

Career Orientation, Work Engagement, and Childfree Preferences Among Generation Z Employees: The Mediating Role of Work-Life Balance

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Abstract: Changing workforce expectations and career priorities among Generation Z have increased attention toward how work-related experiences relate to childfree preferences. This study examined the role of work-life balance in mediating the effects of career orientation and work engagement on childfree preferences among Generation Z. The increasing tendency of younger generations to reconsider traditional family expectations highlights the importance of understanding work-related factors associated with reproductive preferences. This study employed a quantitative explanatory approach using a cross-sectional survey design with 77 Generation Z respondents selected through purposive sampling. Data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The findings showed that career orientation had a significant positive effect on childfree preferences, whereas work engagement had a significant negative effect. Work engagement also significantly influenced work-life balance, while career orientation did not significantly affect work-life balance. Work-life balance showed no significant effect on childfree preferences and did not mediate the relationships among variables. These findings suggest that childfree preferences among Generation Z are more directly associated with career orientation and work engagement than with work-life balance.

Keywords: *Childfree preferences, Career orientation, Work engagement, Work-life balance, Generation Z*

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INTRODUCTION

The choice of not having children appears more and more frequently in discussions about changes in family, adult life, and reproductive decisions in various societies. The decline in global fertility rates has gone hand in hand with the increasing tendency of voluntary childlessness in the reproductive age group in various regions of the world (Sharif-Nia et al., 2024). Changes in social values are also related to the emergence of forms of women's life experiences outside of the role of motherhood (Carbayo-Abengózar, 2025). The decision to have children is no longer understood as a universally lived stage of life, but is influenced by various personal preferences in long-term life planning. Individual autonomy, freedom to make life choices, and self-fulfillment emerge as considerations in the decision-making process related to family and reproduction (Szalma et al., 2025).

Acceptance of childfree options shows variations in various social and cultural contexts. A number of pronatalist oriented societies still associate the presence of children with women's identity, marital life, and individual reproductive roles. People in Pakistan view the presence of children as an inherent part of a woman's married life and identity (Slamat et al., 2026). A similar context is also found in Israeli and Turkish societies which still associate women with the role of motherhood and motherhood as a symbolic identity of women (Makhoul-Khoury et al., 2026; Uğur et al., 2026). The difference in direction of the findings appeared in a study in Poland which showed that 14.89% of respondents did not have children and did not plan to have children in the future. Childfree options develop in social contexts with different reproductive values in each society (Ciesielski & Bakiera, 2024).

Changes in life values in the productive age group are not only related to family and reproductive decisions, but also to the way individuals interpret work and the direction of career paths. Modern career patterns show a shift from the traditional organization-centric career model to one that is more flexible, dynamic, and places the individual at the center of career management (Dong et al., 2026). Career orientation refers to an individual's preference for opportunities, situations, and professional paths that are the basis for career decision-making. Career orientation also includes professional goals, mobility, work priorities, and the direction of a long-term career journey that shape the way individuals define their professional life (Abessolo et al., 2021; Doden et al., 2023). The modern career perspective also places individuals as active actors in developing skills, building professional networks, and managing personal resources that support work experience (Saeed et al., 2023).

Changes in the modern work environment are placing individual involvement in work as an increasingly considered part of the work experience. Organizations not only consider work performance, but also pay attention to individual attachment to work as it relates to well-being, commitment, and work continuity (Jin et al., 2026; Nakagawa et al., 2025). Previous research has also shown a link between career orientation and work engagement that places career orientation as part of an individual's work experience within an organization (Dzimbiri & Molefi, 2022). Work engagement describes a positive psychological condition in the form of a satisfactory working state and is characterized by vigour, dedication, and absorption in the perspective of Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) (Kool et al., 2026).

An individual's involvement with work is not only related to work experience in an organizational environment, but also to life outside of work. The development of digital technology and changes in work patterns show that the boundaries between work and personal life are becoming increasingly dynamic, especially when work activities are no longer tied to fixed working space and time (Gnugesser et al., 2026). Work-life balance refers to the balance of individuals in carrying out various roles and responsibilities of work and personal life through time management, role involvement, and life experiences that run simultaneously (Kamaruddin, 2025). A work environment that supports flexibility and a work-life balance has been shown to be associated with reduced work–family conflict and improved individual well-being (Balushi & Jais, 2026). Strategies that support work-family balance are also related to the individual's ability to realize the plan to have children along with the sustainability of work activities (Zhang & Emery, 2023). The relationship between work and personal life is not only related to daily work experience, but also relates to individual decisions in family life. Changes in work

patterns, the development of telework, and changes in family structure indicate that the boundaries between professional and personal life are becoming increasingly complex and can cause tension in various groups of workers (Fontaine et al., 2025). Previous research has also shown that work experience does not stop at the work environment, but can affect personal life through subjective well-being, life satisfaction, and the way individuals view their living conditions (Vignoli et al., 2020). Other findings suggest that conflicts between work and family life demands, unstable work, and difficulty maintaining work-life balance are related to a decrease in the intention to have children in the reproductive age group (Liu et al., 2026).

