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Unlocking work-life balance: the impact of participative leadership on reducing emotional exhaustion

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ABSTRACT

Amid unprecedented challenges in Malaysia's economy and labour markets, there is a growing inclination among workers to resign in pursuit of a more balanced work-life equilibrium. This shift indicates a changing perspective on employment, where competitive compensation and benefits remain important, but job seekers actively prioritize companies fostering a comprehensive work environment that champions a healthier work-life balance. This study delves into the impact of participative leadership on work-life balance as a means to alleviate emotional fatigue. Employing a quantitative approach and a structured questionnaire distributed through convenience sampling, the research gathered 257 qualified responses from diverse industries. Framed within bounded theory and role theory, the study explores how individuals in Malaysian society manage the interplay between their personal and professional lives to enhance overall well-being. The findings emphasize the substantial role of work interference in personal life, and vice versa, contributing to emotional exhaustion among Malaysian employees. However, the study identifies participative leadership as a crucial mitigating factor against exhaustion. Consequently, fostering empathetic and emotionally intelligent leadership is deemed essential for supporting employees in reducing stress and exhaustion. This research represents a pioneering endeavour in addressing the issue of emotional exhaustion within the distinctive context of work-life balance in Malaysia.

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1. Introduction

In the contemporary landscape, workers have redefined their perception of work-life balance, emphasizing the ability to customize work based on individual priorities. Unlike in the past, employees now take the lead in defining what 'balance' means for them, moving away from the traditional influence of companies. This shift signifies a departure from external dictates towards a more personalized approach. Modern workers perceive a balanced life as one that harmoniously integrates personal and professional aspects. This holistic perspective acknowledges that a fulfilling life comprises more than just professional achievements. According to a 2022 survey conducted by Forbes Health, which gathered insights from 1,120 US workers about their priorities, work-life balance holds a significance comparable to financial stability. The survey revealed that 90% of respondents considered it 'an important aspect of their work', underlining the elevated status of balance in the modern professional's value system (Morgan, 2023). Despite the historical tendency to prioritize work over other life aspects in the pursuit of professional success, there is a growing awareness of the importance of achieving a balanced and integrated work-life dynamic. Recognizing that success extends beyond career achievements, individuals now understand that a harmonious balance is not only beneficial for physical, emotional, and mental well-being but is also instrumental in achieving long-term success in their careers (Sanfilippo et al., 2023).

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The surge in remote work due to the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the workforce. Schieman et al.'s (2021) study indicates that remote workers experience heightened balance, flexibility, and job satisfaction, aligning with the observed reduction in work-family conflict during the pandemic. There's also an increase in productivity and work hours associated with remote work. However, it's essential to note that even before the pandemic, Malaysians faced challenging working conditions, as revealed by a 2019 AIA Vitality survey, contributing to stress and sleep deprivation. The work-from-home policy during the pandemic, exacerbated these challenges, contributing significantly to burnout among Malaysians (Shukla & Kumar, 2023). Emotional exhaustion, marked by cognitive decline due to prolonged stress, is prevalent among those navigating extensive work hours and pressure to balance professional, social, and familial responsibilities (Gitonaga, 2023). Participative leaders, highlighted by MIT Sloan (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2018) and Unilever's Chief Human Resources Officer Leena Nair, play a pivotal role in removing barriers, fostering empathy, and facilitating career growth. Vulnerability in leadership, as emphasized during uncertain times, creates a culture of trust and transparency, fostering collaboration between leaders and employees to identify challenges and celebrate successes (Nair, 2021).

Maintaining work-life balance signifies achieving a harmonious blend of professional and personal responsibilities, enhancing overall satisfaction and fulfilment in one's life. Conversely, an imbalance between work and personal life can lead to severe repercussions, including emotional stress, health issues diminished confidence, and heightened job dissatisfaction (Green, 2018). Prioritizing a healthy work-life balance is crucial for the well-being of employees, as it mitigates burnout and enhances job satisfaction. However, attaining an optimal work-life balance remains a challenge in numerous Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs), as previously examined and reported for various reasons (Yang & Peng, 2017). Bhumika (2020) encourages future researchers to delve into diverse industries, as it could offer a clearer understanding of the correlation between WLB, and the emotional exhaustion experienced by employees in various sectors. Scholars like Wei and Ye (2022) advocate for considering factors that mitigate emotional exhaustion and enhance individuals' well-being. As the importance of leadership in shaping work-life balance (WLB) is increasingly recognized in workplaces, there exists a paucity of literature examining the relationship between leadership styles and WLB on a global scale (Berger et al., 2017).

