

MANUSCRIPT

Blurred Lines: Digital Well-Being and Boundaries for Entry-Level Residence Life Professionals

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The pervasive use of smartphones has altered the ways that entry-level, live-in residence life professionals engage with their work. This qualitative study examines the self-perceptions of digital well-being among 16 live-in professionals as they navigate their work/life balance. Rooted in Shah's definition of digital well-being as the integration of personal health and relationships in digital settings, this study analyzed how participants identified positive and negative impacts of engaging in digital activities and became aware of ways to manage and control those activities to improve personal mental, physical, and emotional health. Three primary themes were identified after analysis of the data: navigating job expectations, establishing and managing boundaries, and practicing self-care through digital behavior change. These findings provide insight into how entry-level, live-in professionals might be empowered to manage their digital well-being to increase job satisfaction and prevent burnout.

"I am never not connected." Sabrina, an entry-level, live-in residence life professional, shared these words as she grappled with the problem of balancing her work and her personal life. Having known a career in the context of constant digital connection, she struggled to balance the ease and convenience of using a phone to connect to her work with the need to separate from work on the evenings and weekends. She worried that her desire to be disconnected might create the perception of not being effective in her work as a student affairs professional. Sabrina's existential work crisis mirrors a concern many newer professionals have in today's connected world. The pressure of increasing expectations from students, colleagues, friends, and family to be connected at all times has created a challenge for professionals as they struggle to balance their work and personal lives.

The ubiquitous nature of digital connection via smartphones is a relatively new phenomenon; the first iPhone, widely considered the device that started the smartphone revolution, was released in 2007. Yet most people cannot imagine a world without smartphones, and younger professionals have never

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known a work world in which these did not exist. As we consider how staff are experiencing student affairs and residence life work and how we might be able to tailor conversations and developmental opportunities to their perceptions of this work, it is important to explore the role of phone use and the influence that digital connectivity has on work/life boundaries.

This study examined how entry-level professionals experienced digital connectedness and managed their relationship with the phone while creating and maintaining boundaries as live-in professionals. For the purposes of this study, entry-level, live-in professionals are defined as individuals who are in their first three years in a full-time, post-master's degree position and who reside in campus-owned housing as part of their job responsibilities. The current study provides insight into the value that newer professionals place on phone use as well as the burdens associated with that connection.

STUDENT AFFAIRS AND WORK/LIFE INTEGRATION

Work/life balance has long been a topic of conversation in college and university student affairs work, with conversations often centering on how to create and maintain boundaries between work and personal life. Boundary Theory (Nippert-Eng, 1996) posits that individuals segment their lives into home and work and assign value to each. When boundaries are highly segmented, they are thickened by the presence of distinct schedules, different groups of people, and differing behaviors in each. Ashforth and colleagues (2000) expanded on Nippert-Eng's theory by addressing the ease and frequency with which people transition between roles; both studies found that integrating work and family facilitated transitions between the two domains.

Student affairs is a helping profession that demands much of its employees' ability to meet the evolving needs of students, creating challenges for many student affairs educators as they struggle to establish and maintain boundaries between their work and personal lives (Linder, 2011; Wilk, 2016). Live-in residence life professionals tend to be extreme "integrators" (Rankin & Gulley, 2018, p. 70), and living where you work can "challenge the clarity of space boundaries . . . making it more difficult to define and maintain separation" (Hirschy & Staten, 2021, p. 60).

Live-in staff often feel challenged because of their proclivity to prioritize their roles as caretakers of students above their own well-being. Working excessive hours can lead to burnout, which is one of the primary reasons that professionals leave the field (Marshall et al., 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this conflict because many positions were reduced or eliminated, and staff were expected to do more work while feeling uncertain about their own wellness (Winfield & Paris, 2022).

Some researchers view work/life boundaries as a generational issue and highlight the role of technology in blurring the lines between the two (Black, 2023; Neville & Brochu, 2019). While younger generations are typically

more technologically savvy and willing to integrate technology into their lives and work, managing that integration in the digital age can be very difficult (Kosseck, 2016).

DIGITAL WELL-BEING

Digital well-being can be understood “as an integration of personal health and relationships in digital settings” (Shah, 2019, para. 1), and the capacity to manage how one views their personal health in a digital world requires balancing various aspects of individual wellness. “Digital well-being considers the impact of technologies and digital services on people’s mental, physical, and emotional health” (Shah, 2019, para. 4) and identifies positive and negative impacts of engaging with digital activities while recognizing how to manage and control those activities to improve personal mental, physical, and emotional health.

