
THE MEANING OF DIGITAL BALANCE AND EMPLOYEE PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING IN THE ERA OF WORK-LIFE INTEGRATION (A Phenomenological Study Of Generation Z In Indonesian Startup Companies)

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Abstract

This study aims to reconstruct the essential meaning of Digital Boundary Management (DBM) and analyze its association with Eudaimonic Psychological Well-being (PWB) among Generation Z employees in Indonesian startup companies. The paradigm shift from Work-Life Balance (WLB) to Work-Life Integration (WLI), mediated by digital connectivity, has blurred professional and personal boundaries, giving rise to the risk of technostress.¹ Using a qualitative, interpretive phenomenological approach, this study involved in-depth interviews with Gen Z employees working in a flexible startup environment. Data analysis follows the Colaizzi Method to uncover subjective experiences and the essence of meaning.² The findings suggest that Digital Balance for Gen Z is a negotiative experience characterized by tension between individual efforts to uphold Digital Autonomy and collective pressures triggered by the internalization of the value of Digital Gotong Royong.³ The success of DBM is not measured by time separation, but by the extent to which intensive integration (WLI) can be justified by Purpose in Life and Personal Growth (Ryff's PWB dimensions).⁴ This study provides theoretical contributions by integrating cultural factors into Digital Boundary Theory and suggesting managerial implications, such as structurally supported Right to Disconnect policies, to maintain PWB in an integration-dominated work environment.

Keywords: Digital Balance, Work-Life Integration, Psychological Well-Being (PWB), Generation Z, Indonesian Startups, Phenomenology

INTRODUCTION

The modern world of work has undergone a fundamental shift, largely influenced by digitalization and the widespread adoption of flexible work models after the pandemic. This shift marks a departure from the traditional Work-Life Balance (WLB) concept, which stressed keeping work and personal life separate, towards Work-Life Integration (WLI). WLI views work as an inherent part of life, offering individuals the flexibility to seamlessly transition between professional tasks and personal responsibilities. While WLI provides valuable flexibility and autonomy, it also presents challenges, such as the blurring of boundaries between work and personal life. The constant connectivity enabled by digital devices has intensified work demands, raising concerns about digital boundary violations and work overload. In this context, Digital Boundary Management (DBM) has emerged as a crucial factor for maintaining employee well-being. If the flexibility that comes with WLI becomes a requirement for employees to be constantly available, it can severely affect job satisfaction and overall well-being.

This study focuses on Generation Z (Gen Z), who are digital natives and now represent a significant portion of the workforce, particularly in the creative and digital sectors of the startup ecosystem. Unlike previous generations, Gen Z seeks not just material rewards but also places great importance on meaningful work, well-being, and personal growth. In Indonesia, the startup environment presents a unique and stressful context. Although the country's digital ecosystem shows promise, many startups are still in the critical early stages, often struggling with the "valley of death." This situation demands high adaptability and resilience, often requiring employees to work long hours. The intensity of digital work demands, coupled with inadequate technological support, can lead to technostress, which adversely affects the mental health of Gen Z workers.

Moreover, Indonesia's work culture, influenced by values such as *Gotong Royong* (mutual cooperation) and *Rukun* (harmony), shapes the startup environment. These values encourage collaboration and a willingness to go beyond job descriptions for collective success. In the digital age, this can create informal pressure for employees to remain online and responsive, which can undermine Gen Z's efforts to maintain Digital Autonomy. This tension between personal preferences for segmentation and social expectations for over-integration can lead to challenges in managing digital boundaries effectively.

Previous research on WLI and the well-being of Gen Z in Indonesia has typically used quantitative methods to explore causal relationships between work-life balance, organizational fit, and overall well-being or job performance. However, these studies have not fully addressed the subjective experience of digital boundary management, particularly within the intense cultural context of Indonesian startups. This research aims to fill this gap by adopting a phenomenological approach to better understand Gen Z's experiences with digital boundary management in the WLI era. The study seeks to explore the meaning of Digital Balance (DBM) for Gen Z employees in Indonesian startups and how this balance influences their Eudaimonic Psychological Well-Being.

Work-Life Integration (WLI) is a response to the limitations of the traditional Work-Life Balance (WLB) model, driven by technological advances and the demand for more flexible work structures. In a WLI framework, work and personal life are not strictly separate but are instead fluid and integrated. While flexibility in work arrangements can enhance job satisfaction, it also introduces the risk of work overload when the availability of work becomes expected at all times. The success of WLI hinges on an individual's ability to manage their autonomy over work time and space, ensuring that the flexibility provided does not turn into a demand.

