Reframing the Discourse on Work-Life Balance in the Digital Age

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Short Paper

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Abstract

This paper reframes our understanding of the discourse on work-life balance (WLB) from a global perspective, where life on the four income levels (from bottom of the wealth to top of the wealth) is equally considered. Based on a systematic literature review, our initial insights are that WLB of workers in the highest economic sectors has received significant attention from scholars and practitioners in the west, while the global rest and those in other economic sectors, which represents the majority of the world's population, has almost entirely been overlooked. We argue for a new understanding of WLB that addresses the needs of all people across the globe, regardless of their economic status or geographic position, and independent of their formal or informal work contexts. In our future work, we aim to address how disparities in: (1) agency and dependence; (2) privacy and exposure; (3) connection and disconnection; and (4) formality and informality can affect people's dignity, equality, and healthy environments.

Keywords: Work-life balance, work-life discourse, income levels, digitalization

Introduction

The rise and proliferation of digital technologies has significantly disrupted work-life balance (WLB) and labor relations within organizations based in the 'west'[1] (Sarker et al. 2012; Venkatesh and Bala 2008). Various technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI), internet of things, and large language models (LLMs), have revolutionized our working lives, how organizations operate, and how employers and employees interact with each other (Rai et al. 2019). Digitalization has the potential to drive innovation, boost productivity, and improve organizational efficiency, particularly by uncovering new approaches to reimagine the future of work (Wang et al. 2020). But these shifts are not limited to the global North; as recognized in the landmark World Development report on *The Changing Nature of Work*, "[e]merging economies are in the middle of a technological shift that is bringing change to the nature of work" (World Bank 2019, p. 5). The aim of this paper is to present the WLB discourse with a new emphasis on a global perspective, rather than on perspectives from Western, industrialised and rich nations that have had "a significant impact on IS research" (Osei-Bryson et al. 2022, p. 1). International human rights law and labor standards have played a significant role in advancing and articulating human rights by guaranteeing, among others, "the right to work", "the right to safe and healthy working conditions, the right to rest, leisure and reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay; and the right to maternity protection" (ICESCR, art. 6 and art. 7). Whilst WLB issues have received significant attention from academics and practitioners in the west (Califf et al. 2020; Poelmans et al. 2008; Sarker et al. 2012), their implications in the majority world have received minimal scrutiny or examination.

This disparity highlights a key gap in the existing discourse on digitalization and WLB that predominantly focuses on: (1) western debates; (2) knowledge workers; and (3) formal workers. The gap is significant because minimal attention is placed on work-life dynamics in non-western, non-knowledge workers and informal contexts, overlooking key differences in different types of work contexts (Wang et al. 2020), where digital technologies play in structuring work-life dynamics in these contexts. WLB issues are fundamentally connected with human well-being (Sarker et al. 2018). As acknowledged by the International Labour Organization (ILO), "*work in the informal economy is often characterized by small or undefined workplaces, unsafe and unhealthy working conditions, low levels of skills and productivity, low or irregular incomes, long working hours and lack of access to information, markets, finance, training and technology*" GC ILO 2002). Yet, the lack of a comprehensive understanding of work-life dynamics in non-western, non-knowledge workers, and informal contexts leads to regulatory frameworks and social norms that amplify existing structural disparities, prevalent in recent debates on digital inequalities (Helsper 2021). An example of such inequalities is found on life on the four income levels that shows earnings per day (level 1 - <$2; level 2 - $2-$8; level 3 - $8-$32; level 4 - >$32), presented by Hans Rosling's lifelong battle to fight 'devastating ignorance' of that reality.
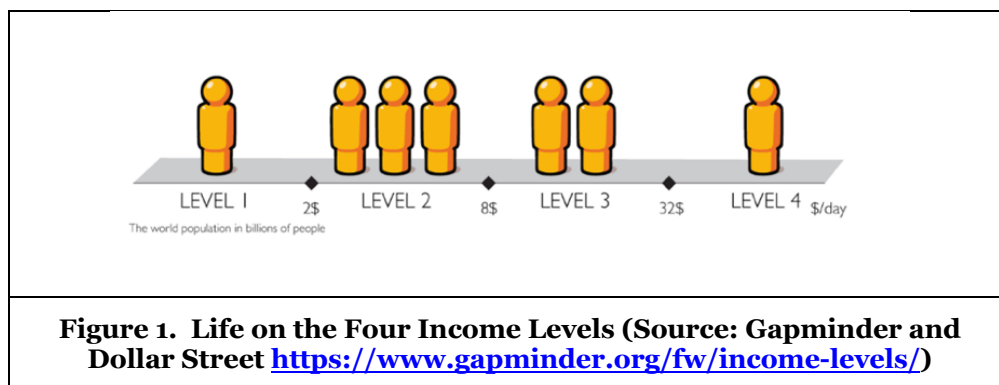