Digital well-being “concerns individuals’ subjective well-being in a social environment where digital media are omnipresent” (Büchi, 2024, p. 172) and how they must balance the benefits and drawbacks of digital connectivity (Vanden Abeele, 2021). This study adapted Shah’s (2019) definition of digital well-being as the healthy integration of digital technology use into the everyday physical, mental, and emotional aspects of human interaction.

EFFECTS OF PHONE USE ON YOUNG ADULTS

Phones and social media have had a deep influence on our current newer professionals (many of whom are classified as late Millennials and early Generation Z) as they have entered the workforce. Approximately 85% of adults in the United States and 96% of 18- to 29-year-olds own smartphones (Faverio, 2022, para. 2). While phone use includes calls and texting, one study reported that “48% of those ages 18 to 29 years said they were online almost constantly” (Faverio, 2022, para. 6).

Phone and social media use in young adults had many negative effects on their mental health and well-being (Twenge, 2020). Despite near-constant digital connection with others, Millennials and Gen Z experienced an increase in “perceived social isolation [which is] associated with substantial morbidity and mortality” (Primack et al., 2017, p. 1). Phone and social media use can create addiction-like responses (Haynes, 2018; McSweeney, 2019) that in turn create distractions that can prevent individuals from focusing, multitasking, and prioritizing (D’Amato, 2019). The current technological environment has also led to increases in depressive symptoms, including increased suicide-related outcomes (Twenge, 2020). In addition, phone use can create physical and physiological issues like negative sleep patterns, neck pain, and eye strain (Derakhshanrad et al., 2021), and significant reduction in physical activity (Lepp et al., 2013).

METHODOLOGY

The intent of this study was to understand how self-perceptions of digital well-being influence how newer professionals navigate their roles in residence life and posed the following research question: *How does guided digital well-being behavior change influence perceptions of boundaries among entry-level, live-in residence life professional staff?*

Using a qualitative descriptive methodology (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) informed by Giorgian descriptive phenomenology (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003), the study utilized a phenomenological approach in order to understand a specific phenomenon in the context in which it occurs by seeking “first-hand experiences” from participants (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008, p. 27). Descriptive phenomenological research helps researchers “determine the meaning of experience” (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003, p. 252), and this methodology can “highlight the intrinsic, often hidden experiences, which can be so important to each individual experience” (Sinfield et al., 2023, p. 2)—in this case, how residence life professionals understand digital well-being and the meaning of their experiences with using phones in the context of their professional roles. Collecting data via semi-structured individual interviews allowed participants to fully describe their experiences.

Participants

Participants were contacted via a recruitment email to the list-serv for the Upper Midwest Region of ACUHO-I and social media posts on LinkedIn and Facebook groups focused on housing professionals. Snowball sampling was utilized via the researcher’s professional connections. Participants were screened to ensure that they met the necessary criteria, including their status as full-time, entry-level residence life employees who have a live-in component to their work (e.g. hall directors, assistant hall directors, and other similar positions). In order to create a relatively balanced group, participants were selected based on order of response and self-reported demographic information about gender, institution type, and race/ethnicity to create a relatively balanced participant group.

Sixteen professionals (eight men and eight women) participated (see [Table 1](#)), and all of them selected pseudonyms for confidentiality. Six identified as non-White, creating an important balance of perspectives, and the group represented 15 different institutions in the United States, representing a wide range of institution types. The average span of their professional experience was 2.2 years, and 15 participants indicated that they had a master’s degree in higher education, student affairs, or a related field.

Data Collection

I conducted two semi-structured individual interviews via Google Meet with each participant, utilizing motivational interviewing (MI) techniques as an intervention method to help participants create positive change in their digital habits. MI is a “collaborative, goal-oriented style of communication”

Table 1.
Participant Information

Pseudonym	Gender identity	Race/ethnicity	Institution type	Institution size	Region of United States
Andrea	Woman	White	4-year private	> 5,000 undergrad	Northeast
Andrew	Man	White	4-year private	< 5,000 undergrad	Midwest
Antonio	Man	Hispanic/Latino	4-year public	< 5,000 undergrad	Northeast
Conrad	Man	White	4-year private	> 5,000 undergrad	South
David	Man	White	4-year public	> 5,000 undergrad	Southeast
Emma	Woman	White	4-year private	< 5,000 undergrad	Midwest
Erica	Woman	White	4-year private	< 5,000 undergrad	Northwest
Jasmine	Woman	Black	4-year private	< 5,000 undergrad	South
Jonathan	Man	Hispanic/Latino	4-year private	< 5,000 undergrad	Midwest
Kip	Man	White	4-year public	< 5,000 undergrad	West
Molly	Woman	White	4-year private	< 5,000 undergrad	Midwest
Rachel	Woman	Asian/PI	4-year private	< 5,000 undergrad	Northeast
Ronald	Man	Black	4-year public	< 5,000 undergrad	Midwest
Sabrina	Woman	Hispanic/Latino	4-year public	> 5,000 undergrad	Midwest
Savannah	Woman	White	4-year private	> 5,000 undergrad	Northeast
Timothy	Man	White	4-year public	< 5,000 undergrad	Midwest

