

-RESEARCH ARTICLE-

**THE MEDIATING ROLE OF COMPETENCY DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES, AND MODERATING ROLE OF AGE BETWEEN WORK-LIFE BALANCE AND SUSTAINABLE CAREERS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE NETHERLANDS AND PAKISTAN**

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—Abstract—

A career becomes sustainable when it enables one to remain happy, healthy, and productive. However, the lack of empirical research evaluating the effects of Work-Life Balance (WLB) on all three indicators of career sustainability in the same research setting is a significant knowledge gap in advancing research on sustainable careers. This research aimed to analyze the role of WLB in sustaining employees' careers, investigate the mediating role of competency development initiatives, and examine the moderating role of age in the Netherlands and Pakistan. The study analyzed data from 760 employees in the Netherlands and Pakistan using a quantitative survey-based research

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methodology. Convenience sampling techniques were used to collect data. Structural equation modeling was used to analyze the data. The results demonstrated that WLB is associated more positively with indicators of sustainable careers for Dutch employees than for Pakistani employees. The study also uncovered differences between the two samples' mediating mechanisms for competency development initiatives. With improved WLB, Pakistani employees become more future-focused and participate in career management activities, while WLB increases Dutch employee participation in learning activities and competency development. Age was determined to be a weak moderator, as the positive effect of WLB on competency development initiatives was only diminished in the Pakistani sample of older employees. This study contributes to the literature on sustainable careers by demonstrating that, while WLB is important for the career sustainability of employees in both cultures, in the individualistic culture of the Netherlands, the career sustainability of employees is more sensitive to their WLB experience. As a result, organizations must invest in providing WLB to their employees, as it is essential for their careers' sustainability.

**Keywords:** Sustainable careers, work-life balance, competency development initiatives, Netherlands, Pakistan

## INTRODUCTION

Career sustainability has become an important topic for modern career researchers, as it plays a crucial role in achieving happiness, good health, decent work, and economic growth. Employability has become more important than job security in today's rapidly changing technological and economic environments (De Vos et al., 2016). Individuals and organizations must invest in sustainable careers to ensure their employees' long-term employability and productivity (Kossek, Valcour, & Lirio, 2014). The digitalization of the workplace has also transformed how professionals interact, collaborate, and complete their daily tasks (Bughin et al., 2018), creating new opportunities for career advancement while presenting new challenges for career sustainability in the fast-paced digital environment.

Literature nowadays shows an increased focus on individuals' ability to sustain their careers throughout their working lives. Scholars have emphasized that a career is sustainable if it ensures that individuals' health, happiness, and productivity remain intact throughout their careers (De Vos, Van der Heijden, & Akkermans, 2020). De Vos and colleagues characterize health, happiness, and productivity as key indicators of sustainable careers in their conceptual model. Research on sustainable careers is still in an evolutionary stage; its indicators and dimensions are still developing and are mostly at the conceptual level. To advance knowledge on sustainable careers, it is important to investigate how it relates to different work- and life-related constructs.

A balanced approach to career development does not compromise non-work domains

of life (Direnzo, Greenhaus, & Weer, 2015; Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014). Work-life balance (WLB) is associated with various work-related outcomes (Haar & Brougham, 2022). Previous studies have established that WLB is directly or indirectly related to health-, happiness-, and productivity-related measures such as performance (Haider, Jabeen, & Ahmad, 2018; Kaya & Karatepe, 2020; Kim, 2014), work engagement (Aryee et al., 2016; Bedarkar & Pandita, 2014), and career satisfaction (Levin et al., 2017; Rupert et al., 2012). However, the absence of empirical research evaluating the effects of WLB on all three indicators of career sustainability in a same research setting represents a significant knowledge gap in the advancement of sustainable careers research. These three indicators, identified by De Vos, Van der Heijden, and Akkermans (2020), are the defining characteristics of sustainable careers, and studying them concurrently is a crucial research endeavor.

De Hauw and Greenhaus (2014) have suggested that WLB encourages learning behaviors among employees (e.g., competency development initiatives) that may make their careers sustainable. These learning behaviors vary with age and may affect WLB and work outcomes (Gragnano, Simbula, & Miglioretti, 2020). This necessitates consideration of the effects of competency development initiatives (CDI) and age when researching career sustainability.

The nature of participation in any learning and career-related initiative depends on multiple contexts of individuals, such as their private lives, occupational sector, and national culture (De Vos et al., 2016). Important among these contextual factors is national culture. Individuals in diverse cultures, such as collectivist and individualistic cultures, evaluate their WLB differently; this substantially affects their health and work-related outcomes (Haar et al., 2014). Thus, empirical research is required to evaluate the relationship between WLB and indicators of sustainable careers in diverse cultures.

This study examines the relationship between WLB and indicators of sustainable careers in two distinct cultures: the Netherlands and Pakistan. In addition, we investigate the role of CDI as a mediator between WLB and indicators of sustainable careers. Moreover, we also investigate the moderating role of age between WLB and CDI. We chose these two countries because their cultures are distinct. The Netherlands is an individualistic society that ranks highly on Hofstede's (1984) dimensions of femininity culture. In the Netherlands, family sizes are smaller. The Netherlands' social policies promote employee well-being; for instance, they require fewer average weekly working hours than other European nations (OECD, 2018). Pakistan, in contrast, is a collectivistic society with a high masculinity index (Hofstede, 1984). In Pakistan, the average family consists of 6.3 people, out of which 2.7 are children under 16 (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2017).