Previous research has linked work-life balance to various aspects of individual work experience and decisions. Work-life balance has been positioned as a moderator in the relationship between work attributes and work engagement (Kibambila, 2026). Other research places work-life balance as a mediator in the relationship between organizational factors and job satisfaction (Joshi & Kumar, 2024). Other research places work-life balance as a mediator in the relationship between organizational factors and job satisfaction (X. Wang et al., 2026). Personal, social, and career aspiration factors have also been linked to the tendency to voluntary childlessness (Rezaei et al., 2026). However, previous studies have largely examined career orientation, work engagement, and work-life balance separately in relation to work experiences, personal well-being, and family-related decisions. Limited research has integrated these three constructs into a single framework for explaining childfree preferences among Generation Z employees.

This study addresses this gap by integrating career orientation, work engagement, and work-life balance into a single model to examine their direct and indirect relationships with childfree preferences among Generation Z employees. The integrated framework extends the discussion of childfree preferences by incorporating employees' work-related orientations and experiences alongside work-life balance as a potential mediating mechanism. This study therefore analyzes whether career orientation and work engagement are associated with childfree preferences directly and indirectly through work-life balance.

RESEARCH METHODS

Method Design

This study uses an explanatory quantitative approach with a cross-sectional design through a survey method. Data collection was carried out once on Generation Z respondents to test the relationships between variables in the research model. Participants were selected using purposive sampling techniques based on predetermined criteria. Respondents are Generation Z individuals born in the range of 1997–2012 and have work experience relevant to the research construct, such as full-time workers, part-time workers, freelancers, interns, or individuals who have income-generating work activities (Espejo et al., 2025). Data is collected through online surveys using Google Forms.

The number of research samples was determined using G*Power software version 3.1 through a priori power analysis procedures. The analysis was carried out using F tests on the menu Linear Multiple Regression: Fixed Model, R^2 Deviation from Zero by considering the size of the medium effect ($f^2 = 0.15$), the level of significance ($\alpha = 0.05$), statistical power ($1-\beta = 0.80$), and the number of predictors as many as three variables

(Faul et al., 2009). The G*Power analysis indicated a minimum required sample size of 77 participants.

Data analysis was carried out using Partial Least Squares–Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) through SmartPLS software. The PLS-SEM method is used because it is suitable for testing predictive models, complex relationships, and models with intervariable mediating effects (Dash & Paul, 2021). PLS-SEM can also be used on relatively small sample sizes and does not demand strict normal data distribution assumptions. The analysis is carried out through two stages, namely the evaluation of the measurement model and the evaluation of the structural model. The evaluation stage of the measurement model aims to assess the quality of the instrument through testing the validity and reliability of the construct. The next stage is a structural model evaluation to test the relationship between variables in the research model and identify direct and indirect influences through the bootstrapping procedure (Hair et al., 2021).

Measurements

The study employed self-report questionnaires to measure all study variables. The instruments were adapted from established scales and administered using response formats appropriate to each construct. All instruments were translated and adapted into Indonesian to ensure contextual suitability and clarity of the questionnaire items.

Career orientation was measured using an instrument adapted from Bravo et al. consisting of 25 items across five dimensions, including five entrepreneurial creativity items, five security items, five lifestyle items, five managerial competence items, and five technical/functional competence items. The instrument measured individual preferences regarding career goals, work values, and long-term professional orientation. Responses were measured using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 for strongly disagree, 2 for disagree, 3 for slightly disagree, 4 for neutral, 5 for slightly agree, 6 for agree, and 7 for strongly agree (Bravo et al., 2017).

Work engagement was measured using the *Utrecht Work Engagement Scale* (UWES-9) developed by Schaufeli et al., consisting of nine items across three dimensions, including three vigor items, three dedication items, and three absorption items. The scale assessed positive psychological engagement and involvement in work activities. Responses were measured using a seven-point frequency scale ranging from 1 for never, 2 for almost never, 3 for rarely, 4 for sometimes, 5 for often, 6 for very often, and 7 for always (Schaufeli et al., 2006).