with particular attention paid to the language of change, and it is “designed to strengthen personal motivation for and commitment to a specific goal by eliciting and exploring the person’s own reasons for change within an atmosphere of acceptance and compassion” (Miller & Rollnick, 2013, p. 29).

The initial interview started with an assessment of interest in the topic and research study. I then asked participants about the positive and negative influences their phone had on their work and personal lives, focused on setting specific goals for behavior change, and then reflected on why that change would make a positive difference for them both personally and professionally (e.g., “In a perfect world, what would your relationship with your phone look like? Why is that scenario important to you?”). The initial interview closed with the creation of strategies to enable behavior change and a plan for tracking behaviors and reflecting on the effectiveness of the

strategies. A second interview was conducted approximately two to three weeks after the initial interview, focusing on a discussion of which strategies for digital behavior change were effective or ineffective and how participants felt after trying to modify their behavior. Additional questions centered on how the behavior change had impacted their personal and professional lives and what they had learned about themselves while attempting to change their digital behavior.

Analysis

In the tradition of descriptive phenomenology, I used reflexive thematic analysis, which seeks to understand what participants think, feel, and do and is therefore appropriate for this type of exploratory research (Braun & Clarke, 2022b; Clarke & Braun, 2017). Reflexive thematic analysis “is concerned with exploring the truth or truths of participants’ contextually situated experiences, perspectives, and behaviors” (Braun & Clarke, 2022a, p. 8). As noted by Sundler and colleagues (2019), “Themes derived from the analysis are grounded in the experience(s) of the participants” (p. 735).

This approach requires an openness and reflective attitude during the analysis to better understand how participants describe their lived experiences with the phenomenon being studied. Prior to beginning the analysis, I conducted a bracketing exercise by identifying and writing down assumptions and beliefs about the research topic in order to be able to set aside preconceived notions and ensure that personal experiences did not influence analysis of the data (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008).

I used Braun and Clarke’s (2022b) six-step iterative process of reflexive thematic analysis. The coding process began by becoming familiar with the data by reading and re-reading transcripts before generating codes. The next step included finding meaning-based patterns within the initial codes, which were sorted into higher level topics in order to generate themes. This process resulted in three primary themes: navigating job expectations, establishing and managing boundaries, and practicing self-care through digital behavior change. I used random member checking to demonstrate validity (Elo et al., 2014). The member checks included communication with specific individual participants to verify the accuracy of quotations and to ensure that I interpreted data in the way it was intended.

Positionality

As a White, cisgender man and a senior student affairs administrator with an extensive background working in residence life, my own experiences shaped my perspective. I served as a live-in professional, but, as someone who began his career at the advent of social media and prior to the widespread availability of smartphones, my experiences negotiating boundaries as a live-in staff member were vastly different from those of my participants. My identities and senior-level professional role may also have shaped how participants shared their experiences.

LIMITATIONS

Participants were recruited via social media posts, thereby limiting the pool to those actively engaged on those platforms. This recruitment approach may have skewed the pool to professionals who may utilize digital tools more frequently for work purposes. Secondly, participants shared their own perceptions of their digital well-being, and though these perceptions are vital to understanding lived experiences, they are an imperfect form of measurement. Additionally, while careful attention was given to creating a diverse group, participants do not fully represent all types of entry-level, early career professionals in residence life.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data analysis highlighted three primary themes: navigating job expectations, establishing and managing boundaries, and practicing self-care through digital behavior change. In terms of the sense of well-being, these themes interact progressively, from uncertainty about how to create change to testing behavior change and to developing methods of sustainable change.

Navigating Job Expectations

A central concern of participants was understanding job expectations in an immersive work environment. Living on campus and being nearby and available to students at all hours created unease about what was truly expected. Participants wrestled with implicit versus explicit expectations, recognizing that the *culture of res life* included unwritten rules about prioritizing work obligations over personal life and being available at all times to meet students' needs. As Antonio noted, the 9–5 schedule “is not the daily lifespan of residence life. It exists way beyond that, right? It's real life. And real life doesn't end just at 5 p.m.” Rachel commented on the perceived pressure to be on call. “What we say isn't always aligned with what we do. There's no formal expectation to be ‘on’ all the time, but there's for sure a pressure to always be present . . . I'm always thinking about work,” a sentiment confirmed by Andrea. “Even when I'm not clocked in, I'm still mentally clocked in because of my phone. There's kind of no escape.”