We intend to contribute to the academic discourse on sustainable careers by addressing

the following theoretical gaps. First, the effects of WLB on indicators (health, happiness, and productivity) of sustainable careers in the Netherlands and Pakistan are investigated. Second, we investigate the mediating role of competency development initiatives (CDI) in the relationship between work-life balance (WLB) and indicators of sustainable careers. Third, we investigate differences in the effects of WLB on aspects of sustainable careers between the two cultural contexts.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **Sustainable Careers**

At the heart of sustainable careers lies the concept of a dynamic person-career fit (Parasuraman, Greenhaus, & Linnehan, 2000), encompassing health, happiness, and productivity. These three indicators are interrelated and they collectively characterize career sustainability (De Vos, Van der Heijden, & Akkermans, 2020).

*Health* encompasses both mental and physical fitness to perform a job. Different jobs have different mental and physical requirements, and they need to be taken care of by both individuals themselves and their employers. Physical and mental health requirements may not be apparent in the early stages of a career, but the absence of preventative measures at a younger age can lead to physical or mental exhaustion with age or an increase in job demands (Khamisa et al., 2015). Therefore, maintaining physical and mental health is essential for career sustainability. *Happiness* in one's career is a state of mind characterized by satisfaction with the current situation and a sense of engagement with work. It is an individual's subjective perception. It is the dynamic alignment of an individual's career with his or her values, career objectives, and needs regarding growth and work-life balance (Sheldon et al., 2002). *Productivity* refers to the level of performance at the current job and the perception of employability within and outside the organization (Heijde & Van Der Heijden, 2006).

Not only are these three indicators of sustainable careers essential for the long-term success of individuals, but they are also essential for the long-term success of organizations.

### **Work-life balance**

WLB is an individual's perception of balancing work and life roles (Haar et al., 2014). This conceptualization of WLB is based on a perception-centered and holistic approach which suggests that every individual uniquely makes sense of the balance between their involvement in work and life roles according to their life values and priorities (Kossek, Valcour, & Lirio, 2014). It is the overall appraisal by individuals of their work and life roles (Haar et al., 2014). This holistic appraisal of WLB does not consider the objective measures of balance between work and life roles, such as the amount of time dedicated

to work or time spent with family and friends. It considers how individuals perceive the balance between their multiple life roles. This implies that different individuals may appraise the same situation differently regarding WLB. Experiencing a good work-life balance brings positive work-related outcomes, such as it reduces turnover intentions and increased job satisfaction and commitment toward the organization (Haar & Brougham, 2022). It also enhances employee well-being (Emre & De Spiegeleare, 2021) and work engagement (Žnidaršič & Bernik, 2021).

### **Work-life Balance as a Predictor of Sustainable Careers**

We draw on role balance theory (Marks & MacDermid, 1996) to examine the role of WLB in achieving sustainable careers. The role balance theory provides a comprehensive evaluation of WLB, which suggests that individuals strive for fulfilling and meaningful experiences in their work and life roles, achieving a sense of equilibrium (Marks et al., 2001). Role balance theory posits that individuals who perceive harmony and congruence between their life roles can achieve success in the workplace. Life may not be in equilibrium based on objective standards of balance (such as equal time for work and home), but it may be well-balanced based on the importance of roles in the minds of individuals (Haar, 2013). By maintaining a balance between work and life, individuals can fit their careers into a broader life context, and as a result, they remain healthy and productive throughout their careers (Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014). Individuals who experience WLB believe that they are doing justice to the life roles that are most important to them (Greenhaus, Collins, & Shaw, 2003), and achieving this holy grail of WLB results in work and life satisfaction (Haar et al., 2014). Employees who experience WLB are energized and more engaged in work-related activities (Greenhaus & Allen, 2011; Russo, Shteigman, & Carmeli, 2016). Previous studies have established that WLB is directly or indirectly related to health, happiness, and productivity-related measures, such as performance (Haider, Jabeen, & Ahmad, 2018; Kaya & Karatepe, 2020; Kim, 2014), work engagement (Aryee et al., 2016; Bedarkar & Pandita, 2014; Brough et al., 2014; Lunau et al., 2014) and career satisfaction (Levin et al., 2017; Rupert et al., 2012). To advance research on sustainable careers, however, it is necessary to evaluate the effect of WLB on all three indicators of career sustainability within the same research setting. Consequently, we form the following hypothesis:

**H1:** Work-life balance is positively related to all indicators of a sustainable career in both samples.

### **The Mediating role of competency development initiatives**

WLB is an important motivator for career-related initiatives (Hall, 2002; Valcour, Bailyn, & Quijada, 2007). Employees' preference for career-related initiatives may vary based on their assessment of work-life balance and how their careers fit into their larger life context.