Work-life balance was measured using the instrument developed by Fisher, Bulger, and Smith consisting of 14 items across four dimensions, including five Work Interference with Personal Life items, five Personal Life Interference with Work items, two Work Enhancement of Personal Life items, and two Personal Life Enhancement of Work items. The instrument assessed reciprocal interference and enhancement between work and personal life domains. Responses were measured using a five-point frequency scale ranging from 1 for not at all, 2 for rarely, 3 for sometimes, 4 for often, and 5 for almost all of the time (Fisher et al., 2009).

Childfree preferences were measured using six items adapted and synthesized from the *International Social Survey Programme* (ISSP) and *European Social Survey* (ESS). Three items were adapted from ISSP to assess attitudes toward family and childbearing values, while three additional items were adapted from ESS to capture individual perspectives regarding life choices and reproductive preferences. The instrument assessed individual acceptance and preferences regarding childfree choices and reproductive decisions.

Responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 for strongly disagree, 2 for disagree, 3 for neutral, 4 for agree, and 5 for strongly agree (Billari et al., 2016; ISSP, 1988).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondent Characteristics

The demographic characteristics of the respondents were examined to provide an overview of the participants involved in the study. The characteristics include age, gender, education, occupation, and marital status. The distribution of respondents based on these characteristics is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Respondent Characteristics

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Age	17–20 years	7	9.09
	21–25 years	39	50.65
	26–29 years	31	40.26
Gender	Male	11	14.29
	Female	66	85.71
Education	High School/Vocational School	18	23.38
	Bachelor's Degree	59	76.62
Occupation	Student	12	15.58
	Worker	50	64.94
	Homemaker/Other	15	19.48
Marital Status	Unmarried	35	45.45
	Married	42	54.55
Total		77	100.00

Table 1 shows that the largest proportion of respondents was aged 21–25 years, comprising 39 respondents (50.65%), followed by respondents aged 26–29 years with 31 respondents (40.26%), while respondents aged 17–20 years accounted for 7 respondents (9.09%). In terms of gender, the majority of respondents were female, with 66 respondents (85.71%), while male respondents accounted for 11 respondents (14.29%). Regarding education, most respondents held a Bachelor's Degree, representing 59 respondents (76.62%), while 18 respondents (23.38%) had a high school or vocational school education. Based on occupation, workers constituted the largest group with 50 respondents (64.94%), followed by homemakers/other occupations with 15 respondents (19.48%) and students with 12 respondents (15.58%). Regarding marital status, 42 respondents (54.55%) were married, while 35 respondents (45.45%) were unmarried. Overall, the respondent characteristics indicate that the sample consisted predominantly of women aged 21–25 years, with a Bachelor's Degree and employment status as workers.

Measurement Model Assessment

The measurement model assessment was conducted to evaluate the validity and reliability of the constructs. Convergent validity was assessed using Average Variance Extracted (AVE), while construct reliability was examined using Composite Reliability (ρ_c) and Cronbach's Alpha. Discriminant validity was evaluated using the Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio (HTMT) criterion.

Table 2. Construct Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Career Orientation	0.928	0.939	0.582
Work Engagement	0.863	0.906	0.786

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Work-Life Balance	0.894	0.918	0.641
Childfree Preferences	0.879	0.921	0.703

As shown in Table 1, all constructs met the recommended threshold values. AVE values ranged from 0.582 to 0.786. Composite Reliability values ranged from 0.906 to 0.939, while Cronbach's Alpha values ranged from 0.863 to 0.928. These findings indicate satisfactory internal consistency and convergent validity across all constructs.

Table 3. Discriminant Validity Assessment Using HTMT

Constructs	CO	WE	WLB	CP
Career Orientation	—			
Work Engagement	0.111	—		
Work-Life Balance	0.736	0.428	—	
Childfree Preferences	0.352	0.294	0.215	—

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio (HTMT). As shown in Table 2, HTMT values ranged from 0.111 to 0.736. These findings indicate satisfactory discriminant validity and confirm that all constructs were empirically distinct from one another.

Structural Model Assessment

The structural model assessment was conducted to examine the predictive relationships among constructs in the proposed model. The evaluation involved structural path analysis through bootstrapping procedures to assess the significance of direct relationships among variables.

