the Malaysian higher education sector remains scarce, particularly in relation to causes of academics’ work-life imbalance such as work intensification. Greenhaus, Collins and Shaw (2003) opine that understanding the influencing factors of WLB for individuals in educational institutions is very important since it helps to create knowledge to all sectors of society today. Pursuant to their findings, they conclude that

the lack of balance between work and family life among academics will affect all other sectors. That being said, WLB is about effective juggling act between paid work and all other activities that are important to people such as family, community activities, voluntary work, personal development and leisure and recreation (Dundas, 2008). The literature on work and family issues (Boyar et al, 2003; Carlson et al, 2003) cautions that balancing a successful career with a personal and family life can be challenging. This is particularly true when academics' work intensifies. Hence, it is hypothesized that:

H1: Work intensification will influence work-life balance.

From a gendered perspective, men and women assume differing roles and responsibilities resulting in them having different experience, knowledge and needs. Women are said to be more involved in their work and family roles and are thus more susceptible to work-life imbalance (Smith-Major, Klein & Ehrhart, 2002). In comparison to their spouses, women may find themselves in a position that they have to manage childcare and housework responsibilities single handedly, making it tougher for them to adjust to their work schedules. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed.

H2: The impact of work intensification on work-life balance will differ across gender.

3. Emotional Labor and Work-Life Balance in Higher Education

The concept of emotional labour was coined by Hochschild (1983) to refer to the performance of various forms of work emotion in the context of paid employment. Performing emotional labor is commonplace in low-level service work situation. However, scholars have acknowledged that emotional labor can be present at different hierarchical levels and among many occupational groups. Yeomans (2010), for instance, proposes that emotional labor theory transcends the service sector and is in fact relevant to all occupations which (1) require a high level of emotion management, (2) are gendered and (3) are part of a service industry, including professional services. Despite that, relatively little research interest was devoted to explore the nature and consequences of emotional labor among 'higher level' professional groups like academics. For example, only a handful of research focused on emotional labor processes among school teachers (Keller et al, 2014; Liu & Zhang, 2015) and even fewer on university lecturers (Chowdhry, 2014; Ogbonna & Harris, 2004).

The emotional labor literature suggests that employees typically resort to 2 main techniques i.e. surface acting and deep acting (Hochschild, 1983) when regulating their work emotions. Surface acting relates to managing observable expressions, whereas deep acting corresponds to managing feelings. Thus, surface acting represents the expression of emotions that are not felt, whereas deep acting in a "good faith" deals with the modification of emotions to comply with the organization's display rules (Johnson, 2004). When employees' emotions are mandated by the organization, Hochschild (1983) contends that emotion management can be detrimental to employees. International literature has accordingly evidenced that emotional labor can significantly affect employees' well-being (Johnson & Spector, 2007), job satisfaction (Yang & Chang, 2008), turnover intention (Meier et al, 2006) and work-family conflict (Seery et al, 2008). However, the findings have been mixed across studies in that some studies found that emotional labor can result in detrimental outcomes, while others reported otherwise. It has been argued that emotional labor is not a bad thing in and of itself as the effects are contingent upon the techniques of emotional labor employed. To elaborate, surface acting can lead to feelings of inauthenticity and consequently job dissatisfaction (Ang & Poh, 2013; Zhang & Zhu, 2007). Conversely, engaging in deep acting may result in feelings of personal accomplishment and by extension, job satisfaction (Ang & Poh, 2013; Johnson, 2004; Zhang & Zhu, 2007). This is particularly true for those who express genuine emotions at work compared to those who fake their emotions. Based on the aforementioned, it is highly likely that the process and consequence

of emotional labor experienced by academics are similar in that their performance of emotional labor can influence their perceived work-life balance.

Thus, we hypothesized that:

H3: Emotional labor will influence work-life balance.

Women are at particular risk of the depersonalizing effects of emotion due to their gendered personal and professional identities (Chowdhry, 2014). Gender has also been found to influence the choice of acting method such that women tend to employ more deep acting as compared to men (Johnson & Spector, 2007). Additionally, women are reportedly better than men at performing emotional labor (Johnson & Spector, 2007; Meier et al., 2006). Accordingly, it can be surmised that men and women have differing experience in terms of their emotional labor and its influence on perceived WLB. Thus, the following hypothesis is formulated.