This is why [De Hauw and Greenhaus \(2014\)](#) recognize WLB as a prerequisite for establishing a sustainable career. WLB increases employee engagement and fosters a desire for career advancement ([Young, 2009](#)). According to [Lee et al. \(2011\)](#), individuals shape their careers (in part) through *individual actions* and *gradual development*. The individual actions are their reactions and responses to their circumstances. Gradual development, on the other hand, is a proactive approach to achieving long-term career objectives, and it entails initiatives aimed at enhancing competencies at a slower pace. These competency development initiatives (CDI) may involve participating in different learning and development opportunities provided by their organizations in the form of formal and informal learning practices and broader career management practices ([De Vos, De Hauw, & Van der Heijden, 2011](#)). In addition, a substantial body of research indicates that proactive workplace behaviors are associated with a variety of positive job and career outcomes ([Fuller Jr, Marler, & Hester, 2012](#); [Parker, Wang, & Liao, 2019](#); [Thomas, Whitman, & Viswesvaran, 2010](#); [Tornau & Frese, 2013](#)). As participation in CDI is a proactive behavior, we may suggest that it is positively associated with health, happiness, and productivity of employees. We differentiate between two dimensions of CDI: learning practices (LP), which include formal and informal learning participation, and career management practices (CMP), such as career counseling.

We expect that employees in the Netherlands and Pakistan, who perceive WLB will perceive their careers more sustainable, through participation in CMP and LP.

**H2:** CDI mediates the relationship between WLB and indicators of sustainable careers in both samples.

**H2a:** Career management practices (CMP) mediate the relationship between WLB and indicators of sustainable careers in both samples.

**H2b:** Learning practices (LP) mediate the relationship between WLB and indicators of sustainable careers in both samples.

### **Age as Moderator**

Age is a significant factor that may influence the learning motivation of employees. Evidence of the effects of age on employee motivation to learn has been inconsistent and inconclusive in previous research studies ([Raemdonck et al., 2015](#)). On the one hand, research indicates that age has no bearing on learning motivation ([Schulz & Roßnagel, 2010](#)). On the other hand, research indicates that it does play a role in determining an employee's intent to learn. Several studies indicate that older employees are more interested in informal learning activities ([Berg & Chyung, 2008](#); [Kyndt, Dochy, & Nijs, 2009](#)), whereas younger employees are more interested in acquiring knowledge and developing new skills ([Gragnano, Simbula, & Miglioretti, 2020](#); [Klimchak et al., 2019](#)). These variations in preferences may have differential effects on work-life balance (WLB)

and its outcomes (Ferdous, Ali, & French, 2021; Gragnano, Simbula, & Miglioretti, 2020). Younger employees may be more interested in balancing their work with hobbies, travel, and education (Klimchak et al., 2019), whereas older employees may be more interested in balancing their work with family-related responsibilities (Haar, 2013). Older employees are less likely to participate in formal (Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004; Livingstone, 1999) and informal (Gupta, Govindarajan, & Malhotra, 1999; Van Der Heijden et al., 2009) learning and development activities provided by their organizations.

We anticipate that age will have a negative effect on the relationship between WLB and participation in CDI, given that research suggests that aging reduces the motivation to participate in learning and developmental activities.

**H3:** The relationship between WLB and participation in CDI is stronger for younger than older employees in both samples.

**H3a:** The relationship between WLB and participation in CMP is stronger for younger employees in both samples.

**H3b:** The relationship between WLB and participation in LP is stronger for the younger employees in both samples.

### **The Role of National Culture: the Netherlands and Pakistan**

WLB is associated with several positive work and life-related outcomes across diverse cultures (Aryee, Srinivas, & Tan, 2005; Greenhaus, Collins, & Shaw, 2003; Haar et al., 2014; Lyness & Judiesch, 2014). However, it is argued that WLB is more positively related to life and work-related outcomes in individualistic cultures than in collectivist cultures (Haar et al., 2014). This may be because, in individualistic cultures, individuals are fully responsible for achieving their WLB, and once achieved, WLB leads to higher job and life-related outcomes (Haar et al., 2014). In collectivist cultures, work is considered a means of supporting and advancing their families, and conflict between work and life is considered unavoidable and less harmful (Lewis & Beauregard, 2018; Lu et al., 2010; Spector et al., 2007).

As discussed previously, there are differences in the WLB outcomes between collectivist and individualistic cultures. However, we want to determine how significant these differences are in the contexts of the Netherlands and Pakistan. We do not precisely understand how CDI mediates differently in these two contrasting cultures and how age matters differently regarding WLB's effects on CDI. Therefore, we have also investigated and reported the differences in the Dutch and Pakistani employees' WLB and its outcomes with respect to all the hypotheses in the analysis section.

## **METHODS**

## Respondents

Participants for this study were recruited in the Netherlands and Pakistan using the technique of convenience sampling. These participants were professionals from various organizations recruited via various online sources and professional contacts in both nations. Participation was voluntary. A total of 760 individuals completed the questionnaire. For data collection, both online and paper surveys were administered. Data screening was performed to identify missing values and outliers. In the data, there were no influential univariate outliers. We calculated Mahalanobi's distance to identify multivariate outliers and eliminated thirty-eight outlier cases. There were 722 responses retained.