Although the concept of work-life balance has been extensively explored in developed nations, with notable studies conducted by Ratnesh et al. (2019), there remains a significant lack of research on work-life balance (WLB) in regions beyond Western countries. The limited attention given to this subject does not diminish its significance; rather, it is becoming increasingly crucial in developing countries and those with diverse cultural value systems, as exemplified by the case of Malaysia. In general, work interfering with personal life (WIPL) tends to be more prevalent than personal life interfering with work (PLIW). Nonetheless, in the specific context of Malaysia, it was observed that PLIW surpassed WIPL significantly, as reported by Jayasingam et al. (2023). Therefore, the research aims to examine the role of participative leadership on the relationship between work-life balance (WIPL&PLIW) and emotional exhaustion among employees.

2. Literature review

A considerable number of employees have encountered difficulties in aligning their work and personal life expectations. Emotional exhaustion, particularly heightened during the COVID-19 period, has been a significant challenge for many employees grappling with conflicts between work and family responsibilities (Bhumika, 2020). While earlier studies have explored the conflict between professional and personal life dynamics (Sirgy & Lee, 2017), others have emphasized the critical role of work-life balance in mitigating conflicts between an employee's work and personal life (Frone, 2003). Well before the COVID-19 era, an individual's work and personal realms were often closely interconnected. This is where the relevance of boundary theory becomes apparent, providing insights into how individuals navigate the boundaries between their personal and professional lives (Allen et al., 2014). Additionally, role theory is pertinent, confirming that an imbalance in work-life contributes to an increase in emotional exhaustion.

2.1. Boundary theory

it is a cognitive sociological framework of mental categorization in a qualitative study examining the symbols and identities associated with individuals' work and home lives. This theory was developed to

specifically address the integration and segmentation of borders between work and family domains. It explores how individuals construct, maintain, negotiate, and traverse the physical, temporal, behavioural, relational, or psychological 'lines of demarcation between domains' (Clark, 2000) or 'limits that define entities as separate from one another' (Ashforth et al. 2000). However, it's noteworthy that roles receive minimal mention within the context of boundary theory. Therefore, this study delves into an alternative theoretical framework, namely role theory.

2.2. Role theory

it begins with a set of normative expectations that define specific positions or statuses in social structure, outlining corresponding roles and behaviours in interactions (Biddle, 1986). The foundational premise is that an individual's life encompasses various roles, encompassing responsibilities both within and outside the workplace (Anglin et al., 2022). Work-life balance (WLB) is dissected to gauge the extent of interference between different life roles, whether work encroaches on personal life or vice versa. The theory posits that role conflict or imbalance is likely when pressures coincide in multiple sets, especially if adherence to one set complicates compliance with another. Empirical studies affirm the association between work-life imbalance and negative outcomes such as emotional exhaustion (Wei & Ye, 2022). Conversely, a favourable work-life balance is linked to positive outcomes such as enhanced job satisfaction and improved mental health (Haar et al., 2014).

2.3. Emotional exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion, a well-established precursor to burnout, was introduced in Maslach's (1982) model. It arises from confronting overwhelming time and energy demands (Boles et al., 1997) and managing excessive emotional and psychological pressures (Bacharach et al., 1991). Symptoms encompass complete exhaustion and demotivation at the workplace (Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004). Research indicates that work-family conflict can be a catalyst for emotional exhaustion (Liu et al., 2015), now officially recognized as a diagnosable condition by the World Health Organization (Forbes, 2018).

Kim, Choi, and Vandenberghe's (2017) study underscores the significant impact of emotional exhaustion on poor employee performance, contributing to a notable loss of lives annually in the United States (Harvard Business Review, 2021). Forbes highlights substantial financial losses for companies due to disengagement caused by emotional exhaustion (2019). Gallup's 2021 survey reveals that 63% of employee absences stem from emotional exhaustion. Deloitte's 2020 survey discloses that over 77% of employees experience emotional exhaustion to varying degrees. This exhaustion, linked to severe health implications and debilitating burnout (Salvagioni et al., 2017), results in an annual healthcare cost of around \$190 billion for U.S. businesses (Harvard Business Review, 2021). Work-life balance emerges as a pivotal influencer during COVID-19, particularly in work-from-home scenarios (Palumbo, 2020). Collie (2021) proposes that participative leadership can alleviate negative effects, while Meyer et al. (2021) find that women experience higher levels of emotional exhaustion during pandemic-related lockdowns.