Digital Boundary Management (DBM) expands on the concept of work-life boundary management by addressing the unique challenges posed by the digital work environment. DBM includes strategies, both behavioral and technological, that individuals use to manage the intersection between their work and personal lives. These strategies can range from strict segmentation, such as setting availability hours or turning off notifications, to more integrated approaches where clear boundaries are not communicated, and work continues beyond regular hours. Effective Digital Balance involves managing this overlap, ensuring that the digital connectivity

between work and personal life remains manageable and does not negatively impact well-being.

Psychological well-being (PWB) is a multidimensional concept, encompassing both hedonic (pleasure and satisfaction) and eudaimonic (meaning and purpose) aspects. The PWB model by Carol Ryff outlines six dimensions: Self-Acceptance, Positive Relations with Others, Autonomy, Environmental Mastery, Purpose in Life, and Personal Growth. For Generation Z, the eudaimonic aspects of well-being—particularly Purpose in Life and Personal Growth—are especially relevant. If DBM strategies support these dimensions, they are likely to enhance Gen Z's psychological well-being. However, if excessive integration without clear purpose leads to overwork and stress, it can negatively affect their well-being, causing burnout.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design with an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach. Phenomenology was selected because it aims to understand and reconstruct the essential meanings of phenomena, particularly how individuals consciously experience Digital Equilibrium. Interpretative phenomenology, influenced by scholars like Alfred Schutz and Martin Heidegger, focuses on reconstructing participants' lifeworlds—essentially how individuals interpret and internalize reality through socialization. To maintain objectivity, the researcher employed the Epoche method, or bracketing, which involves suspending preconceived notions and biases related to Generation Z, startup culture, and Work-Life Integration (WLI). This ensures the participants' experiences dominate the research findings.

The participants were selected using purposive sampling, with the inclusion criteria being employees from Generation Z (born between 1995-2010) working full-time in Indonesian digital startup companies. These participants must actively experience flexible work models or WLI facilitated by digital technology. A typical phenomenological study includes five to ten participants to allow for deep analysis of the lived experiences of each individual. The research was conducted at a startup company based in the Greater Jakarta area.

Primary data was gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews. The interviews aimed to capture detailed descriptions of how participants manage work and non-work boundaries using digital tools. The questions focused on boundary violations, the Digital Boundary Management (DBM) strategies employed, and how these strategies impacted their well-being, life purpose, and personal growth in the WLI context. To ensure the credibility of the data, the Triangulation Method was used, which involved supplementing interview findings with behavioral observations and participant-generated documents, such as diaries regarding their digital boundary usage.

Data analysis followed the Colaizzi Method, a structured phenomenological process to distill meaning from raw narratives. The analysis involved several steps, including immersion in the data, extracting significant statements, formulating meanings, grouping themes, and compiling textual and structural descriptions. The final step involved validating the essence of the findings with participants through member checking, ensuring the credibility and authenticity of the research outcomes.

Additionally, researcher reflexivity was emphasized, with the researcher critically reflecting on potential biases to ensure accurate representation of participants' experiences.

RESULTS

The Meaning of Digital Boundary Management (DBM) as an Effort to Maintain Pseudo-Autonomy

Gen Z participants demonstrated a high level of awareness of the importance of setting digital boundaries. They consciously employed DBM segmentation tactics, such as turning off work notifications on personal devices after 5 p.m. or using calendars to clearly indicate availability.¹⁷ This is an effort to assert Digital Autonomy—the ability to regulate online behavior and maintain control over non-work time.

However, textual experience consistently reveals that these efforts are often thwarted by the startup reality characterized by disrupted deadlines and urgent requests coming in outside of working hours.¹² The autonomy perceived through WLI turns into a demand for required flexibility, which substantially weakens the sense of personal control.

This phenomenon disrupts two crucial dimensions of Ryff's PWB: Environmental Mastery (the ability to effectively manage the environment and daily activities) and Autonomy (the ability to be self-determined and independent). When individual boundaries fail to be enforced, Gen Z experiences a decreased sense of mastery over their work environment, which triggers technostress.¹ Digital Balance is thus defined as the daily struggle to reassert self-control that is often illusory due to constant operational demands.

Blurring Boundaries through Digital Mutual Cooperation Culture

One of the most significant findings revealed from participants' experiences was the role of social and cultural norms in eroding digital boundaries. Employees reported difficulty refusing requests for work or assistance from coworkers and superiors, especially during critical projects, even if the request fell outside of their work hours or job descriptions.

In the context of Indonesian startups, the collective values of Gotong Royong and Rukun (harmony) are internalized as mandatory digital availability.³ Gotong Royong as a spirit of reciprocal cooperation¹³, in an intense digital environment, translates into social pressure to over-integrate for the sake of 'team success'.³ Refusing digital requests outside of working hours is often perceived as a violation of team ethics and can threaten Rukun.