The Pakistani sample included 109 females and 253 males. The Pakistani sample had a mean age of 35.01 (SD = 7.6). The Dutch sample included 118 females and 239 males. The mean age of the Dutch sample was 33.19 (SD = 10.2). All respondents were white-collar employees from various industries, including the financial sector, communications and media, information technology, and manufacturing. All of the participants attained a college degree.

## Measurement instruments

The questionnaire was administered in English because all respondents could understand and communicate in English.

## Work-life balance

WLB was measured with a scale developed by Haar (2013). Participants rated their agreement with three statements (e.g., "Nowadays, I seem to enjoy every part of my life equally well"). All the statements were rated on a five-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha for the Dutch and Pakistani samples was 0.81 and 0.77, respectively.

## Participation in CDI

The two dimensions of *Participation in CDI* (i.e., CMP and LP) were measured with twelve statements (De Vos, De Hauw, & Van der Heijden, 2011). Participants were asked about their participation in a diverse set of CDI (e.g., "career discussions with an internal career counselor"). All statements were rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = never; 5 = always). Cronbach's alpha for Dutch and Pakistani samples were 0.93 and 0.82, respectively.

For measuring indicators of sustainable careers *health*, *happiness*, and *productivity*, we have employed several measures corresponding to these indicators.



## Health

Employees' physical and mental health was assessed using a single-item measure of workability (Ahlstrom et al., 2010). On a scale from 0 to 10, respondents were asked to rate their current workability. Several studies have demonstrated the reliability of this single-item measure (Ahlstrom et al., 2010; Gupta et al., 2014; Kinnunen & Nätti, 2018; Mokarami et al., 2017).

## Happiness

We included career satisfaction and work engagement to gauge employees' happiness. *Career Satisfaction* was measured with five statements (Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Wormley, 1990). Participants rated their agreement with the statements (e.g., "I am satisfied with the success I have achieved in my career"). All the statements were rated on a five-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha for the Dutch and Pakistani samples was 0.79 and 0.89, respectively. *Work Engagement* was measured with three statements (Schaufeli et al., 2017). Participants rated their agreement with the statements (e.g., "I am immersed in my work"). All the statements were rated on a seven-point Likert scale (0=never; 6=always). Cronbach's alpha for the Dutch and Pakistani samples was 0.86 and 0.69, respectively.

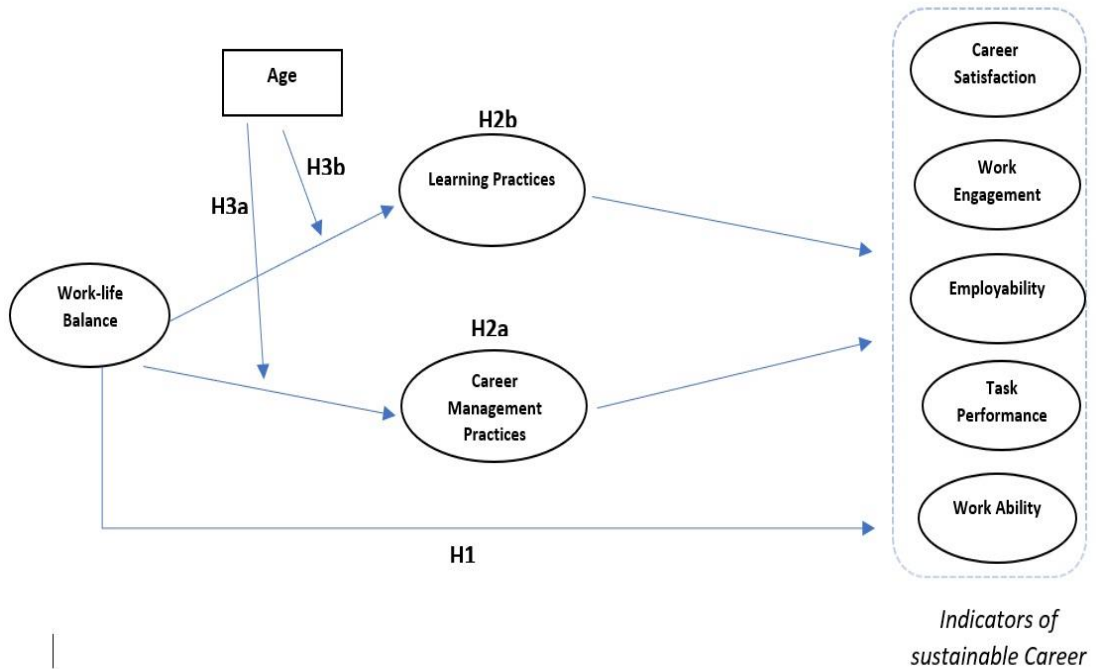
## Productivity

This study utilized task performance and self-perceived employability as productivity measures (Heijde & Van Der Heijden, 2006). Task Performance was measured by using three statements (Griffin, Neal, & Parker, 2007). Participants rated their level of agreement with the statements (e.g., "I perform the fundamental aspects of my job competently"). Each statement was rated on a six-point Likert scale (1 = totally disagree, 6 = totally agree). Cronbach's alpha was 0.83 for the Dutch sample and 0.77 for the Pakistani sample. Self-perceived employability was measured with three items measuring internal and external employability (Veld, Semeijn, & van Vuuren, 2015). Participants rated their level of agreement with the statements (e.g., "I am confident that it is easy for me to find an attractive new job in my current organization"). Each statement was rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = absolutely not; 5 = absolutely). Cronbach's alpha was 0.74 for the Dutch sample and 0.79 for the Pakistani sample.