2.4. Work-Life balance

The concept of work-life balance aims to empower individuals in achieving both productivity and satisfaction while fulfilling their professional and personal obligations (Clark, 2000). Historically, this balance was characterized by individuals being equally engaged and content in both work and personal life (Greenhaus et al., 2003). Assessing an individual's work-life balance depended on their adept management of various life roles (Russo et al., 2016). It's essential to recognize that the significance of work-life balance can vary based on an individual's life stage and circumstances. Work-life balance involves effectively addressing diverse life roles, managing time and engagement efficiently, and attaining a harmonious sense of satisfaction across all life aspects (Sirgy & Lee, 2017).

Studies on work-life balance primarily explore the tension between professional and personal life domains (Sirgy & Lee, 2017). Certain literature employs the terms work-family conflict (WFC) and family-work conflict (FWC) to convey the idea encapsulated within the concept of work-life balance

(Mellner et al., 2015). WFC occurs when work demands intrude upon family life, while FWC happens when family responsibilities interfere with work (Liu et al., 2015). Fisher (2020) identifies three work-life balance categories: work interference with personal life (WIPL), personal life interference with work (PLIW), and work-personal life enhancement. However, existing research mainly focuses on WIPL and PLIW (Karkoulia et al., 2016). Lack of work-life balance in employees can lead to significant repercussions, affecting well-being and health (Sirgy & Lee, 2017). Disruptions in work-life balance are linked to emotional exhaustion (Lee et al., 2013).

Research has indicated that achieving a balance between work and life can mitigate Emotional Exhaustion (EE) (Mulyani et al., 2021). Conversely, work-life imbalance has been identified as a contributing factor to EE (Wilkinson, 2008). For instance, individuals facing challenges in managing their work-life balance reported higher levels of EE (Eisenberg et al., 2022). In essence, heightened work-related stress contributes to work-life imbalance, subsequently leading to Emotional Exhaustion.

2.5. Participative leadership

Participative leadership, also known as democratic leadership, is defined as a leadership style where all employees within an organization actively participate in decision-making processes. This approach has demonstrated its ability to encourage employees to engage in the creative process, providing them with a sense of psychological safety (Lu et al., 2020). Various positive leadership styles, including authentic leadership, empowering leadership, servant leadership, ambidextrous leadership, and transformational leadership, have been recognized for their significant roles in fostering positive employee outcomes, such as workplace thriving (Liu & Cao, 2016; Mortier et al., 2015; Niessen et al., 2017; Usman et al., 2020; 2021).

The importance of social support in alleviating conflicts between work and family life has been emphasized by researchers (Blanch & Aluja, 2012; Eby et al., 2005). Participative leaders are known for actively supporting their employees by consistently seeking their input on workplace matters and seeking advice on potential solutions (Mulki et al., 2006). Participative leadership has been linked to fostering employee engagement in the creative process and creating a sense of psychological safety (Lu et al., 2020). Research indicates that this leadership style is particularly effective when employees perceive fair treatment (Sara et al., 2017). Due to its supportive nature, participative leadership has been associated with minimizing work-family conflict (Blanch & Aluja, 2012). Mulki et al. (2006) highlight that participative leadership significantly contributes to reducing emotional exhaustion among employees through its demonstration of support and empathy, which helps alleviate stress. Despite the numerous positive outcomes explored in the context of participative leadership, there remains much to explore regarding employees' thriving in the workplace (Bortoluzzi et al., 2013; Chan, 2019; Chang et al., 2019).

The relevant research details the link between work-life balance, emotional exhaustion, and participative leadership (Buruck et al., 2020). However, discussing emotional tiredness and participative leadership may enrich the study case. Participative leadership, which involves workers in decision-making, reduces emotional fatigue and work-family conflict. Participative leaders create a supportive environment by actively soliciting employee input and valuing their perspectives, according to study (Silla et al., 2020). This strategy creates psychological safety and empowers employees to engage in the creative process, reducing emotional exhaustion.

Participatory leadership reduces work-family conflict by giving social support and empathy to employees. Participatory leaders treat workers fairly and involve them in decision-making to reduce work-life balance stress (Charoensukmongkol & Puyod, 2021). This decreases employee emotional fatigue. Despite past studies showing that participative leadership improves employee well-being, further research is needed to understand how it does so. Future studies may reveal how companies may help employees and create a pleasant workplace. Digging deeper into participatory leadership and employee outcomes might provide these insights.