H4: The impact of emotional labor on work-life balance will differ across gender.

4. Method

The unit of analysis was academics in both public and private universities in Malaysia. The survey instrument together with invitations to participate in the study were distributed to 320 academics. We obtained a response rate of 59% with 190 completed surveys from public (60 or 21.6%) and private universities (130 or 78.5%). There was almost an equal number of female (99 or 52.1%) and male (91 or 47.9%) respondents. Their ages ranged from 28 to 58 years old. Most of them were married (122 or 64.2%) and had dependents (101 or 53.2%). A large majority of the respondents (149 or 78.4%) were permanent staff with work tenure of between 4 to 25 years. The respondents were from different academic disciplines such as humanities, social sciences, pure sciences and formal sciences.

The measures used in the study were adapted from various sources. The responses were scored on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Work intensification was measured using 4 items from the scale adapted from Korunka and Hoonakker (2014), which represents the perceptions of the need to work at increasing speed, perform different tasks simultaneously, and reduce idle time. A sample item is "These days, I have to work at high speed to complete my work." The internal consistency coefficients for the items in work intensification are found to range from 0.75 to 0.82. The performance of emotional labor was gauged using Brotheridge and Lee's (1998) employee-focused emotional labor scale which comprises 3 deep acting and 3 surface acting items. Deep acting denotes efforts made to actually feel the emotions that are displayed to others (e.g. "I try to actually experience the emotions that I must show"). Whereas surface acting involves efforts to express emotions that are not felt and at the same time resist expressing true feelings (e.g. "I hide my true feelings about a situation"). The internal consistency coefficients for this measurement are reported to range from 0.86 to 0.91. Finally, work-life balance was assessed using 8 items adapted from the scale developed by Wong and Ko (2009), which gauges the enough time-off from work. A sample item is "I have enough time after work to carry out personal matters." Relatively high coefficient alphas of between 0.90 to 0.92 have been found for this measurement.

To test the proposed model, the structural equation modeling (SEM) technique using partial least squares (PLS) was used. Accordingly, we employed the two-stage analytical procedures, whereby the measurement model was tested first to validate the instrument followed by the structural model testing to validate the relationships that were hypothesized.

5. Results and Discussion

5. 1 Measurement model analysis

We first ascertained convergent validity by examining the indicator loadings, average variance extracted and also the composite reliability values. Convergent validity evaluates whether or not the items represent one and the same underlying construct. We first assessed the loadings of the indicators to ensure that they were above the threshold of 0.6 (Gholami, Sulaiman, Ramayah & Molla, 2013), the composite reliability (CR) should be above 0.7 and the average variance extracted (AVE) should be above 0.5 (Hair, Hult, Ringle & Sarstedt, 2017). Table 1 shows that all the values exceeded the recommended thresholds, thus verifying convergent validity.

Table 1: Convergent Validity

Construct	Item	Loading	CR	AVE
Work intensification	Wi2	0.774	0.880	0.711
	Wi3	0.888		
	Wi4	0.863		
Emotional labor	Da1	0.785	0.917	0.788
	Da2	0.936		
	Da3	0.934		
Work-life balance	Wlb1	0.770	0.940	0.691
	Wlb2	0.782		
	Wlb4	0.778		
	Wlb5	0.854		
	Wlb6	0.887		
	Wlb7	0.856		
	Wlb8	0.891		

Note: CR=Composite reliability; AVE=Average Variance Extracted; Wi1, Sa1, Sa2, Sa3 and Wlb3 were deleted due to low loadings.

It should also be noted that due to low loadings, all 3 surface acting items were deleted, leaving only deep acting items to represent the emotional labor dimension. We infer that deep acting was perceived as a more prevalent technique than surface acting in the academic emotional labor process. Even though teaching career requires a face-to-face service work (and thus is an emotional process), universities generally do not mandate regulations of their staff's work emotions as do other service and hospitality industries. There is as such no real necessity for academics to "fake their feelings" or surface act when dealing with students, colleagues and other stakeholders. A study by Zhang and Zhu (2007) found that Chinese college instructorssimilarly engaged in deep acting much more than surface acting.

Next, we tested discriminant validity which represents the extent to which a construct differs from other constructs within the model. By comparing the square root of the AVE with the correlations among constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), we can confirm that the measures are discriminant. As shown in Table 2, the square root of the AVEs are higher than the row and column values, thus confirming that the measures are discriminant.

