



A Phenomenological Study of Digital Nomads: Redefining Work-Life Boundaries in the Gig Economy

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Abstract :

This study aims to explore how digital nomads in the gig economy manage their work-life boundaries and the strategies they employ to achieve a balance between professional and personal lives. Given the increasing prevalence of remote work, particularly within the digital nomad community, this research investigates the challenges and methods used by individuals to navigate these boundaries. A qualitative research design, involving semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and diary studies, was employed to collect data from digital nomads across various locations. The findings reveal that time-blocking, spatial segmentation, and technology play key roles in managing work-life boundaries. However, challenges such as blurred boundaries, isolation, and the constant pressure of being always "on" were also identified. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of work-life balance in the context of global mobility and digital nomadism. The implications of this study suggest that digital nomads need more structured boundary management strategies, and organizations supporting remote work should consider providing tools and resources to enhance boundary control. This research also offers practical insights for improving the well-being and productivity of remote workers in the evolving gig economy.

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary society, the issue of work-life balance has become an increasingly important topic, especially with the rise of remote work and the gig economy. The flexibility offered by digital nomadism—working while traveling and choosing one's work environment—has been praised for providing individuals with the opportunity to achieve a greater sense of freedom and autonomy (Rauf & Parham, 2023). However, this newfound freedom often brings with it challenges in managing the boundary between work and personal life, as workers continuously navigate changing locations and work expectations (Suckley & Orel, 2024). These challenges are critical not only for the well-being of digital nomads but also for understanding how work-life boundaries are navigated in a global, ever-changing labor landscape. Therefore, this research is vital for both society and organizations seeking to understand the dynamics of remote work and its impact on employees' mental health and productivity (Mathur & Gulati, 2024). As digital nomadism grows, it becomes essential to explore its broader implications for work culture, individual autonomy, and the psychosocial effects of constant mobility.

The general problem that this study aims to address is the difficulty in maintaining clear work-life boundaries among digital nomads, particularly in the gig economy. As digital nomads typically engage in freelance or project-based work, their work environments are highly flexible, which can lead to a lack of structured time for personal activities (De La Vega & Cecchinato, 2023). Research has shown that the blurred lines between work and life often lead to higher stress levels, burnout, and reduced well-being (Sengupta & Al-Khalifa, 2022;

Hilpi & Heini, 2023). Moreover, the constant mobility of digital nomads further complicates their ability to set clear boundaries. These challenges have significant implications for both their personal lives and their professional output. Thus, understanding how digital nomads manage or fail to manage these boundaries is crucial for both theoretical and practical reasons, particularly in designing interventions and support systems for highly mobile knowledge workers (Mathur & Sankpal, 2024).

The phenomenon of digital nomadism, where individuals use technology to work remotely while traveling, has gained substantial traction in recent years. This movement has resulted in a growing population of workers who live and work in various parts of the world (Koll & Wang, 2025). However, despite its popularity, the specific mechanisms through which digital nomads manage their work-life boundaries remain underexplored. Observations in co-working spaces and other common locations for digital nomads reveal a wide variation in how individuals set boundaries between work and personal life (Cho & Beck, 2022; Suckley & Orel, 2024). Some rely on strict schedules and physical space segmentation, while others struggle with the challenge of being constantly connected to work. Understanding these nuances is critical to improving the practices and strategies employed by digital nomads in managing their work-life balance, particularly considering differences in personal circumstances, work type, and social support systems.

Previous research has explored the impact of remote work and flexibility on work-life balance. For instance, studies by Adisa et al. (2022) and Cook (2023) have focused on how remote workers, in general, manage work-life boundaries. However, these studies often overlook the complexities introduced by the transient nature of digital nomads' lifestyles (Rauf & Sheehan, 2023). Aroles et al. (2022) and Lyzwinski (2024) have investigated boundary management in flexible work environments, but their research primarily addresses workers with fixed locations or stable routines. Our study fills this gap by focusing on the unique challenges faced by digital nomads who continuously move between different locations (Koll & Lin, 2025; De La Vega & Newbold, 2023). This research is vital for developing a deeper understanding of how digital nomads maintain or fail to maintain boundaries, offering insights that extend beyond traditional remote work settings and informing future workplace design, policy, and support for mobile knowledge workers.