Table 4. Coefficient of Determination (R^2)

Endogenous Construct	R^2	Adjusted R^2
Childfree Preferences	0.244	0.223
Work-Life Balance	0.200	0.179

Table 3 presents the coefficient of determination values for endogenous constructs. The results showed that Career Orientation, Work Engagement, and Work-Life Balance explained 24.4% of the variance in Childfree Preferences. In addition, Career Orientation and Work Engagement explained 20.0% of the variance in Work-Life Balance. These findings suggest that the proposed model exhibited an acceptable level of explanatory capability. The structural relationships among constructs are further illustrated in Figure 1.

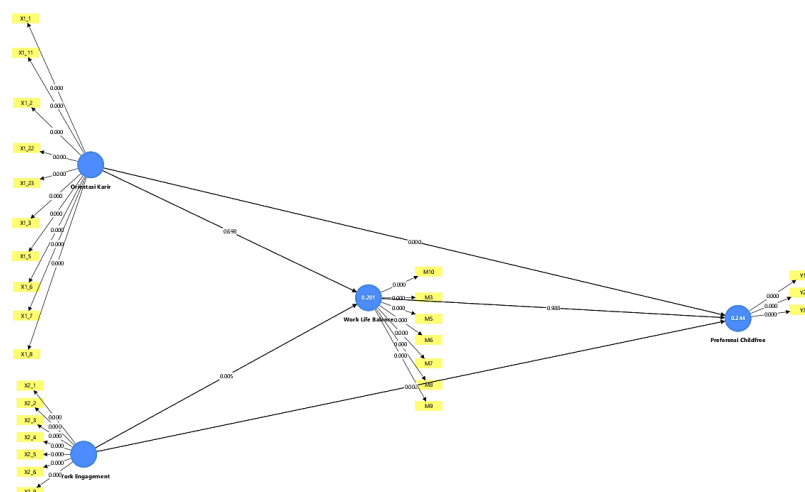


Figure 1. Structural Model Results

Figure 1 illustrates the structural model results, including the relationships among Career Orientation, Work Engagement, Work-Life Balance, and Childfree Preferences, as well as the explanatory power of endogenous constructs represented by R^2 values.

Table 5. Bootstrapping Results for Direct Effects

Relationship	Original Sample (β)	T Statistics	P Values
Career Orientation → Childfree Preferences	0.648	6.726	0.000
Career Orientation → Work-Life Balance	0.055	0.388	0.698
Work Engagement → Childfree Preferences	-0.575	3.156	0.002
Work Engagement → Work-Life Balance	0.409	2.813	0.005
Work-Life Balance → Childfree Preferences	-0.002	0.015	0.988

Table 4 presents the bootstrapping results of direct effects among constructs. Career Orientation showed a significant positive effect on Childfree Preferences ($\beta = 0.648$, $p < 0.001$). Work Engagement demonstrated a significant negative effect on Childfree Preferences ($\beta = -0.575$, $p = 0.002$) and a significant positive effect on Work-Life Balance ($\beta = 0.409$, $p = 0.005$). Career Orientation did not significantly predict Work-Life Balance ($\beta = 0.055$, $p = 0.698$), while Work-Life Balance showed no significant effect on Childfree Preferences ($\beta = -0.002$, $p = 0.988$). Overall, three direct relationships were statistically significant, whereas two relationships did not reach statistical significance.

Mediation Analysis

Mediation analysis was conducted to examine the indirect effects of Career Orientation and Work Engagement on Childfree Preferences through Work-Life Balance.

Table 6. Specific Indirect Effects

Indirect Relationship	Original Sample (β)	T Statistics	P Values
Career Orientation → Work-Life Balance → Childfree Preferences	-0.000	0.005	0.996
Work Engagement → Work-Life Balance → Childfree Preferences	-0.001	0.013	0.990

Table 5 presents the specific indirect effects among constructs. The indirect effect of Career Orientation on Childfree Preferences through Work-Life Balance was not statistically significant ($\beta = -0.000$, $p = 0.996$). Similarly, the indirect effect of Work Engagement on Childfree Preferences through Work-Life Balance was also not significant ($\beta = -0.001$, $p = 0.990$). These findings indicate that Work-Life Balance did not mediate the relationships between Career Orientation and Childfree Preferences or between Work Engagement and Childfree Preferences.

Discussion

Career orientation and work engagement were associated with childfree preferences among Generation Z, while work engagement was also positively related to work-life balance. However, work-life balance did not demonstrate a significant role in explaining childfree preferences or mediating the relationships examined in this study. Contemporary work environments have experienced substantial changes characterized by flexible work arrangements and shifting labour patterns (Vadavi & Sharmiladevi, 2024). Accelerated digitalisation, uncertainty, and rapidly changing work environments have altered employee expectations and increasingly require individuals to adapt to changing work conditions and career demands (Kolot et al., 2022).

