

Negotiating Work-Life Balance in the Digital Age: A Phenomenological Study of Remote and Hybrid Workers in Indonesia

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of flexible work arrangements (FWAs) has transformed work-life balance (WLB) dynamics in Indonesia's digital economy. Although previous studies have primarily emphasized quantitative outcomes, limited research has explored the lived experiences of remote and hybrid workers. This study aims to examine how Indonesian workers negotiate professional and personal boundaries within digitally mediated work environments. Using an existential-hermeneutic phenomenological approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 15 workers from the education, technology, and creative sectors and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis. The findings identified five major themes: blurred work-life boundaries, digital fatigue, flexible productivity, family interference, and coping strategies. The study reveals that WLB is a dynamic process shaped by hyper-connectivity, socio-cultural expectations, gender roles, and sandwich-generation pressures. The findings contribute to Boundary Theory and Conservation of Resources Theory by contextualizing WLB within Indonesia's collectivist culture and highlighting the importance of organizational support, including healthier digital boundaries and employee well-being policies.

Keywords: Work-Life Balance, Remote Work, Hybrid Work, Phenomenology, Digital Fatigue.

1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital work practices has accelerated the adoption of flexible work arrangements (FWAs) in Indonesia, particularly within technology, education, and creative sectors (Wardhani & Setiawan, 2024; Sunaryo et al., 2024). While remote and hybrid work systems offer greater flexibility and autonomy, they also create psychosocial challenges related to work-life balance (WLB), including excessive workload, blurred work boundaries, and digital fatigue (Widyastuti et al., 2024; Santoso et al., 2024). Continuous digital connectivity often extends work demands beyond normal working hours, increasing stress and emotional exhaustion among employees.

Theoretically, FWAs are associated with greater control over professional and personal boundaries; however, excessive flexibility may also intensify work-family conflict (Allen et al., 2013; Kossek et al., 2021). Boundary Theory and Work-Family Border Theory explain that the overlap between work and personal domains can weaken role boundaries and disrupt WLB (Ashforth et al., 2000; Clark, 2000). In Indonesia, these challenges are further influenced by collectivist values and traditional gender roles, which increase domestic and caregiving pressures, particularly among women workers (Rahayu & Firmansyah, 2024).



Although previous studies in Indonesia have examined WLB quantitatively, limited research has explored the lived experiences of remote and hybrid workers across different industries. Therefore, this study employs an existential-hermeneutic phenomenological approach to explore how Indonesian workers experience and negotiate WLB within digitally mediated work environments. Specifically, the study aims to identify the psychological, cultural, and structural factors shaping WLB and to formulate practical recommendations for organizations implementing digital work systems.

2. Literature Review

Boundary Theory and Work-Family Border Theory explain that individuals create physical, temporal, and psychological boundaries to separate work and personal life, thereby reducing interrole conflict (Ashforth et al., 2000; Clark, 2000). In remote and hybrid work environments, these boundaries become increasingly blurred because the home also functions as a workplace, and digital communication technologies extend work accessibility beyond normal working hours. Excessive boundary permeability may therefore intensify work-life conflict and reduce work-life balance (WLB).

Research on Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs) shows that flexibility can both improve and disrupt employee well-being. Allen et al. (2013) found that temporal flexibility more effectively reduces work interference with family than spatial flexibility, which often increases domestic interruptions. Similarly, Kossek et al. (2021) emphasized that a supportive organizational culture is essential for ensuring that FWAs improve WLB. In Indonesia, flexible work systems have been associated with increased productivity and job satisfaction, although they may also intensify workload and boundary-management difficulties in digitally connected environments (Wardhani & Setiawan, 2024; Pratama et al., 2025).

The psychological impact of remote work can also be explained through Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory, which argues that stress emerges when psychological and emotional resources are continuously depleted (Hobfoll, 1989). Continuous online meetings and prolonged screen exposure contribute to digital fatigue, emotional exhaustion, and declining motivation among Indonesian workers (Santoso et al., 2024). Excessive workload has similarly been shown to negatively affect WLB and increase work stress (Widyastuti et al., 2024).

Socio-cultural factors further shape WLB experiences in Indonesia. Traditional gender roles often place women in dual domestic and professional responsibilities, increasing emotional pressure and role conflict (Rahayu & Firmansyah, 2024). To manage these challenges, Indonesian workers commonly adopt both practical and spiritual coping strategies. Huda et al. (2022) highlighted the important role of religious coping in emotional regulation, while Setiawan et al. (2023) emphasized that organizational initiatives such as the Right to Disconnect (RTD) may help create healthier and more sustainable digital work environments.