3. Research framework and hypothesis

Emotional exhaustion, as identified by Maslach and Jackson (1981), leads to a diminished focus on work and a negative shift in behaviour and attitude. In the corporate world, managers express concerns about

emotional exhaustion in employees due to its adverse effects on both employee turnover and job performance (Lee & Ashforth, 1996). The negative correlation between family-work conflict (WFC) and employee commitment, has been established in prior research (Adams & Jex, 1999; Greenhaus et al., 1997). Additionally, work-family conflict has been associated with employee stress, depression, and burn-out (Frone et al., 1997; Macewen & Barling, 1994).

Participatory leadership involves leaders sharing challenges with employees and collectively deciding on solutions (Kahai et al., 1997). Leaders can effectively alleviate employee stress by aiding them in managing both work-family conflict and family-work conflict (O'Driscoll et al., 2003). Employees who utilize such supportive measures to address stress are more likely to experience motivation and support, ultimately leading to a decrease in turnover rates within the organization (McCarthy et al., 2013). The presented framework (Figure 1) and the hypotheses derive insights from boundary and role theory, wherein the empirical study investigates the link between work-life imbalance and negative consequences, including emotional exhaustion (Wei & Ye, 2022).

H1: Work Interference in Personal Life (WIPL) impact on Emotional Exhaustion

H2: Personal Life Interference at Work (PLIW) impact on Emotional Exhaustion

H3: Participative Leadership moderate the relationship between Work Interference in Personal Life (WIPL) and Emotional Exhaustion

H4: Participative Leadership moderate the relationship between Personal Life Interference (PLIW) at Work impact on Emotional Exhaustion

4. Method

The research focused on individuals aged 18 years and older, residing in Malaysia, and balancing work responsibilities while living with their families. This demographic was chosen due to their likelihood of encountering challenges in managing work-family conflict with additional familial responsibilities (Appendix A). Following the guideline suggesting a minimum sample size at least five times the number of variables (Hair et al., 1998), the initial target was 400 respondents. However, the study received 290 responses, with 257 qualified responses being utilized. Employing a cross-sectional time horizon and a quantitative research approach, data was collected through a survey questionnaire distributed via email. Google Sheets facilitated data compilation, while IBM SPSS was used for analysis. Ensuring research accuracy, stratified random sampling was employed. A pilot test involving 25 responses was conducted to validate the questionnaire's reliability. The survey questionnaire included a short note to the respondents regarding informed consent, indicating that they were participating in the survey voluntarily and that they could withdraw their responses at any time.

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of Multimedia University, Malaysia with the approval number (EA0172024). All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their rights to confidentiality, and their ability to withdraw at any time without penalty. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. The study adhered to the ethical standards as prescribed in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments.

Operational measurements included seven items for Work Interference in Personal Life (WIPL) and three items for Personal Life Interference with Work (PLIW), adapted from Hayman (2005) with factor

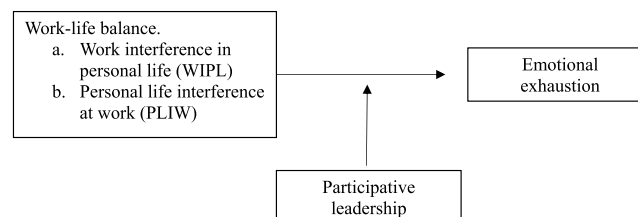


Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

loadings of 0.6 and above. Emotional exhaustion, derived from Maslach and Jackson (1981), comprised nine questions on a 5-point Likert scale. However, due to low factor loading (below 0.3), only five items were included in this study. Participative leadership was gauged using five items adapted from Harris and Ogbonna's (2001) scale, with all items exhibiting factor loadings exceeding 0.6. Values surpassing 0.4 are regarded as reliable according to Guadagnoli and Velicer (1988).

5. Data analysis

Among the 257 respondents, 44% were males, and 56% were females. In terms of age distribution, 40.1% were between 25 and 29 years old, and 28.4% were between 30 and 34 years old. Work experience varied, with 42.4% having 1–5 years of experience and 26.8% having 6–10 years. Regarding current organizational tenure, 37.4% had 2–3 years of experience, while 35% had less than a year. Respondents' educational attainment included 66.1% holding a bachelor's degree and 23.7% holding a master's degree. Employment sectors were diverse, with 30.7% in information technology, 21.8% in finance and insurance, and others in various industries. In terms of monthly income, 33.1% earned more than MYR 8000, 24.5% earned between MYR 2001–4000, and 22.2% earned between MYR 4001–6000.