This articulation demonstrates that Gen Z's work-life boundaries in Indonesia are not only being dissolved by technology but also reinforced by powerful cultural mechanisms. The norm of digital mutual cooperation (Gotong Royong Digital) is a non-technological factor that triggers boundary violations, rendering DBM tactics of individual segmentation ineffective. Implicitly, Gen Z's positive relationships with others (PWB Ryff) are conditional on their willingness to remain digitally available.

Balance Found in Self-Growth and Meaning (Eudaimonic Alignment)

Despite facing high integration demands, participants showed tolerance for intensive work hours and blurred boundaries, as long as the work aligned with personal values and facilitated Personal Growth. Phenomenology found that Gen Z is willing to aggressively integrate their work and life if it provides Purpose in Life or results in significant skill development (e.g., becoming a sought-after content creator or UI/UX designer).

This confirms that Digital Balance is not measured by the number of hours worked or strict separation, but rather by the quality of contributions and alignment with their Eudaimonic aspirations.⁴ Participants cited Purpose in Life as a primary justification for intensive WLI. Conversely, when digital integration only serves corporate demands without any opportunity for self-development or meaning, work intensity quickly turns into a feeling of exploitation, leading to burnout and decreased performance.

The Essence of the Meaning of Digital Balance

Based on the synthesis of the themes above, the Essence of the Meaning of Digital Balance for Generation Z in Indonesian startup companies is: negotiative and contextual boundary management, the success of which is not measured by the separation of time (Balance), but from the extent to which intensive Work-Life Integration can be justified by individual autonomy (Digital Autonomy) and support self-growth (PWB Eudaimonic) amidst the pressure of the Digital Gotong Royong culture.

Table 2: Essential Summary of the Theme of Digital Balance Meaning and Implications of Ryff's PWB

Main Theme (Essence of Meaning)	Impact on DBM (Integration/Segmentation) Tactics	Psychological Well-Being Implications (PWB Ryff)	Main Tension/Contradiction
The Pseudo-Digital Autonomy	Segmentation Tactics fail due to constant Required Flexibility.	Decreasing Environmental Mastery and Autonomy.	The need for personal control vs. the demands of an always-on environment. ⁹
Digital Mutual Cooperation	Encouraging socio-culturally mandated Over-Integration.	Threatens Positive Relations with Others and triggers Technostress. ³	Collective Values (Mutual Cooperation) vs. Personal Boundary Needs.
Eudaimonic Alignment	WLI intensity is tolerated if it aligns with personal values and goals.	Strongly supports Purpose in Life and Personal Growth. ⁴	Quality of Work Experience (Meaning) vs. Quantity of Work Time.

CONCLUSION

This phenomenological study successfully reconstructs the meaning of Digital Balance as experienced by Generation Z, extending beyond traditional time-based metrics. In the context of Work-Life Integration (WLI), Digital Balance is a subjective concept that is continuously negotiated. It is influenced by two opposing forces: Gen Z's desire for Digital Autonomy and the pressures from the Digital Gotong Royong culture, which demands constant availability. The balance is achieved when WLI is aligned with Eudaimonic goals, such as self-growth and finding meaning in life. When this alignment is absent, the integration of work and personal life becomes a source of burnout rather than fulfillment.

From a theoretical perspective, this research contributes to expanding Boundary Theory and Digital Boundary Management (DBM). It highlights that the effectiveness of DBM tactics, particularly segmentation strategies, is highly dependent on the socio-cultural context. In collectivist environments like Indonesian startups, the cultural value of Gotong Royong often acts as a moderating variable, counteracting employees' individual boundary-setting efforts. Future research should consider incorporating this cultural framework to better understand why boundary violations occur despite intentional efforts to segment work and personal life.

In terms of managerial implications, startups looking to retain Gen Z talent need to adapt their human resource management strategies to support the psychological well-being (PWB) of their employees. First, structural support for collective boundaries is crucial. Given the pressures of Gotong Royong Digital, companies should implement and enforce "Right to Disconnect" policies to provide a clear separation between work and personal time. Second, retention and career development strategies should emphasize personal growth opportunities and ensure that employees' purpose in life is aligned with their work, making intensive projects worthwhile for their personal development.

However, this study has limitations, particularly its phenomenological approach, which focuses on deep, subjective experiences rather than statistical generalization. Additionally, the study's scope is limited to Generation Z within the digital startup environment. Future research could explore a cross-context comparative study between Gen Z in startups, which typically have high work integration, and Gen Z in industries with more rigid work structures, which tend to emphasize work-life segmentation. Further studies could also examine culture-based interventions, such as DBM training or digital mental health programs, aimed at alleviating the stress associated with Gotong Royong Digital. Lastly, analyzing how different leadership styles in startups moderate the impact of Gotong Royong on employee boundary violations and technostress would offer valuable insights for managing work-life boundaries in the digital age.

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