Table 2: Discriminant Validity

Construct	Work intensification	Emotional labor	Work-life balance
Work intensification(WI)	0.843		
Emotional labor(EL)	0.253	0.888	
Work-life balance(WLB)	-0.258	0.183	0.831

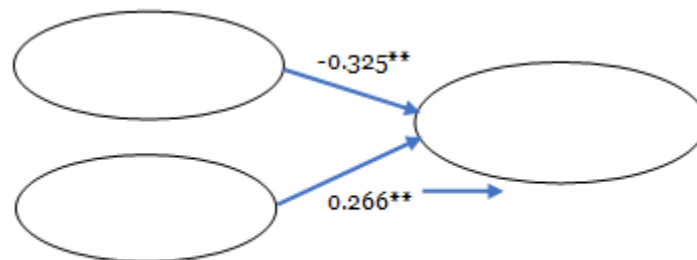
Note: Values on the diagonal bolded are square root of the AVE while the off-diagonals are correlations.

We also computed the Q^2 or predictive relevance by using the blindfolding procedure with a distance value of 6. Blindfolding is a measure which builds on a sample re-use technique, which omits a part of the data matrix, estimates the model parameters and predicts the omitted part using the estimates (Hair et al., 2017). If the Q^2 value is greater than zero, then we can conclude that the model has sufficient predictive relevance (Fornell & Cha, 1994). The Q^2 was found to be 0.180, thus predictive relevance was confirmed.

5. 2 Structural model Analysis

In the second phase of the data analysis, we proceeded with the path analysis to test the 4 hypotheses formulated in this study. We began by first testing the non-gendered-stratified model after controlling for potential confounding effects of socio-demographic characteristics such as marital status, number of dependents, university type, academic discipline and work tenure). Figure 1 and Table 3 present the results.

The R^2 value of 0.132 suggests that 13.2% of the variance in WLB is explained by work intensification and emotional labor. There was a negative relationship ($\beta = -0.325$, $p < 0.01$) between work intensification and WLB. Thus, H1 was supported. Similarly, H3 was supported because emotional labor (deep acting) was found to be positively related to WLB ($\beta = 0.266$, $p < 0.01$).



Note: ** $p < 0.01$, Significant.

Figure 1: Research Model (Non-gendered-stratified)

The finding confirms that work intensification is a potential job stressor which can result in work-life imbalance, and that is consistent with past findings (e.g. Burchielli et al., 2005; Burchell, 2002). As expected, emotional labor (deep acting) is positively related to WLB; in other words, engaging in deep acting is beneficial (e.g. Ang & Poh, 2013; Johnson & Spector, 2007), as in this case, for an improved WLB. The finding also supports Wharton's (1993) contention that emotional labor in itself may not be necessarily harmful to the performers, but how it is performed can make all the difference.

Table 3: Hypotheses Testing (Non-gendered-stratified model)

Hypothesis	Relationship	Std. Beta	Std. Error	t-value	Decision
H ₁	WI → WLB	-0.325	0.072	4.507**	Supported
H ₃	EL → WLB	0.266	0.070	3.772**	Supported

Note: ** $p < 0.01$.

We repeated the same procedures for the gendered-stratified model analysis. The results are shown in Figure 2 and Table 4. A comparison of the R^2 values of both models for men and women suggests that the proposed structural model is slightly better at explaining the experiences of women compared to those of men. To elaborate, the R^2 value of 0.176 indicates that 17.6% of the variance in WLB experienced by women can be explained by work intensification and emotional labor. On the contrary, the 2 variables only explained 14.9% of the variance in men's perceived WLB. In addition, there was an insignificant negative relationship ($\beta = -0.261$) between work intensification and WLB for men. Whereas for women, work intensification and WLB was found to be significantly and negatively related ($\beta = -0.421$, $p < 0.01$). Thus, H₂ cannot be rejected. This finding is unsurprising and it offers important gender implications in that work intensification proves to be more detrimental to women's WLB than that of men. The reason is because women generally engage at higher levels of both paid and unpaid work when compared to their male counterparts (ILO, 2017) due to the gendered expectations of family obligations and parenting coupled with the intensified work demands and current expectations from women academics.