Figure 1. Life on the Four Income Levels (Source: Gapminder and Dollar Street https://www.gapminder.org/fw/income-levels/)

From a global perspective, the division into top of the wealth (level 4, e.g., knowledge workers, and level 3, e.g., manual workers) (Drucker 1969), with bottom of the wealth, (level 2, e.g., agricultural workers, and level 1, e.g., low yield agricultural workers) impacts every aspect of our lives. About 60% of global employment is in the informal economy (UNSTATS 2023), yet the experiences of this group are largely

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[1] The authors of this paper do not align with 'west vs. rest' perspective, we highlight the current discourse theorizing on work-life issues as a westernized notion, overlooking the rest: https://www.gapminder.org/data/geo/west-vs-rest/

ignored in discussions on work-life dynamics. Thus, work-life dynamics of formal and informal work for life on the four income levels, becomes critical to view WLB evolving in very different ways.

To address the above gaps, we examine the following research question: How can we better understand how digital technologies shape the work-life dynamics for people across the four income levels around the world? This research question raises a number of critical sub-questions: How does the increasing use of digital technology impact rights protections under international human rights law and the capacity to realize UN sustainable development goals (SDGs) in democratic systems, across the globe? How does digitalization impact work-life issues and labor relations in the wake of the Covid-19 global crisis? What role does digitalization play in securing a WLB for those across the four levels? Should we extend beyond a traditional westernized notion of WLB and emphasize different constitutional and human rights principles in the context of the work-life dynamics in underexplored areas across the four income levels? Understandably, these present a broad range of questions, which are essential to answer and to address WLB holistically. In a large-scale research project that we have begun, we will endeavor to answer these related yet distinct questions.

We argue that work-life issues are very different for the rich and the poor. The pressing issue of how the digital feeds into boundary preferences only for a few privileged (Desrochers and Sargent 2004), within and between countries, reinforces and even exacerbates existing social inequities presenting distinct work-life issues for different segments of global society. Boundary preferences, then, must be disentangled from a westernized conception and interpreted differently in the context of those disproportionately affected by poverty. We provide a framework to ensure a more just and equitable approach, where we call for a new perspective of WLB that reflects the reality of our complex globalized, digitalized, and dynamic world.

The rest of the manuscript is organized as follows: First, through a systematic literature review, we provide an understanding of how, and where the notion of WLB on the four income levels has been challenged to date. We then present initial insights and conclusions, highlighting our future research and potential implications on how theorizing and policy-development surrounding WLB should aim to cover all four income levels, rather than a small minority of the world's population.

Theoretical Background

The Existing Discourse of Work-Life Balance: A Systematic Literature Review
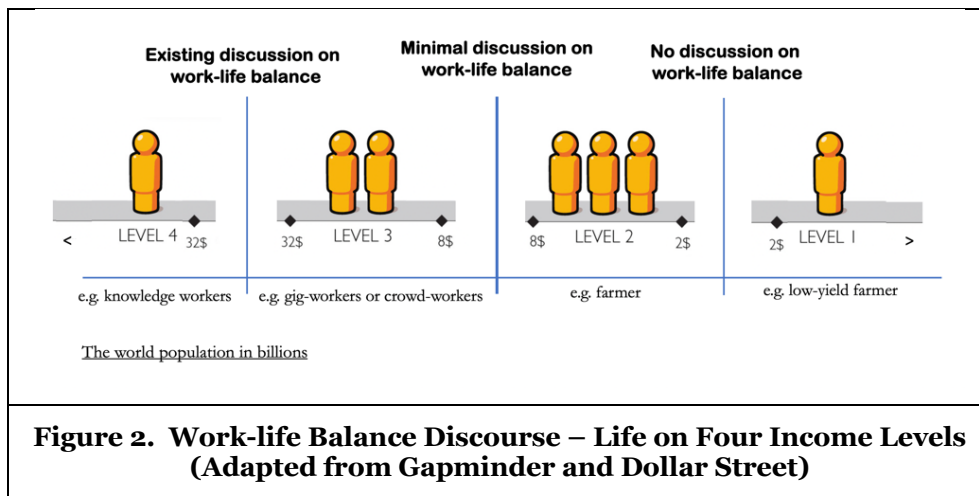
The concept of WLB is dominated by discourse from wealthy countries especially in the west and has focused on those engaged in broad forms of knowledge work in formal settings. WLB is "the degree to which an individual is able to simultaneously balance temporal, emotional, and behavioral demands of both paid work and family responsibility" (Hill et al. 2001, p. 49). Others describe WLB as the "balance of work responsibilities and non-work responsibilities." (Poelmans et al. 2008, p. 233), Empirically, the concept of WLB has been viewed as a lack of work-life conflict. WLB is also seen to be affected by other than just broader socio-economic and industrial relations. Digital nomadism is one such example (Wang et al. 2020), while other work-life aspects (work-life conflict, work-life integration, work-life spillovers) are vigorously debated in the literature (Califf et al. 2020; Clark 2000; Sarker et al. 2018; Schieman et al. 2021).