## Analysis

Structural equation modeling was used to test the hypothesized relations in AMOS version 22. At first, we conducted confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) of the full measurement model to test the model's fitness before hypotheses testing. We considered the traditional cut-off values for model fit indices specified by Browne and Cudeck (1989) for RMSEA  $>.06$  to  $.08$  and (Bentler,

1990) for CFI and TLI  $\geq .90$  to  $.950$ . After CFA, we conducted invariance analysis (Byrne, 2013) on both samples to establish measurement invariance. The structural model was then developed to test the hypothesized relationships (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Hypothesized Model

## RESULTS

### Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 shows the mean scores, standard deviations, and correlations between the study variables in Dutch and Pakistani samples. In the Dutch sample, WLB was positively associated with all indicators of sustainable careers, i.e., work engagement ( $r = 0.62, p < .01$ ), employability ( $r = 0.30, p < .01$ ), task performance ( $r = 0.44, p < .01$ ), career satisfaction ( $r = 0.76, p < .01$ ), and workability ( $r = 0.30, p < .01$ ). Whereas, in Pakistani sample, WLB was found positively associated with work engagement ( $r = 0.18, p < .01$ ), task performance ( $r = 0.48, p < .01$ ), career satisfaction ( $r = 0.41, p < .01$ ), and workability ( $r = 0.23, p < .01$ ), but it was insignificant for employability.

**Table 1: M, Std. Dev, and Correlations of all variables in Dutch and Pakistani samples**

	M	Sd	Gender	Age	WE	Emp	TP	CMP	LP	CS	WLB
Dutch Sample = 360											
Age	33.19	10.20	-.12*								
WE	3.74	1.01	-.10*	.11*							
Emp	3.56	0.84	-.13**	-.32**	.31**						
TP	4.45	0.74	-0.02	0.03	.34**	.34**					
CMP	2.13	1.07	-0.10	0.00	.48**	.21**	-.17**				
LP	2.35	0.87	-.13*	-0.02	.44**	.30**	-0.10	.85**			
CS	3.50	0.85	-0.04	.11*	.71**	.32**	.40**	.43**	.41**		
WLB	2.95	0.69	-.11*	.15**	.62**	.30**	.44**	.27**	.20**	.76**	
WA	8.16	1.59	-0.03	.18**	.31**	.18**	.35**	0.02	0.08	.30**	.30**
Pakistani Sample = 362											
age	35.01	7.58	-.29**								
WE	2.26	0.76	-0.05	0.01							
Emp	2.84	0.77	0.07	0.03	.21**						
TP	3.15	0.80	-0.10	-0.08	.23**	0.01					
CMP	2.86	0.97	0.03	-.17**	.34**	.30**	.31**				
LP	2.50	0.53	.12*	-0.10	.23**	.19**	.18**	.38**			
CS	3.15	0.63	0.04	-.13*	.22**	.21**	.43**	.38**	.29**		
WLB	2.65	0.62	-0.06	-.17**	.18**	0.03	.48**	.32**	.23**	.41**	
WA	7.59	2.03	-0.02	0.06	.28**	.19**	.32**	.30**	.14**	.26**	.23**

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

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

WE=Work engagement; Emp=Employability; TP=Task Performance; CMP=Career management practices; LP= Learning practices; CS=Career Satisfaction; WLB=Work life balance, WA=Work ability

### Measurement Invariance/Multigroup CFA

First, we used multigroup analysis procedures suggested by [Byrne \(2013\)](#) to analyze the measurement invariance in both samples. Measurement invariance was examined to ensure that differences in the fit indices of measurement and structural models in both samples were not due to any measurement inadequacy. Both samples were nested using AMOS procedures for configural and factorial invariances. In the full measurement model, two items, one from employability, and one from task performance, were found non-invariant. After constraining these two items equal across groups, partial invariance was achieved as the difference in the comparative fit index ( $\Delta CFI$ ) was .007, which is less than the cut-off value, i.e.,  $\Delta CFI < .01$  ([Cheung & Rensvold, 2002](#)).

## Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Next, we performed confirmatory factor analysis to evaluate the fitness of the full measurement model. Hypothesized model showed poor fit with the data. Several items from CDI showed cross-loadings or loading less than 0.5, so those items were removed. In the accepted model two dimensions of CDI were retained i.e. 4 items for learning practices (LP), and 3 items for career management practices (CMP). These modifications resulted in a good model fit, CFI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.06, TLI = 0.92.

## Hypotheses Testing

H1 was tested using a structural model with direct paths from Work-life balance to Career Satisfaction, Employability, Task Performance, Work Engagement, and Workability. H2a and H2b were tested using indirect paths from CMP and LP. The indirect relationship between LP and Task Performance was insignificant for either group, so it was eliminated. For testing Hypothesis H3, paths were drawn from the interaction term of age and WLB to CMP and LP. The path from the interaction term to CMP was eliminated due to both groups' lack of statistical significance. [Figure 2](#) depicts the fit statistics for the accepted structural model: CFI = 0.92, RMSEA = 0.04, and TLI = 0.90. [Table 2](#) displays the difference between the hypothesized and accepted models' fit indices.