Men Women

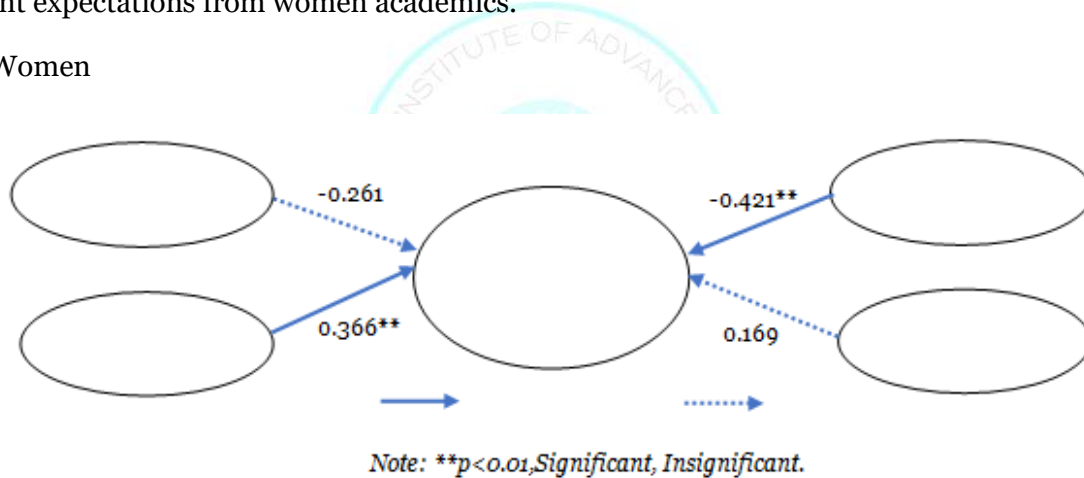


Figure 2: Research Model (Gendered-stratified)

Similarly, H₄ was also supported in that gender differences were found in the relationship between emotional labor and WLB. For the male sample, emotional labor was positively related to WLB ($\beta = 0.366$, $p < 0.01$), whereas the hypothesized relationship was not significant for women ($\beta = 0.169$). An explanation for this finding is in order. Teaching jobs tend to be female-dominated and they require more nurturance than, for example, jobs which are more male-dominated such as in law enforcement or transportation (Yang & Guy, 2015). Given women's natural emotive capacities (Yang & Guy, 2015), women academics are naturally better than their male counterparts in managing their emotions. Consequently, their emotional labor process did not turn out to be a significant job stressor for them. Male academics in this study similarly preferred to deep act when managing their emotions. Contrary to the norm whereby men are known to be less adept at deep acting when compared to women, the data showed that male academics incidentally engaged in deep acting which is a more effective technique. Thus, they reaped the benefits in terms of improved WLB.

Table 4:Hypotheses Testing (Gendered-stratified model)

Hypothesis	Relationship	Std. Beta		Std. Error		t-value		Decision
		Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	
H2	WI →WLB	-0.261	-0.421	0.141	0.10	1.84	4.36**	Supported
H4	EL→WLB	0.366	0.169	0.10	0.12	3.72**	1.42	Supported

Note: ** $p < 0.01$.

Conclusion

On the basis of the current study's findings, it can be argued that the non-gendered-stratified model may be too simplistic for theorizing the experiences of academics. The gender-stratified framework is as such a better alternative. Given that, future initiatives to improve experience of WLB should account for gender-based heterogeneity in work intensification and emotional labor experience. The data from this study revealed that women academics faced greater challenges in their attempts to reduce the incompatibilities between work and life domains and hence, the result of work intensification is a lowered WLB. Thus, women require more support to improve their WLB experience. The support can come from various sources such as workplace support, familial and social support which can help mitigate the negative effects of work intensification and emotional labor on WLB. How women cope with work and family is also important to a healthy WLB. Thus, extending this study to include coping strategies and supportive systemic responses to the issues of work intensification and performance of emotional labor should be valuable for a more thorough understanding of WLB in the higher education sector. The study also found that regardless of gender, the academic sample tended to deep act when managing their emotions at work. This is good news for a healthy WLB among academics given that deep acting is a more effective technique for emotion management. However, this finding awaits future empirical validation as to whether the management and regulation of work emotion is indeed uniquely different in the Malaysian academe.

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