This study examines employee emotional tiredness, work-life balance, and participative leadership. It emphasises emotional tiredness in the workplace and its detrimental effects on employee attrition and performance. Based on boundary and role theory, work-life imbalance can cause emotional fatigue. The theoretical framework is based on this concept. The hypotheses were developed to examine the association between emotional fatigue, work interference in personal life (WIPL), personal life interference at work (PLIW), and participative leadership. The reliability study confirmed the consistency and dependability of the research project's measurement scales.

In the correlation research, emotional tiredness, work interference in personal life, and personal life interference at work were positively correlated. Participatory leadership, however, correlates negatively with these factors. Regression analysis illuminates variable relationships. The first and second hypotheses show that WIPL and PLIW reduce psychological tiredness. The third and fourth hypothesis will examine how participatory leadership moderates the associations. Participative leadership does not change the link between WIPL and emotional fatigue, but it moderates the relationship between PLIW and emotional exhaustion in their interaction.

Gender differences in job interference in personal life and participative leadership are shown by separate *t*-tests. Males report more work intrusion in personal life and active leadership than females. The findings emphasise the importance of work-life balance in the workplace and suggest that participative leadership may reduce the negative impacts of personal life interference at work on emotional weariness. However, qualitative analysis might provide a deeper understanding of participatory leadership's impact, suggesting additional study.

5.1. Reliability analysis

Cronbach's alpha values for all variables are greater than 0.70, as shown in Table 1. Cronbach alpha coefficients for independent variables are 0.907 for work interference in personal life (WIPL), 0.705 for personal life interference with work (PLIW), and 0.969 for participative leadership. Cronbach alpha values for the dependent variable is 0.720 for emotional exhaustion. All the findings indicate high item reliability (Hair et al., 2019).

5.2. Correlation analysis

Results in Table 2 show the positive correlation between work interference in personal life and emotional exhaustion ($r = .582, p < 0.01$) and personal life in work interference and emotional exhaustion ($r = .479, p < 0.01$). On the other hand, there is negative correlation between participative leadership and work interference in personal life ($r = -.582, p < 0.01$) and participative leadership and personal life in work interference ($r = -.378, p < 0.01$). The result further show that participates leadership has negative correlations with emotional exhaustion ($r = -.408, p < 0.01$).

Table 1. Reliability analysis.

Constructs	Cronbach's Alpha	No. of items
Work interference in personal life (WIPL)	0.907	7
Personal life interference at work (PLIW)	0.705	3
Emotional exhaustion (EE)	0.720	5
Participative leadership (PL)	0.969	5

Table 2. Correlation analysis.

		Work interference in personal life (WIP)	Personal life interference at work (PIW)	Emotional exhaustion (EE)	Participative leadership (PL)
Work interference in personal life (WIP)	Pearson Correlation Sig.(2-tailed)	1	.361** .000	.582** .000	-.582** .000
Personal life interference at work (PIW)	Pearson Correlation Sig.(2-tailed)	.361** .000	1	.479** .000	-.378** .000
Emotional exhaustion (EE)	Pearson Correlation Sig.(2-tailed)	.582** .000	.479** .000	1	-.408** .000
Participative leadership (PL)	Pearson Correlation Sig.(2-tailed)	-.582** .000	-.378** .000	-.408** .000	1

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 3. Model summary of regression analysis.

Model	R square	Adjusted R square	F-statistics	Significance level
1	.469	.465	112.286	0.000

a. Predictors: (Constant), Work interference in personal life, Personal life interference at work, participative leadership.

Table 4. Regression analysis.

Dependent variable	Independent variable	Beta	t-value	Significance
Emotional exhaustion	Work interference in personal life	.491	9.837	.000**
	Personal life interference at work	.320	6.415	.000**

**Significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

5.3. Regression analysis

From the model summary in Table 3 show that, *R* square value is 0.469. This means that, for 1 unit of change in the independent variables, a 46.9% change will occur among the dependent variable. In terms of adjusted *R* square, the change will be 46.5%. Regarding the value of *F* obtained 112.286, which is significant at 0.000. Hence, this model shows that the set of independent variables can explain the changes in emotional exhaustion. This shows that the model fits well with the dataset.