## Direct Effects of WLB on Indicators of Sustainable Career

According to H1, WLB is positively related to all indicators of a sustainable career. We found support for hypothesis H1 in both samples. In Pakistani employees, we found positive effects of WLB on Career Satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.25$ ,  $p < .001$ ), Task Performance ( $\beta = 0.41$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and workability ( $\beta = 0.17$ ,  $p < .005$ ). At the same time, the effects on Employability and Work Engagement were insignificant. For Dutch employees, all these effects were found to be stronger. Effects of WLB were significant on all indicators of sustainable careers, i.e., Career Satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.70$ ,  $p < .001$ ), Task Performance ( $\beta = 0.52$ ,  $p < .001$ ), Employability ( $\beta = 0.28$ ,  $p < .001$ ), Workability ( $\beta = 0.40$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and Work Engagement ( $\beta = 0.55$ ,  $p < .001$ ). [Table 3](#) summarizes all regression effects.

## Mediation Effects of CDI

In line with our expectations about mediation, we found support for H2a. In Pakistani employees, CMP positively mediated between WLB and all indicators of sustainable careers significantly, workability ( $\beta = 0.24$ ,  $p < .01$ ), Work Engagement ( $\beta = 0.09$ ,  $p < .01$ ), employability ( $\beta = 0.10$ ,  $p < .01$ ), Task Performance ( $\beta = 0.06$ ,  $p < .01$ ), Career Satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.05$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In the Dutch employees, there was significant negative mediation for workability ( $\beta = -0.18$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and Task Performance ( $\beta = -0.08$ ,  $p < .01$ ), whereas other three mediations were found insignificant.

We found partial support for H2b from our data. In the Pakistani sample, none of the mediation of LP was significant. However, In the Dutch sample, except for performance, all partial mediations of LP were significant, i.e., for Career Satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.055$ ,  $p < .01$ ), employability ( $\beta = 0.083$ ,  $p < .01$ ), Work Engagement ( $\beta = 0.061$ ,  $p < .05$ ), workability ( $\beta = 0.113$ ,  $p < .01$ ). All mediation effects in both groups are summarized in Table 4.

### Moderating Effect of Age

H3a predicted that the relationship between WLB and CMP is stronger for younger and older employees in both samples. The moderating effect of age was found insignificant in both groups. Hence, the hypothesis was rejected, and the path was removed in the final model.

H3b predicted that the relationship between WLB and LP is stronger for younger and older employees in both samples. We found partial support for this hypothesis, as in the Pakistani sample, age negatively moderated this relationship ( $\beta = -0.20$ ,  $p < .01$ ), whereas in the Dutch sample, this moderation was insignificant ( $\beta = -0.01$ ,  $p = 0.706$ ).

**Table 2. Fit Indices of Hypothesized and Accepted Structural Model**

	CMIN/DF	CFI	TLI	RMSEA
Hypothesized model	2.59	0.89	0.87	0.05
Accepted Model	2.20	0.92	0.90	0.04

**Table 3. Standardized Regression Estimates**

	Dutch Sample	Pakistani sample
WLB->CS	.69**	.25**
WLB->TP	.52**	.42**
WLB->Emp	.28**	-.07
WLB->Workability	.39**	.17**
WLB->WES	.55**	.08

\*. significant at the 0.05 level.

\*\* . significant at the 0.01 level.

WE=Work engagement; Emp=Employability; TP=Task Performance; CS=Career Satisfaction; WLB=Work life balance, WA=Work ability

**Table 4. Mediation and Moderation Effects in Accepted Model**

<b>Mediations</b>	<b>Dutch Sample</b>	<b>Pakistani Sample</b>
WLB->LP->CS	.05**	Insignificant
WLB-> LP ->Emp	.08**	Insignificant
WLB-> LP ->WES	.06*	Insignificant
WLB-> LP ->Workability	.11**	Insignificant
WLB->CMP->Workability	-.18**	.24**
WLB-> CMP ->WES	Insignificant	.09**
WLB-> CMP ->Emp	Insignificant	.10**
WLB-> CMP ->TP	-.08**	.06**
WLB-> CMP ->CS	Insignificant	.05**
Age x WLB -> LP	Insignificant	-.20**

\*. significant at the 0.05 level.

\*\* . significant at the 0.01 level.