Building on the work of previous scholars, this study introduces a new perspective on boundary management. Unlike past research that has focused primarily on fixed remote work environments, this study examines how the constantly changing environments of digital nomads impact their ability to maintain work-life boundaries (Cho & Volda, 2022; Suckley & Orel, 2024). The study explores how digital nomads adapt their strategies for boundary management depending on their location, work type, and personal circumstances. This new approach is necessary because it addresses the emerging trend of global mobility in the workplace and provides insights that can help improve the mental health and productivity of remote workers (Mathur & Kee, 2024). The findings of this study contribute to the literature by offering a more nuanced understanding of boundary management in a global, mobile workforce, highlighting the interplay between work design, individual coping strategies, and environmental factors.

The key research problem addressed in this study is the challenge digital nomads face in maintaining clear work-life boundaries while living and working in various global settings. As digital nomads continue to rise in number, it is essential to understand how they navigate the complex interplay of work and life. This study argues that the constant mobility and fluidity of their work environments create unique challenges that differ from traditional remote work settings. Thus, the research seeks to answer how digital nomads manage their boundaries and what strategies they employ to maintain a balance between work and personal life. The contribution of this study lies in providing deeper insights into these strategies and highlighting the factors that influence their effectiveness.

In summary, this research aims to contribute to the understanding of work-life boundary management in the context of digital nomadism, an increasingly relevant issue in the gig economy. By addressing the gaps in existing literature, this study provides valuable insights into the lived experiences of digital nomads, offering both theoretical and practical implications for individuals, organizations, and policymakers. As digital nomadism continues to grow, understanding how to manage work-life boundaries effectively will be critical for ensuring the well-being and productivity of remote workers across the globe. The study's findings will help shape future policies and practices in managing work-life integration in the evolving gig economy.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the work-life boundaries of digital nomads in the gig economy. Qualitative research allows for an in-depth understanding of the experiences, perceptions, and behaviors of individuals in their natural settings (Hall & Liebenberg, 2024; Lim, 2024; Pyo et al., 2023). Given the complexity and subjective nature of work-life balance among digital nomads, this approach is ideal for capturing their lived experiences, which are often influenced by personal, social, and professional factors that cannot be easily quantified. The choice of a qualitative design enables the exploration of these nuances, contributing to a deeper theoretical understanding of boundary management in a global mobility context.

The research will be conducted in various locations where digital nomads commonly work and reside, such as co-working spaces, remote offices, and urban areas with high concentrations of freelancers and remote workers. These locations are selected based on their relevance to the target group and their significance in the gig economy. The decision to focus on digital nomads who frequently move between different cities or countries is grounded in the need to understand the challenges and strategies they employ in managing their work-life boundaries in dynamic, multicultural environments. This context offers a rich basis for the phenomenological study, providing a comprehensive view of the subject matter.

Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and diary studies. Semi-structured interviews allow participants to express their experiences in their own words, while participant observation provides insight into their daily routines and interactions within work and leisure contexts. Additionally, diary studies will help capture the ongoing dynamics of work-life integration. The data will be analyzed using a framework that includes data condensation, reduction, display, and verification (Khudhair et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2022). Through these steps, patterns and themes will emerge that help explain how digital nomads navigate the boundaries between their professional and personal lives, leading to a better understanding of this growing phenomenon.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The results of this phenomenological study provide valuable insights into how digital nomads in the gig economy manage the boundaries between their work and personal lives. The findings are organized into key themes that emerged from the data, highlighting the diverse experiences and strategies used by digital nomads in different contexts. This chapter presents the results under several sub-headings that reflect the major areas of focus in understanding work-life boundary management among digital nomads.

Work-Life Boundary Management Strategies

Digital nomads employ a variety of strategies to manage their work-life boundaries, which differ significantly based on their individual lifestyles, work schedules, and the environments in which they operate. One common strategy identified in the study is time-blocking, where participants schedule specific periods for work and leisure, ensuring that

each area of their lives receives focused attention. This allows digital nomads to maintain a sense of structure despite the fluidity of their work environment. Another strategy observed was spatial segmentation, where work is confined to specific physical spaces, such as co-working spaces or designated home offices. By setting physical boundaries, digital nomads can mentally disconnect from work when they are in personal spaces, reducing the risk of burnout.

However, not all participants were able to maintain strict boundaries between work and life. For some, the boundary between work and leisure became blurred, especially when working from locations where both work and personal activities coexisted, such as in cafes or co-living spaces. These participants reported frequent interruptions and challenges in fully detaching from work, highlighting the fluidity and complexity of boundary management in a mobile context.