Generation Z has been recognized as a workforce cohort with distinct work values and workplace expectations compared to previous generations. Younger employees tend

to demonstrate different career preferences and work priorities that shape how they perceive professional experiences and long-term life goals (Mabaso, 2025). Previous studies also reported that Generation Z increasingly values flexibility, meaningful work, and work-life balance as essential aspects of work experiences (Siahaan et al., 2026). Intrinsic work values and alignment between personal priorities and work experiences were also identified as important considerations among younger employees (Davidsen et al., 2025). These characteristics may influence how younger employees construct long-term priorities and evaluate future life trajectories, including decisions related to career and personal life domains.

The positive relationship between career orientation and childfree preferences suggests that individuals with stronger career orientation may place greater emphasis on professional aspirations and long-term career development. Career-related priorities may extend beyond organisational contexts and shape broader life planning, including family-related decisions. Previous studies reported that individuals frequently consider family planning goals when making career and specialty choices, indicating that career pathways and personal life planning are often interconnected rather than independent domains (Dason et al., 2024). Educational and career aspirations have also been associated with delayed childbearing intentions among younger populations, particularly among individuals with strong academic and professional goals (Okine et al., 2023). Similar findings further suggest that career advancement and educational attainment may increase the opportunity cost of childbearing and influence fertility-related decisions and future family planning considerations (Mei et al., 2025; J. Wang et al., 2026).

The negative relationship between work engagement and childfree preferences suggests that individuals with higher levels of work engagement tended to report lower childfree preferences. Work engagement represents a positive and fulfilling work-related state characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Villarroel-Núñez et al., 2026). Such experiences have been associated with positive outcomes including psychological well-being, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment. Within the Job Demands–Resources framework, employee engagement emerges through the availability of resources that support motivational processes and employee well-being (Boxall et al., 2026). Findings from previous studies further suggest that employee engagement reflects not only the availability of work resources but also interactions among personal values, environmental fit, and individual evaluations of work experiences. Employees with high engagement tend to actively invest physical, emotional, and cognitive energy into their work roles and seek alignment between work conditions and personal aspirations (Keane et al., 2024). Supportive organizational contexts, communication quality, and meaningful work experiences have also been associated with stronger employee engagement and greater attachment toward work activities and organizational goals (Xu et al., 2024).

The findings showed that work-life balance did not significantly influence childfree preferences and did not mediate the relationships examined in this study. This finding suggests that work-related experiences may not always influence personal preferences through a single mechanism. Long-term personal decisions may involve broader evaluations concerning career aspirations, financial considerations, and individual life priorities in addition to work-related experiences (Felix et al., 2024; Makarentseva et al., 2025). Employment conditions and socioeconomic circumstances may further contribute to how individuals evaluate future family-related decisions (Imhanrenialena et al., 2023).

The findings of this study may also be understood within the broader context of changing workforce expectations among Generation Z. Younger employees increasingly seek work experiences that support self-development, meaningfulness, and alignment between organizational environments and personal values (Sukmawati et al., 2025). Distinct career expectations and preferences among Generation Z may create implications for workforce management and employee engagement strategies (Kozová et al., 2025). Work experiences among Generation Z are increasingly evaluated not solely through performance outcomes but also through alignment with well-being and individual priorities (Siahaan et al., 2026).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined the role of work-life balance in mediating the relationships between career orientation, work engagement, and childfree preferences among Generation Z. The findings indicated that career orientation and work engagement were associated with childfree preferences, while work engagement was also positively related to work-life balance. Career orientation demonstrated a positive relationship with childfree preferences, whereas work engagement showed a negative relationship. However, work-life balance did not significantly influence childfree preferences and did not mediate the relationships examined in this study. These findings suggest that work-related experiences among Generation Z may extend beyond organizational outcomes and relate to broader personal preferences and long-term life considerations.

Organizations need to recognize the changing work values and expectations of Generation Z employees. Human resource management practices may consider developing flexible work environments, meaningful work experiences, and career development opportunities that align with employee aspirations and personal priorities. Future research is recommended to examine additional factors beyond work-life balance, including personal values, career adaptability, organizational support, and subjective well-being, to provide a broader understanding of childfree preferences and long-term life decisions among younger employees.

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