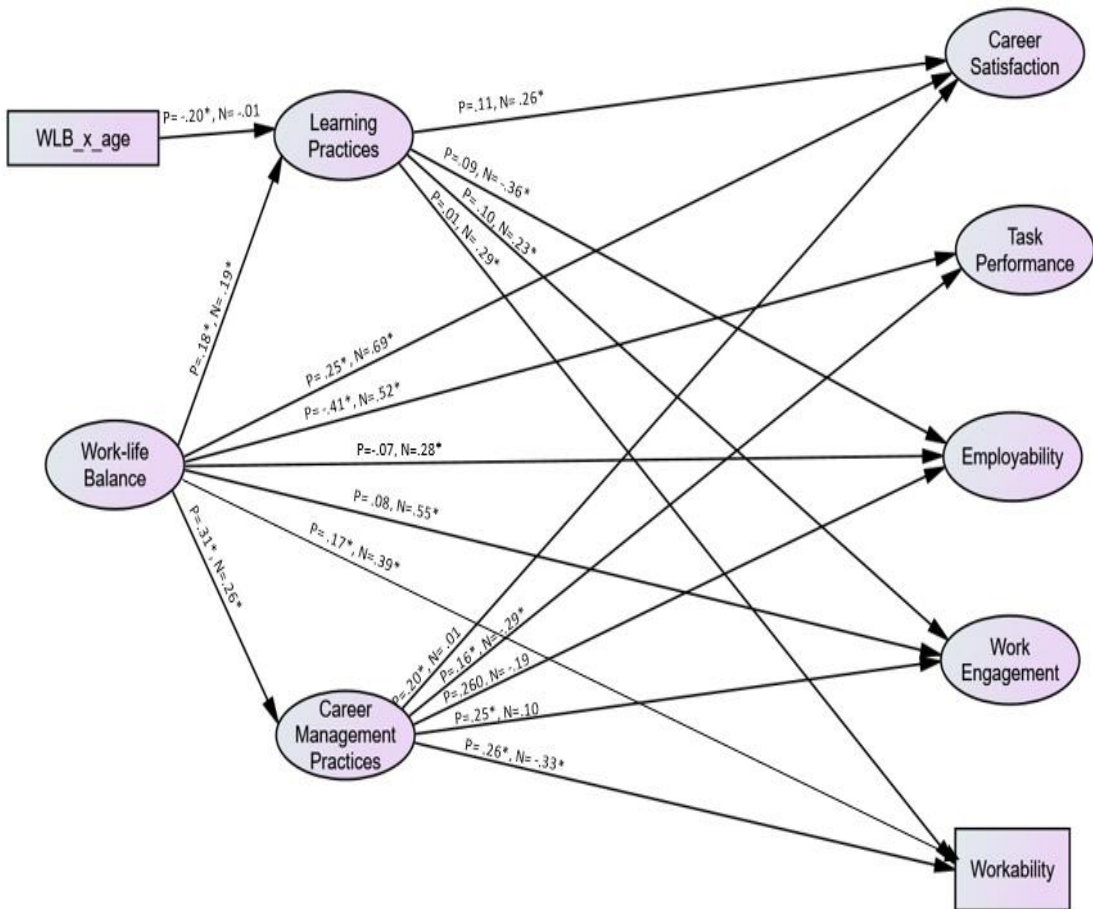
WE=Work engagement; Emp=Employability; TP=Task Performance; CMP=Career management practices; LP= Learning practices; CS=Career Satisfaction; WLB=Work life balance, WA=Work ability

### **Difference between Dutch and Pakistani employees**

We were also interested in knowing the difference in both samples concerning all hypotheses. Regarding H1, group comparison was performed using an Amos estimand that compared the regression weights, standard errors, and confidence intervals. There was a significant difference in effects on career satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.55, p < .01$ ), employability ( $\beta = 0.42, p < .01$ ), and Work Engagement ( $\beta = 0.69, p < .01$ ), whereas the effect on Task Performance and Workability was not found significantly different between both groups.

As far as the difference in mediation effect was concerned (regarding H2), the group comparison revealed the following results: The mediating effect of CMP between Work-life balance and different measures of happiness, health, and productivity was significantly different among Dutch and Pakistani employees; employability ( $\beta = 0.16, p < .01$ ), workability ( $\beta = 0.42, p < .01$ ), task performance ( $\beta = 0.14, p < .01$ ). Whereas for Work Engagement and Career Satisfaction, there was no significant difference in mediation effect. On the other hand, the mediating effect of LP was not significantly different among both groups.

Age had no moderating effect (regarding H3) among Dutch employees, but it negatively moderated the relationship between WLB and LP among Pakistani employees ( $\beta = -0.14, p < .01$ ).



**Figure 2.** Accepted Model- Standardized estimates: P = Pakistani sample, N = Dutch Sample, \* p < .05

## DISCUSSION

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between WLB and indicators of sustainable careers (SC) in two diverse cultures: the Netherlands and Pakistan. We also investigated the mediating effects of CDI between WLB and indicators of SC and the moderating effect of age between WLB and CDI. We found support for part of our hypothesized moderated mediation model.

First, our results indicate that WLB is associated more positively with indicators of SC for Dutch employees than for Pakistani employees. According to prior research (Haar et al., 2014), WLB is more positively associated with job- and life-related outcomes in individualistic cultures (the Netherlands) than in collectivist cultures (Pakistan). Having WLB is important for all the indicators of SC included in this study for Dutch employees. Their happiness (i.e., career satisfaction, engagement at work), health (i.e.,

workability), and productivity (i.e., employability, performance) are all sensitive to their WLB experience. In contrast, for Pakistani employees, WLB is important for their health but has a weak correlation with their happiness and productivity perceptions. Although it is well-established that WLB is important for the productivity and well-being of employees worldwide (Lyness & Judiesch, 2014), its significance varies across cultural contexts (Haar et al., 2014). In collectivist cultures, WLB may be less meaningful because employees view their work as a means to support and advance their families; conflict between these two is viewed as inevitable and less harmful (Lewis & Beauregard, 2018; Lu et al., 2010; Spector et al., 2007). Therefore, WLB may be less significant for the career sustainability of Pakistani employees than for Dutch employees.