This prevailing westernized notion of WLB is often viewed as the universal definition of WLB. Work-life discourse is ubiquitous and has broad societal impact on all segments of society (McMillan et al. 2011). Yet, the diversity of social, cultural, and geographic dimensions in today´s globalized, interconnected, and increasingly digitalized world often remains unchallenged in the context of WLB in the majority world. Further, this gap of unchallenged WLB from a global perspective, is gaining greater attention in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic (Venkatesh 2020). Covid-19 presented the impetus for organizations to reimagine work, increasing remote and hybrid remote work, while also raises concerns about the impact of digitalization on amplifying existing social inequalities and structural disparities, including further marginalization of marginalized groups (Schiariti 2020). Measures to curb the spread of Covid-19, such as lockdowns, vaccine requirements, and mandatory testing, posed fundamental constitutional and human rights questions, including threatening the enjoyment of the right to life, right to health, right to privacy, freedom of movement, and civic participation (Spadaro 2020). Accelerated digitalization because of the pandemic led to increasing work-life conflict, including contentious debates over the precise boundaries

and the blurring of the work and private sphere, fueling, among others, employer surveillance versus employee privacy, employee technostress versus technoeustress (Califf et al. 2020; Schieman et al. 2021).

Yet, digitalization can also improve WLB and strengthen interactions and trust between organizational structures, including relations between employers and employees (Califf et al. 2020). The inclusion of good governance targets concerning internet access in the UN 2030 agenda and the UN digital compact and the sustainable development goals, including good health and wellbeing, decent work and economic growth and reducing inequalities (UNDESA 2022), shows a recognition of both the centrality of digitalization to all aspects of human development as well as the fact that differences in digitalization between 'west versus rest' must be highlighted. Despite the potential of digital technologies to ensure a fair and more just society, digital inequalities have led to increased polarization in the world (Diaz Andrade and Doolin 2016; Helsper 2021). It is now taken as a given that greater benefits from digitalization accrue to wealthier members of society (Prahalad 2019).

Through a systematic literature review, we show that the current discourse on WLB focuses primarily on levels 3 and 4, completely minimizing the debate, on levels 1 and 2. Figure 2 shows life on the four income levels, where work-life research has taken place, to date.

Figure 2. Work-life Balance Discourse – Life on Four Income Levels (Adapted from Gapminder and Dollar Street)

Against this backdrop of complex, dynamic, and evolving work environments (Venkatesh and Sykes 2013) there is a disconnect between western-based theory and the reality of the majority of people's working lives and experiences of WLB. With this call for action, embracing technology development, adoption, and use, on behalf of top of the wealth pyramid, calls for a non-reductionist model (Sarker and Valacich 2010), to conceptualize WLB and labor relations in all its complexities and across life on four income levels, from a global perspective. We also call for better understanding of how the design of technology, in the form of tools, services and solutions could be driven (Venkatesh et al. 2017).

We then show that capturing how digital tools and technologies might be designed, implemented, and used in such a way as to ensure constitutional and human rights principles of equality and non-discrimination for benefiting from digitalization worldwide, where the conception of WLB is broadened to capture the world as a whole and works to promote the UN SDGs, equally. This allows us to comprehensively understand that despite rapid advances in digitalization and accessibility of technology, the use of the concept of classical understanding of WLB in the global context is problematic.

The former UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights Phillip Alston has suggested that '…systems of social protection and assistance are increasingly driven by digital data and technologies that are used to automate, predict, identify, surveil, detect, target and punish' and to observe that 'despite the enormous stakes involved, not just for millions of individuals but for societies as a whole, these issues have, with a few notable exceptions, garnered remarkably little attention' (Alston 2019). Social protection systems, as emphasized in SDG target 1.3 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) 2022), play a crucial role in addressing and preventing poverty. Consequently, the prevailing exclusionary trends in the digitalization of these systems pose significant threats to increasing the vulnerability of the most impoverished populations worldwide. Yet, this does not have to be the case; as

technological systems are socially constructed, they can be designed to promote international human rights norms and democratic principles, including UN values of dignity and equality, directly affecting WLB for all.