The first and second hypothesis is to determine the significant impact of work interference in personal life and personal life interference at work on emotional exhaustion. Table 4 results show that work interference in personal life has the highest beta value at .491, followed by personal life interference at work at .320. Both variables' values were statistically significant at *p* value = 0.000. This means that both work interference at personal life and personal life interference at work have a positive impact on emotional exhaustion.

The third hypothesis of the research is to determine the role of participative leadership on relationship between work interference in personal life and emotional exhaustion. In this model in Table 5 shows that *R* Square is 0.392, meaning that approximately 39.2% of the variance in emotional exhaustion is explained by work interference in personal life and participative leadership. This indicates that these predictors collectively have a moderate explanatory power. The *F*-value of 81.895 with a *p*-value of 0.000 suggests that the model is indeed statistically significant. This means that the predictors collectively have a significant impact on explaining the variance in emotional exhaustion.

As shown in Table 6, the standardized coefficient (beta) of 0.436 indicates a more robust positive relationship, while the highly significant *t*-value of 4.052 (with a *p*-value of 0.000) underscores the statistically significant impact of work interference in personal life on emotional exhaustion. On the other hand, participative leadership, with a Beta value of 0.206 and a *t*-value of 1.913 (with a *p*-value of 0.057),

Table 5. Model summary of regression analysis.

Model	R square	Adjusted R square	F-statistics	Significance level
1	.392	.387	81.895	.000

b. Predictors: (Constant), Work interference in personal life, participative leadership.

Table 6. Regression Analysis.

Dependent variable	Independent variable	Moderating variable	Beta	t-value	Significance
Emotional exhaustion	Work interference in personal life (WIPL)		.436	4.052	.000**
		Participative leadership	.206	1.913	.057

**Significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*Significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

does not achieve statistical significance. Therefore, it suggests that participative leadership does not act as a moderating factor in the relationship between work interference in personal life and emotional exhaustion.

The fourth hypothesis is to assess the influence of participative leadership in the context of the relationship between personal life interference at work and emotional exhaustion. As shown in Table 7, the R-square value of 0.335 indicates that the combined effects of the predictors, which include personal life interference at work and participative leadership, account for approximately 33.5% of the variability in the dependent variable. This level of explanation is considered moderate. Furthermore, the high F-statistic of 63.897 and the extremely low p-value of 0.000, as demonstrated in the table, underscore the strong statistical significance of the model that incorporates personal life interference at work and participative leadership as predictor variables. These results confirm that at least one of these predictors has a significant relationship with the dependent variable.

Table 8 shown that beta value of 0.253 for personal life interference at work, along with a t-value of 3.470, demonstrates a statistically significant relationship with a high level of confidence ($p < 0.01^{**}$). This indicates a positive association between personal life interference at work and emotional exhaustion. In contrast, participative leadership exhibits a higher beta value of 0.371, with a t-value of 5.083, signifying a statistically significant relationship at a very high level of confidence ($p < 0.01^{**}$). The result confirm that participative leadership moderate the relationship between personal life interference at work and emotional exhaustion.

5.4. Independent t test

As per the findings in Table 9, males demonstrate an average score of 3.2447 on Work Interference in Personal Life (WIPL) with a standard deviation of 0.77846, signifying that males report a greater level of work interference in personal life compared to females. This difference is statistically significant. Similarly, on Personal Life Interference with Work (PLIW), males score an average of 3.6372 with a standard deviation of 0.54504, and there is no statistically significant distinction in personal life interference with work between males and females. Regarding Emotional Exhaustion (EE), males exhibit an average score of 3.9502 with a standard deviation of 0.78854, suggesting no statistically significant difference in emotional exhaustion between males and females. Additionally, on Participative Leadership (PL), males record an average score of 3.5982 with a standard deviation of 0.95117, indicating that males report slightly higher participative leadership scores compared to females. This difference is statistically significant.

6. Discussion

The study outcomes reveal a connection between the encroachment of work into personal life and an elevated level of emotional exhaustion. Many individuals experience disturbances related to work, extending beyond regular working hours, resulting in heightened emotional exhaustion. Furthermore, the research underscores that disruptions in personal life occurring during work hours also play a role in emotional exhaustion. In the current work landscape of the private sector,

Table 7. Model summary of regression analysis.

Model	R square	Adjusted R square	F-statistics	Significance level
1	.335	.329	63.897	.000

c. Predictors: (Constant), personal life at workspace, participative leadership.