Second, we anticipated that participation in CDI (i.e., LP and CMP) would mediate between WLB and SC indicators in both samples. We obtained mixed results. In this model, only CMP was a partial mediator for all SC indicators in the Pakistani sample. In the Dutch sample, LP acted as a positive partial mediator for all SC indicators, whereas CMP acted as a negative partial mediator for two SC indicators and had no effect on the other three.

The partial mediation of CMP in the Pakistani sample suggests that with improved WLB, employees become more future-oriented and participate in career management activities available in the work environment; this positively affects indicators of SC. The partial mediation of LP in the Dutch sample suggests that employee satisfaction with WLB increases their participation in learning activities; they feel more comfortable enhancing their competencies for their current jobs, which positively affects SC indicators. These findings are consistent with the theory that greater exposure to WLB motivates employees to participate in activities that enhance their career development (De Hauw & Greenhaus, 2014; Young, 2009). Nonetheless, these results indicate differences in the mediation mechanisms between the two contexts, which can be attributed to cultural differences in how individuals perceive their WLB and its effects on their work-related outcomes (Haar et al., 2014). This is also demonstrated by the negative partial relationship between CMP and workability and performance in the Dutch sample. This unexpected result may result from the negative correlation between CMP and performance/workability in the Dutch sample. Possible explanations include the existence of a reciprocal relationship between performance/workability and CMP; the perception of high performance/workability may discourage employees from engaging in career development activities.

In this study, we found only partial support for the moderating effect of age. Only in the Pakistani sample was the positive effect of WLB on LP participation diminished among older individuals. This indicates that as employees age, the effect of WLB on their desire for competency development decreases. Aside from this, there is no indication that age



moderates the relationship between WLB and CMP participation in either sample. Previous research has yielded mixed and inconclusive results regarding the effect of age on employee participation in developmental activities (Raemdonck et al., 2015). While several studies suggest that employee participation in developmental activities declines with age (Gupta, Govindarajan, & Malhotra, 1999; Van Der Heijden et al., 2009), other research suggests the opposite (Berg & Chyung, 2008; Kyndt, Dochy, & Nijs, 2009). Some research suggests that age has no effect (Schulz & Roßnagel, 2010). This inconclusiveness could be attributable to conceptual limitations of chronological age (Raemdonck et al., 2015). Therefore, we propose that using subjective age conceptualizations such as organizational age, functional age, or life-span age may provide greater insight into the effects of aging on career sustainability. These subjective conceptualizations of aging consider additional factors, such as work experience, life roles, and health (Cleveland & Shore, 1992). Using these conceptualizations may eliminate inconsistencies and improve comprehension of the role of age in the dynamics of sustainable careers.

### **Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

Our study has some limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, it was impossible to establish causality because we employed a cross-sectional design. Future studies should employ longitudinal research designs better to understand the causal relationship between WLB and career sustainability. Second, the results of our study indicate the importance of giving more attention to cultural context. Conducting more in-depth studies using qualitative methods or conducting quantitative research using more cultural variables may contribute towards an adequate understanding of cultural issues. Third, Future research may focus on samples from specific professions across nations to better understand career sustainability concerns. Fourth, we were interested in WLB as an overall evaluation of an individual's work and life roles; future research may concentrate on objective measures of WLB, such as weekly work hours, spouse contribution to income, family size, etc., to gain a more objective understanding of career sustainability issues. Fifth, we could only obtain partial evidence indicating that the relationship between WLB and CDI changes with age. Future research should employ various age conceptualizations to determine how aging affects the viability of careers. Le Blanc, Van der Heijden, and Van Vuuren (2017) shed light on how different age conceptualizations are related to the sustainability of careers. Using different age conceptualizations may improve comprehension of the relationship between aging and the viability of careers.

### **Implications for practice**

Despite these limitations, our research has implications for organizations in sustaining their employees' careers. Organizations must invest in providing WLB to their employees, as it is essential to the longevity of their careers. It helps improve their

employees' health, productivity, and happiness. It is even more crucial in individualistic cultures, where employees are more sensitive to their work-life balance. Individuals should also take responsibility for their careers and invest in their WLBs, as this helps to ensure the longevity of their careers. The sacrifice of a work-related opportunity for the sake of WLB may be beneficial in the long run, as WLB helps individuals maintain their health, productivity, and happiness.

## CONCLUSION

By understanding the effects of WLB on multiple indicators of sustainable careers, we have contributed to the field of sustainable careers. This study highlights the importance of WLB in sustaining the careers of employees in the diverse cultures of the Netherlands and Pakistan. In the individualistic culture of the Netherlands, WLB is emphasized more because the career sustainability of employees is more dependent on their perception of WLB. Our findings have implications for researchers, HR professionals, and individuals who wish to build sustainable careers.

## Data Availability

The data used for this study, measurement scales, details about removed items, and result outputs are available upon reasonable request from the authors.

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