Next, we describe how we approached the review of the existing literature on WLB to better understand the current focus and emphasis.

Research Design

We use a systematic literature review to examine the WLB discourse from theoretical angles, and directing us toward empirical angles, emphasizing a nuanced and critical perspective. We aim to continue exploring the discourse and qualitative dimensions of the human experience with work-life and gain a more in-depth understanding of the complexity of WLB by engaging with the personal stories and experiences of the participants, through the use of semi-structured interviews in our future work.

Systematic Literature Review on Work-Life Balance

The systematic literature review was driven by a comprehensive view on identifying concepts and phrases fit for searching literature in the area of WLB. We particularly looked at identifying whether WLB has been a discourse across life on the four income levels. The results yielded 351 studies, which through an Endnote delivery format, the identified literature was inserted into the service of Covidence, a digital tool for guiding and handling the process of systematic literature reviews. While the review primarily focused on understanding whether WLB is a global discourse as opposed to a "west versus rest" discourse, the literature revealed that work-life issues are debated differently, from balance to integration, and from spillovers to conflict, and tensions, and that such conceptions pertain to those in levels 3 and 4.

Importantly, the search across many databases and hosts occurred to ensure that we got close to all possible references published to date in the area of WLB. This yielded many duplicates, with a final 212 total duplicates removed. Table 2 below presents the types of databases/hosts and our search strategies.

Databases/Hosts	Search Strategies
AIS; ACM; IEEE; Scopus; PubMED; Inspec; Web of Science; Business Source Complete; Ebsco Host; Academic search complete	e.g., AIS (worklife balance OR work-life balance OR work life balance OR worklife conflict* OR work-life conflict* OR work life conflict* OR worklife boundar* OR work-life boundar* OR work life boundar* OR work harmony balance OR work harmony conflict* OR work harmony boundar*) AND (digitali* OR digital technolog* OR digital service*).
	e.g., Academic search complete (worklife OR work-life OR "work life" OR workharmony OR work-harmony OR work harmony) AND (harmony OR balance OR conflict* OR boundaries) AND (digitaliz* OR digitalis* OR "digital technology" OR "digital service*" OR "computer-mediated communication").
Table 2. Databases/Hosts and Search Strategies	

Through our research design, we argue that our systematic literature shows vast differences of the WLB discourse that has mainly focused on the westernized notion of WLB, also pertaining to those on income levels 3 and 4. Our initial insights below raise this argument by highlighting existing assumptions and themes to enlighten us for new perspectives that show what future researchers should be paying attention in the WLB discourse, intending to re-shape future research agendas in this area.

Initial Insights

Our review of the literature highlights some existing assumptions and themes. Below, we elaborate on them, and draw attention to alternate perspectives that need to be considered for a more inclusive and global definition and understanding of WLB.

1. **Agency and Dependence**
   The varying degrees of agency and dependence between work and family relationship are not the same across the four levels in the globe. While those in level 4 might have more agency, those in level 1 might have more dependence, and vice versa, depending on the aspect, type of work, and context in question.

   According to Hobson (2011), agency inequalities for WLB are greater for individuals linked to weaker institutional resources and cultural/societal norms that act as constraints for work-family relationship and WLB. Dependency, on the other hand, particularly technological dependency shows that digital well-being is often compromised (Sarker et al. 2018). We aim to explore these inequalities further.

2. **Privacy and Exposure**
   Digital privacy and its impact on working lives is deeply debated across levels 3 and 4, but little is understood whether the same applies in levels 1 and 2, across the globe.

   Wang et al. (2020) utilized boundaries in the context of digital nomads to show that people can make choices on how they divide or intersect with work-life contexts. While in the west it is often common to separate work and life by making the boundaries clearer for a formal worker, an informal worker in the context of a developing country might not be able to do so.

   The debate on privacy and exposure is often driven by the discussion how digital technologies are leading the way towards the loss of digital privacy (Acquisti et al. 2022). We aim to continue by reflecting upon digital and physical privacy, equally. An example is an informal worker, who often has no choices to protect the privacy of their family (e.g. informal work conducted in a home setting). For informal workers, particularly in low-income levels, achieving a WLB often means prioritizing exposure of their family in a home setting over privacy. A study by Basile et al. (2022) shows that technology has the means to offer WLB for parents in high income levels, also letting them to consider the role the technology plays in children's privacy rights. We aim to continue exploring these implications.