Table 8. Regression analysis.

Dependent variable	Independent variable	Moderating variable	Beta	t-value	Significance
Emotional exhaustion	personal life interference at work (PLIW)		.253	3.470	.001**
		Participative leadership	.371	5.083	.000

**significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*Significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 9. Independent t-test.

Variable	Gender	Mean	Standard deviation	T value	Significant (2-tailed)
Work Interference in Personal Life (WIPL)	Male	3.2447	.77846	3.359	.001
	Female	2.9007	.84191	3.391	.001
Personal Life Interference with Work (PLIW)	Male	3.6372	.54504	1.851	.065
	Female	3.4995	.62618	1.882	.061
Emotional Exhaustion (EE)	Male	3.9502	.78854	.682	.496
	Female	3.8837	.76609	.680	.497
Participative Leadership (PL)	Male	3.5982	.95117	2.010	.045
	Female	3.3421	1.06010	2.037	.043

employees often contend with substantial workloads that extend into their personal time. The practice of bringing work home to meet job demands poses a challenge for employees in maintaining a balance between work responsibilities and the needs of their family members, including children and the elderly. These familial demands frequently hinder work performance, ultimately contributing to emotional exhaustion.

The study's findings cast doubt on the effectiveness of participative leadership as a moderator in the relationship between work interference in personal life and emotional exhaustion. Despite its emphasis on employee involvement and collaboration, participative leadership seems to fall short in addressing the underlying factors contributing to work interference in personal life. This raises questions about the actual impact of participative leadership practices, suggesting that employees may still grapple with work interference, ultimately leading to emotional exhaustion. However, the study acknowledges a potential positive influence of participative leadership when it encourages collaboration, instils accountability in individual roles, and facilitates collective problem-solving. In these instances, employees might find it easier to focus on their personal lives. This nuance highlights the importance of clear communication about roles and contributions in the context of participative leadership. A well-implemented participative leadership strategy is noted for its potential to foster open communication, boost morale, and enhance employee retention. This, in turn, is suggested to contribute to reduced emotional exhaustion among employees, ensuring a more effective balance between professional responsibilities and personal life.

Surprisingly, the association between work interference in personal life and participative leadership displays gender-based variations. Males exhibit a higher tendency for emotional exhaustion compared to females. Additionally, males perceive that leaders with participative leadership styles exert a more significant influence on them. The study revealed that participative leadership plays a role in diminishing personal life interference at work, and by exerting such influence, it has the potential to alleviate emotional exhaustion experienced by employees to some degree.

7. Theoretical contribution and practical implications

The synthesis of Boundary Theory and Role Theory enhances the theoretical foundation for understanding the complexities of work-life dynamics. The intertwining of these theories provides a holistic framework that captures both the spatial and psychological aspects of boundary management, as well as the normative expectations and conflicts associated with different roles. The theoretical synthesis suggests

that interventions aiming to improve work-life balance should consider not only the physical and psychological boundaries but also the normative expectations tied to various roles. Organizations may benefit from adopting strategies that facilitate effective role management, acknowledging the potential impact on employees' emotional well-being.

Organizations striving to enhance employee well-being and alleviate emotional exhaustion can adopt practical strategies. Implementing flexible work policies, like remote work and flexible hours, empowers employees to manage professional and personal responsibilities effectively. Training programs focused on time management provide valuable skills for navigating work and personal commitments efficiently. Cultivating a workplace culture that actively supports work-life balance is crucial, setting clear expectations and support mechanisms. Participative leadership plays a vital role in mitigating personal life interferences on emotional exhaustion, emphasizing the importance of leadership training and creating a holistic, supportive atmosphere. These strategies collectively contribute to a comprehensive approach for fostering employee well-being.

8. Conclusion

The study's results emphasize the substantial impact of work interference in personal life and personal life interference at work on emotional exhaustion, highlighting the necessity for organizations to implement strategic interventions prioritizing employee well-being. The practical implications provided offer actionable insights to support the development of a more supportive workplace. Furthermore, the central role of participative leadership emerges as a crucial factor in alleviating the impact of personal life interference at work on emotional exhaustion within the organizational context. By integrating these suggestions, organizations can foster a workplace culture that not only recognizes and accommodates the diverse personal needs of employees but actively works towards minimizing the negative effects of work and personal life interferences on emotional well-being. Through these efforts, organizations can nurture a resilient and engaged workforce, contributing to sustained organizational success.