3. Methods

This study employed an existential-hermeneutic phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of work-life balance (WLB) among Indonesian remote and hybrid workers. Phenomenology was chosen to understand how individuals interpret and give meaning to their experiences within digitally mediated work environments (Creswell, 2013). The study applied

the principle of epoché or bracketing to minimize researcher bias and capture authentic participant perspectives.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling and were required to have worked full-time in remote or hybrid arrangements for at least 12 months within Indonesia’s technology, education, or creative sectors. Following Creswell’s (2013) recommendation for phenomenological studies, 15 participants from diverse demographic and regional backgrounds were recruited. Data were collected through semi-structured online interviews focusing on boundary management, digital fatigue, family interference, productivity, and coping strategies. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and validated through member checking procedures.

Data analysis used Braun and Clarke’s (2006) reflexive thematic analysis, including data familiarization, coding, theme development, and interpretive reporting. To ensure trustworthiness, the study applied Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability through member checking, reflexive journaling, and methodological transparency. Participant identities were anonymized to maintain confidentiality.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Informant Profile

The sociodemographic characteristics of the 15 participants are presented in Table 1. The sample encompasses diverse geographic locations across five major Indonesian islands, representing a range of household compositions, work modalities, and professional sectors.

Table 1. Informant Profile

Code	Gender	Age	Sector	Work Model	Marital Status	Location
P01	Female	34	Education	Remote	Married (2 Children)	Yogyakarta
P02	Male	29	Technology	Remote	Single	Jakarta
P03	Male	41	Education	Hybrid	Married (3 Children)	Surabaya
P04	Female	27	Creative	Remote	Single	Sorong
P05	Female	32	Technology	Hybrid	Married (1 Child)	Bandung
P06	Male	35	Creative	Hybrid	Married (2 Children)	Jember
P07	Female	26	Creative	Remote	Single	Denpasar
P08	Male	31	Technology	Remote	Married (1 Child)	Surakarta
P09	Female	38	Education	Hybrid	Married (2 Children)	Manado
P10	Male	28	Technology	Hybrid	Single	Yogyakarta
P11	Female	25	Creative	Remote	Single	Jakarta
P12	Male	33	Education	Remote	Married (1 Child)	Malang
P13	Female	30	Technology	Remote	Married (2 Children)	Semarang
P14	Male	36	Creative	Remote	Married (3 Children)	Bali

P15 Female 29 Education Hybrid Single Pontianak

4.2. Thematic Coding Framework

Five superordinate themes were identified through reflexive thematic analysis. Table 2 presents the thematic coding structure, inclusive of sub-themes and corresponding indicators of subjective experience.

Table 2. Thematic Coding Framework

Superordinate Theme	Sub-Themes / Codes	Initial	Indicators of Subjective Experience
Theme 1: Blurred Boundaries	Extreme role integration Always-on demand Temporal ambiguity	boundary	Difficulty separating professional and personal time Psychological pressure from late-night instant messaging Extension of work hours beyond standard office norms
Theme 2: Digital Fatigue	Virtual overload Emotional exhaustion Physical health deterioration	cognitive	Saturation from consecutive video meetings Feelings of anxiety, burnout, and lost motivation Sleep disturbances, headaches, and eye strain
Theme 3: Flexible Productivity	Scheduling autonomy Commute elimination Boundary dependency	stress control	Capacity to self-regulate work rhythm Energy conservation from the absence of the traffic commute Critical requirement for strict self-discipline
Theme 4: Family Interference	Constant interruptions Domestic role conflict Sandwich generation burden	child	Noise and disruption during video conferences Pressure from traditional gender-role expectations Dual caregiving pressure for children and elderly parents
Theme 5: Coping Strategies	Problem-focused coping Spiritual/religious coping Corporate advocacy	policy	Physical demarcation of dedicated workspaces Prayer, worship, and cultural acceptance practices Demand for formal Right-to-Disconnect implementation

Theme 1: Blurred Boundaries and Hyper-Connectivity

The most dominant theme identified in this study was the blurring of boundaries between work and personal life. Consistent with Boundary Theory and Work-Family Border Theory, participants experienced difficulties maintaining physical, temporal, and psychological separation between professional and domestic roles (Ashforth et al., 2000; Clark, 2000). Remote and hybrid work arrangements transformed the home into a continuous workspace, while digital communication platforms extended work accessibility beyond formal working hours. Participants frequently described answering work messages late at night and feeling unable to fully disengage from work responsibilities. This finding supports Allen et al. (2013), who argued that excessive flexibility and permeability increase interrole conflict and weaken work-life balance.

“I realized one day that I had answered a client message at 11 PM while lying in bed. The boundaries just disappeared.” (P02, Male, Technology, Remote, Jakarta)

Theme 2: Digital Fatigue and Psychological Exhaustion

Participants also reported experiencing digital fatigue caused by prolonged screen exposure, continuous online meetings, and constant digital responsiveness. Symptoms included emotional exhaustion, cognitive overload, headaches, sleep disturbances, and declining motivation. These findings align with the Conservation of Resources Theory, which explains that continuous demands gradually deplete individuals' psychological resources and increase stress (Hobfoll, 1989). Similar findings were reported by Santoso et al. (2024), who identified digital fatigue as a major psychological consequence of work-from-home systems in Indonesia.