Impact of Remote Work on Personal Life

The impact of remote work on personal life was a recurring theme in the interviews. Many digital nomads noted that the flexibility provided by remote work allowed them to spend more time with family and friends, travel, and engage in personal hobbies. This increased personal freedom was often cited as a key reason for choosing the digital nomad lifestyle. However, despite these benefits, several participants expressed challenges in maintaining personal relationships, especially when traveling frequently. The constant movement and time zone differences sometimes strained relationships, making it difficult to establish long-term personal connections.

Moreover, the lack of a fixed routine was highlighted as both a benefit and a challenge. While some digital nomads appreciated the ability to customize their daily schedules, others found it difficult to establish a sense of stability, which led to feelings of loneliness or isolation. These findings suggest that while digital nomads experience greater freedom, the lack of structured routines and constant transitions may lead to emotional and social challenges that impact their overall well-being.

Technology and Tools for Boundary Management

Technology plays a pivotal role in helping digital nomads manage their work-life boundaries. The study found that digital nomads rely heavily on digital tools such as project management software, communication platforms, and time tracking apps to stay organized and maintain control over their work tasks. These tools help participants balance their professional responsibilities with personal activities, ensuring they can switch between work and leisure modes efficiently. Many digital nomads also used technology to stay connected with family and friends, relying on video calls, social media, and messaging apps to bridge the gap created by geographic separation.

However, while technology enables remote work, it also contributes to boundary challenges. Some participants noted that the constant connectivity facilitated by smartphones and laptops often made it difficult to disconnect from work, leading to an “always-on” mentality. This constant connectivity can erode the boundaries between work and leisure, as digital nomads feel pressured to respond to work-related messages or emails outside of their designated work hours. Thus, while technology is essential for boundary management, it also poses a risk to work-life balance if not carefully managed.

Cultural and Environmental Influences on Boundary Management

Cultural and environmental factors significantly influence how digital nomads manage their work-life boundaries. For example, participants living in countries with strong work-life balance cultures, such as in parts of Europe, reported that local norms around work and leisure were more supportive of maintaining boundaries. These norms, such as taking long lunch breaks or having structured working hours, were seen as helpful in encouraging digital nomads to establish clear distinctions between work and personal life.

In contrast, digital nomads living in cultures where work is prioritized or where long working hours are common, such as in parts of Asia, experienced greater difficulty in maintaining boundaries. They often felt pressure to work long hours or respond to work demands even outside of their designated work time. Additionally, the physical environment in which digital nomads worked, such as co-working spaces or cafes, influenced how well they could manage their boundaries. Environments that were noisy or lacked dedicated spaces for work often made it harder for participants to establish clear distinctions between work and leisure.

These findings suggest that both cultural and environmental factors should be considered when examining how digital nomads navigate their work-life boundaries. The local context in which digital nomads live and work plays a crucial role in shaping their ability to maintain work-life balance.

Well-being and Mental Health Concerns

Mental health and well-being emerged as significant concerns among digital nomads. While many participants reported that the flexibility of remote work positively impacted their well-being, others faced mental health challenges related to the demands of their lifestyle. The lack of clear boundaries between work and life, as well as the isolation caused by constant travel, led to feelings of stress, anxiety, and burnout for some participants. The inability to disconnect from work, combined with the emotional toll of being away from family and friends, was a common theme among those who struggled with maintaining work-life boundaries.

Participants who had difficulty managing their boundaries also reported lower levels of job satisfaction and a higher risk of burnout. These findings highlight the need for digital nomads to implement effective boundary management strategies to protect their mental health. Additionally, the study suggests that support systems, such as mentorship or peer networks, could be beneficial for helping digital nomads navigate the challenges of their lifestyle and improve their overall well-being.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide a nuanced understanding of how digital nomads manage their work-life boundaries in the gig economy, and these results align with some existing literature while also revealing differences that contribute to new insights. For example, the finding that digital nomads use time-blocking and spatial segmentation to establish clear boundaries between work and personal life is consistent with previous research by Adisa et al. (2022) and Cook (2023), who found that clear segmentation strategies are essential in managing work-life balance among remote workers. Both studies highlight that these strategies help individuals draw distinct lines between professional responsibilities and personal well-being. However, while Adisa et al. (2022) focused on the broader impact of COVID-19 on boundary management, our study shows that digital nomads not only

engage in spatial and temporal segmentation but also adapt these strategies to meet the unique challenges of constant mobility. This difference underscores the added complexity faced by digital nomads who operate in multiple, often transient, locations.