9. Future research

The study presents a notable gap in conducting a thorough analysis of potential confounding variables or alternative explanations that could impact the observed relationship. Without a more comprehensive examination of contextual factors, the robustness and generalizability of the proposed connection between participative leadership, work interference, and emotional exhaustion remain uncertain. This prompts inquiries into the broader applicability of the findings and the extent to which they can be extrapolated to different organizational settings or cultural contexts.

While the study introduces intriguing insights, its limited exploration of the intricate relationships between participative leadership, work interference, and emotional exhaustion opens avenues for future research. A more rigorous investigation, accompanied by an in-depth examination of various influencing factors, is essential for a comprehensive understanding of these dynamics in real-world work environments. Future research endeavours could delve into these complexities, providing a more nuanced perspective on the interplay between participative leadership, work interference, and emotional exhaustion, thus enhancing the depth and applicability of the study's findings.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Additional information

No additional information is available for this paper.

Authors' contribution statements

Tauseef Rasheq Ahad: Conceptualization and execution of the research; Methodology; Software; Data curation; Writing of original draft.

Nasreen Khan: Conceptualization; Supervision; Methodology; Software; Data curation; Discussion of research framework.

Anusuyah Subbarao: Review; Supervision; Editing; Suggestions for improvement.

H M Mahfuzur Rahman: Conceptualization; Methodology; Discussion of the findings; Review.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Appendix A: Survey questionnaire

SECTION 01

Please tick one answer per question

Gender

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female

Age

- ☐ 20–24 years
- ☐ 25–29 years
- ☐ 30–34 years
- ☐ 35–39 years
- ☐ 40–45 years
- ☐ 45–49 years
- ☐ 50 years and above

Total Work Experience

- ☐ Less than 1 year
- ☐ 1-5 years
- ☐ 6-10 years
- ☐ 11-15 years
- ☐ 16-20 years
- ☐ 20 years and above

Work Experience in Current Organisation ☐ Less than 1 year

- ☐ 2-3 years
- ☐ 4-5 years
- ☐ 5 years and above
- ☐ Nationality
- ☐ Malaysian
- ☐ non-Malaysian

Educational Qualification

- ☐ Professional Certifications
- ☐ Diploma
- ☐ bachelor's degree
- ☐ Master's Degree
- ☐ Ph.D.

Industry (please select one that suits your current profession the most)

- ☐ Agriculture
- ☐ Wholesale and Retail
- ☐ Government
- ☐ Hotel and Accommodation
- ☐ Consulting
- ☐ Transport and Storage
- ☐ Health and Social Work
- ☐ Administration and Support
- ☐ Finance and Insurance
- ☐ Education
- ☐ Real Estate
- ☐ Information Technology
- ☐ Industrial Engineering
- ☐ Mining and Quarrying
- ☐ Others (please specify:)

Monthly Income

- o Less than MYR 2,000 per month
- o MYR 2,001 to 4,000 per month
- o MYR 4,001 to 6,000 per month
- o MYR 6,001 to 8,000 per month
- o Above MYR 8,000 per month

SECTION 02

Work Interference in Personal Life (WIPL)		1	2	3	4	5
1	My personal life does not suffer because of work					
2	My job does not make my personal life difficult					
3	I do not neglect personal needs because of work					
4	I do not put personal life on hold for work					
5	I do not miss personal activities because of work					
6	I do not struggle to juggle work and non-work					
7	My personal life does not drain me of energy for work					
Personal Life Interference with work (PLIW)		1	2	3	4	5
1	It is not hard to work because of personal matters					
2	My work does not suffer because of my personal life					
3	I have better mood at work because of personal life					
Emotional Exhaustion (EE)		1	2	3	4	5
1	I feel emotionally drained from my work					
2	I feel used up at the end of the workday					
3	I feel fatigued when I get up in the morning and have to face another day on the job					
4	I feel burned out from my work					
5	I feel frustrated by my job					
6	I feel I'm working too hard on my job					
7	I feel I'm at the end of my rope					
8	Working with people all day is really a strain for me					
9	Working with people directly put too much stress on me					
Participative Leadership (PL)		1	2	3	4	5
1	My supervisor encourages us to express our ideas or suggestions					
2	My supervisor uses our suggestions to make decisions that affect us					
3	Before making decisions, my supervisor consider what employees have to say					
4	My supervisor explains the way tasks should be carried out					
5	My supervisor help employees make working on their tasks more pleasant					