“By Thursday afternoon, I feel like my brain has reached its limit. I stare at a screen all day and cannot think clearly anymore.” (P05, Female, Technology, Hybrid, Bandung)

The findings also support Widyastuti et al. (2024), who found that excessive workload significantly contributes to work stress and declining work-life balance among Indonesian employees.

Theme 3: Flexible Productivity and Autonomy

Despite these challenges, participants viewed flexibility as one of the primary advantages of remote and hybrid work arrangements. Flexible scheduling and the elimination of commuting were perceived as improving productivity, reducing physical exhaustion, and increasing personal autonomy. Workers in metropolitan areas such as Jakarta and Bandung particularly emphasized the psychological relief gained from avoiding daily traffic congestion. This finding is consistent with Wardhani and Setiawan (2024), who found that flexible work arrangements positively influence employee creativity and satisfaction when supported by effective work-life management practices.

“Not driving through Jakarta traffic every day changed my life. I finally have energy when I start working.” (P02, Male, Technology, Remote, Jakarta)

However, the study also revealed that flexibility requires strong self-discipline and boundary control. Participants who lacked structured routines often experienced procrastination and extended working hours, supporting Kossek et al.'s (2021) argument that flexibility without organizational and personal boundary management may create self-exploitation rather than well-being.

Theme 4: Family Interference and Gendered Responsibilities

Family interference emerged as another major challenge, particularly among married participants and female workers. Participants described frequent interruptions from children and household responsibilities during working hours, which intensified emotional pressure and reduced concentration. These findings reflect Allen et al.'s (2013) concept of Family Interference with Work (FIW), where domestic responsibilities disrupt professional performance.

“My daughter thinks that because I am home, I am always available. Sometimes I feel like I am failing both as a mother and as a worker.” (P01, Female, Education, Remote, Yogyakarta)

The findings further confirm Rahayu and Firmansyah's (2024) argument that traditional gender-role expectations continue to place disproportionate caregiving responsibilities on women in Indonesia. In addition, participants belonging to the sandwich generation reported

significant emotional and financial pressure due to simultaneous responsibilities toward children and aging parents. These overlapping domestic obligations reduced workers' ability to maintain balanced professional and personal roles.

Theme 5: Coping Strategies and Organizational Support

To manage these pressures, participants adopted both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies. Common strategies included creating dedicated workspaces, implementing structured schedules, limiting digital interruptions, and establishing personal routines to separate work from family life. These practices represent efforts to restore boundary control within digitally mediated work environments.

“I bought a lock for my home office door because I needed a signal that when the door is closed, I am working.” (P12, Male, Education, Remote, Malang)

Participants also emphasized the importance of spiritual and religious coping mechanisms such as prayer, worship, and acceptance (*pasrah*) in reducing stress and maintaining emotional stability. This finding supports Huda et al. (2022), who identified religious coping as a significant emotional regulation strategy among Indonesian workers.

“After a difficult day, I pray. It reminds me that work is not everything.” (P09, Female, Education, Hybrid, Manado)

Beyond individual coping strategies, participants highlighted the importance of organizational support, particularly regarding the implementation of Right to Disconnect (RTD) policies. Consistent with Setiawan et al. (2023), participants believed that limiting after-hours communication and promoting healthier digital boundaries are necessary to sustain employee well-being in Indonesia's increasingly digital work environment.

5. Conclusion

This phenomenological study has generated a theoretically rich and empirically grounded account of the lived experience of work-life balance among remote and hybrid workers across Indonesia's education, technology, and creative sectors. The overarching finding is that WLB in the digital era is not a fixed equilibrium of temporal allocation but a perpetually renegotiated, contextually embedded dynamic of role management—deeply inflected by Indonesia's unique socio-cultural landscape.

The progressive dissolution of role boundaries driven by hyper-connected digital platforms generates the conditions for digital fatigue, which in turn erodes motivation, engagement, and psychological well-being. While flexible productivity offers genuine enhancements to worker autonomy and energy conservation, these benefits are paradoxically conditioned upon individual boundary control self-efficacy that many workers have not yet developed. Family interference—amplified by traditional gender-role norms and the dual caregiving obligations of Indonesia's sandwich generation—further destabilizes the professional performance of remote workers whose domestic environments resist the cognitive demands of deep professional work.

Workers have developed a distinctively Indonesian coping repertoire that integrates problem-focused boundary management tactics with spiritually grounded emotional resilience. Yet individual resilience, as this study demonstrates, has a structural ceiling. Sustainable WLB in Indonesia's digital economy ultimately requires the co-production of individual adaptive

capacity and organizational policy reform—most urgently, the formalization of Right to Disconnect protections, outcome-based performance management systems, and integrated psychosocial support programs.

This study contributes to the international WLB literature by demonstrating how Boundary Theory, COR Theory, and cultural-collectivist frameworks intersect in a Southeast Asian digital labor context, generating insights that challenge Western-centric models of flexible work and offer alternative theoretical pathways for future cross-cultural WLB research.

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