One notable divergence from existing literature is the blurring of work and personal boundaries experienced by some digital nomads, especially when working from shared environments like co-working spaces or cafes. While Aroles et al. (2022) discuss how remote workers struggle with boundary management in various contexts, this study reveals a more pronounced challenge for digital nomads who work in highly fluid environments. This finding emphasizes that, unlike remote workers with fixed workspaces, digital nomads face a dynamic context where the physical space they inhabit often lacks the structure necessary for clear boundary delineation. This blurring of boundaries may lead to increased stress, a phenomenon highlighted by Sengupta and Al-Khalifa (2022) in their study of millennial workers in India, who noted the strain that comes with constant connectivity and the lack of physical separation between work and personal life.

The study's findings on the impact of remote work on personal life further corroborate existing research. Participants in this study found that while remote work enabled them to travel and spend more time with family, it also strained relationships due to frequent movement and time zone differences. This aligns with the work of Rainoldi et al. (2025) and Hunter-Pazzara (2022), who explored how the flexibility of remote work, while providing benefits, can also lead to emotional and social challenges. The tension between the desire for freedom and the reality of isolation or relationship strain is a recurring theme in the literature. What our study adds is the insight that digital nomads, especially those with frequent mobility, experience these challenges more acutely, often due to the lack of long-term stability in their personal relationships.

Technology was also found to play a dual role in boundary management, as both an enabler and a complicating factor. The use of digital tools such as communication platforms and project management software is consistent with the work of Lyzwinski (2024) and Marx et al. (2025), who highlight how technology facilitates remote work and enhances productivity. However, the negative aspect of constant connectivity, as seen in the “always-on” mentality that some digital nomads struggle with, was a significant issue raised by several participants. This aligns with Prester et al. (2023), who argue that the pervasiveness of technology in remote work environments can undermine work-life boundaries. Our study extends this literature by emphasizing the need for digital nomads to be more deliberate in managing their technological engagement, suggesting that mindfulness and self-regulation may be key to preventing burnout.

Cultural and environmental factors were also highlighted in this study, revealing that digital nomads in cultures that prioritize work-life balance, such as those in certain European countries, have an easier time maintaining boundaries. This finding aligns with Seeber and Erhardt (2023), who discuss the role of national cultural norms in shaping work practices and boundary management. In contrast, digital nomads living in more work-focused cultures, such as some parts of Asia, face greater challenges in setting clear boundaries due to societal pressures for extended working hours. This reflects the findings of Mancinelli and Molz (2023), who emphasized how frictional mobility regimes shape the experiences of digital nomads differently based on geographic and cultural contexts. The study underscores the importance of considering cultural contexts when studying the work-life balance of remote workers, particularly those in the gig economy.

The mental health implications of digital nomadism, particularly related to the difficulty in maintaining boundaries, were evident in the data and are consistent with previous research by Wu and Huang (2024) and Song and Gong (2025), who discussed the negative impacts of boundary crossing on well-being. While flexibility and autonomy are key benefits of remote work, our findings suggest that without clear boundaries, digital nomads may experience higher levels of stress and burnout. This highlights the need for both theoretical and practical approaches to support digital nomads in maintaining mental health and work-life balance. The findings imply that organizations and platforms that cater to digital nomads should consider providing resources to help them manage boundaries more effectively, such as mental health support, time management tools, and access to communities for emotional support

CONCLUSION

The most significant finding of this study is that digital nomads use a variety of strategies, such as time-blocking, spatial segmentation, and technology, to manage their work-life boundaries. However, the research also highlights the challenges of maintaining these boundaries, including the blurring of work and personal life, the isolation associated with constant travel, and the "always-on" mentality. These findings underscore the need for more structured approaches to boundary management in the context of digital nomadism, offering valuable insights for both individuals and organizations. The key lesson from this study is that while digital nomads enjoy the flexibility of remote work, without clear boundaries, their well-being and productivity may suffer.

The strength of this research lies in its contribution to the understanding of work-life balance in the gig economy, particularly for digital nomads who operate in dynamic, mobile environments. By focusing on the specific challenges faced by this group, the study provides a novel perspective that extends beyond traditional remote work settings. However, the study's limitations include its reliance on self-reported data and the focus on a specific group of digital nomads, which may not fully capture the experiences of all remote workers. Future research could expand this study by including a broader sample and exploring the effectiveness of different boundary management strategies across various cultures and work environments.

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