3. **Connection and Disconnection**
   The thought that one can connect and disconnect for a better WLB as a lifestyle choice in the west, this choice is not applicable in levels 1 and 2. We consider that disconnection is a forced way for levels 1 and 2, rather than a choice.

   Boundaries can be set by the fact that a worker chooses to schedule their customer availability digitally. A connection is then made possible by showing e.g. an active status; busy status, away status, on applications that allow communication. But digital disengagement (Kunstman and Miyake 2022) is rather an illusion for allowing digital escape in the form of complete disconnection. If it would potentially allow "mental away" opportunities, especially for those who are well-versed into technology and live constantly with it (Floros et al. 2019). We aim to continue exploring these implications.

4. **Formality and Informality**
   While the world has rapidly scaled up the development of legal frameworks and regulatory policies addressing how we should be using and adapting innovative technological developments in the workplace, levels 3 and 4 are often driven by formal work where such frameworks and policies apply (e.g., with GDPR for privacy protection), but levels 1 and 2 are often driven by informal work, without de jure rules governing their working conditions.

   The psychological boundaries set by a person, but also tangible boundaries that relate to time, place, and people at work and at home are equally important (Desrochers and Sargent 2004). This view clearly shows that, while types of work cannot be assumed to be always regulated and formal, 60% of the working world conducts informal work. As a result, tangible boundaries in informal work are not positioned in relation to WLB the same as in formal work. Time and place, for instance, differ between a formal and informal worker (e.g. formal freelance worker and informal gig-worker) (Wang et al. 2020). A gig-worker most likely sells his products from home, often coordinating the visit of his client using technology, but the client's physical presence is important, as well as it is client's convenience (a client showing late in the evening). Then what remains to be set as a boundary in a work-life context of an informal worker, is no longer the same to a formal worker. We aim to continue exploring these implications.

Implications for Research and Practice

We offer initial insights into the work-life discourse, particularly in fostering new discourse to address the future of work across the globe. This requires moving beyond the 'west versus rest' perspectives, by acknowledging the pervasiveness of technology in all aspects of our lives, with the potential to transform global perspectives on what WLB means for all.

We advance a new perspective reframing the discussion on the theory and practice of WLB in the context of digitalization, with the mission to transcend the existing limits of the westernized notion. We aim to continue advancing our understanding of how digitalization impacts work-life issues globally that promote, protect, and respect constitutional principles, fundamental human rights, and UN SDGs, regardless of the socio-economic or geographic status. The rational for our approach is to focus on exploring the social impact of digitalization on organizational relations and WLB across all four income levels in the world. This differs from the 'overwhelming majority' of existing research, which primarily focuses on the impact of digital technology on work-life challenges for level 4 income workers, and to a lesser extent, on level 3 income workers, overlooking levels 1 and 2, almost entirely. Our research seeks to bridge this significant gap in the literature.

A fundamental contribution of our work is the recognition that limited contexts can be unjust or unequal towards others, and imposing views from one context onto another undermines democratic values. Another critical contribution of this work is that it shows how information systems research can align better with several UN SDGs, including "3. good health and wellbeing," "5. gender equality," "8. decent work and economic growth," and "9. industry innovation and infrastructure.", by adopting a more creative and inclusive approach that transcends conventional boundaries and limitations of current westernized discourse on WLB. Finally, our insights can contribute to guide the development and assessment of existing laws and regulatory policies concerning human rights, digitalization, and sustainable progress, promoting a more meaningful WLB for all.

Conclusions

Our work is among the first to investigate what should WLB mean for all, from the perspective of both international human rights law and UN sustainable development goals with the aim to continue investigating the techno-optimism and techno-pessimism discourse. We intend to continue challenging this view by asking if we can balance techno-optimism with a more nuanced view on techno-pessimism on all walks of life. Such challenges should focus on what good work-life integration means for all, by carefully thinking about adverse incorporation of digital-by-default missions, at a cost of challenging the future of work without balance, among others, and how we might promote human dignity and flourishing.

We end by stating that our vision is to actively engage with answering the questions of "how can we capture the social impact of digitalization on WLB by comparative analyses?" and "how can digital technologies be designed to promote WLB for all across the globe? Our future work will involve a longitudinal investigation with varying degrees of WLB across the four income levels. We believe that our future work has the potential to attract new empirical research aimed at addressing UN sustainable development goals in all walks of life.

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