Phones were a double-edged sword as participants tried to balance the usefulness of convenient connections with students and the burdens that phones often created. Regardless of whether they used their own or institution-issued phones for work, they felt the burden of constant connection. As Kip said, the phone seemed necessary to maintain connections with residents. “Using my phone makes me feel more relatable and connected to my students. If I'm not in their space—even digitally—then I don't really know what's going on.” However, between interviews, Kip reflected on his phone use and recognized that he couldn't “be in their space all the time and still have my boundaries and sanity. I'm more comfortable picking and choosing now, and it feels healthier.” The need to be relatable and connected was met with pressure to always be performing in their work roles. As

Jonathan said, “In a perfect world, I would not have such high standards for myself or others, wouldn’t have such high expectations of how I’m communicating and how up to date I am on everything going on at work.”

Molly also commented on the pressure she felt to always be connected.

I do kind of have a slight workaholic mindset where . . . I always want to be productive. And I feel like being productive means I have to constantly be on my phone dealing with whatever email is there. And I feel like if I lose that mentality, then I won’t be as good at my job.

Andrew added to this sentiment, recognizing that the pressure to stay connected to his phone wasn’t simply a personal choice but comes from “a personal *and* an institutional or systemic level. Perfectionism makes me want to respond quickly and help people, but there’s pressure to look competent and accomplish tasks, and that comes from an overall culture in higher ed.” While constant connection may have not been an explicit job expectation, the implicit demands of the profession resulted in the perception that *not* being connected meant they were not living up to expectations.

Establishing and Managing Boundaries

Participants noted that establishing boundaries was one of the most challenging parts of their live-in role, since the physical proximity of their living spaces to students created expectations for their constant accessibility as a resource and support person. Maintaining work/life boundaries was sometimes impossible if staff had interpersonal relationships with students that impeded the ability to maintain distance from work even outside of usual business hours. While challenges with boundaries are not limited to residence life live-in professionals, living among students is a unique context that creates real and perceived challenges to the separation of work and personal life. The ability to remain constantly connected via phones only compounds the challenges of establishing and maintaining the boundaries that already exist for live-in professionals.

Conrad summarized how the use of phones is integrated into the ethos of student affairs work. “We need [students] to feel prioritized and wrapped in care, and that creates compulsion to be connected.” This pressure can be overwhelming at times, as Antonio reflected.

It’s hard to have your own personal life outside of your professional life in this role, and it’s honestly because of phones and the need to always be connected. It feels like the essence of [res life] work is being entirely engrossed in the job.

During the initial interview, Andrew commented on how the immediacy of responding to a phone call or message affected his ability to create boundaries.

My phone is the thing that blends my work and personal life together. It's harder for me to establish and to respect a boundary because I open my phone and see an email and I worry, even if it's a concern that isn't really that great.

Identifying the phone as the instrument that disrupts boundaries was an important step in thinking more deeply about the value of separating work life from personal life. During the second interview, after he had reflected on the significance of the urgency he was placing on messages he received, Andrew recognized that he needed to establish some limits.

I've given myself permission to pause. I try not to read the message during "off hours," but if I do I try not to respond because I learned that is what often continued the cycle of this false sense of urgency with students.

Rachel recognized the central difficulty in maintaining firm boundaries. Residence life "forces you to blend so much of your work with your life, and then you add on top of that [my phone], which basically lets work be in front of my face 24/7, that it creates these blurred lines for me."

Those blurred lines are exacerbated by an inability to manage boundaries because the phone had become such a necessary accessory. As Jasmine said,

So I don't know what the bigger problem is—the ability to create boundaries or the inability to control the way that people can reach me at all times. I think my phone just enables bad habits with boundaries and I don't realize it's me that could have some control.

Antonio also felt that the blurred lines created challenges. "I think it would be hard for me to survive without my phone, honestly. I've learned that boundaries work until they don't work, and I can almost always trace it back to my phone that caused that blurred line." In addition, participants acknowledged discomfort in recognizing that though their phone was a social lifeline that kept them connected to friends and family away from work, it also kept them tethered to their jobs because phones were a necessity for work.

Practicing Self-Care Through Digital Behavior Change

During the individual interviews, participants were able to identify the unhealthy ways they were prioritizing phone use and the complicated role that phones played in the management of their work/life balance. The process of engaging in conversations focused on purposeful behavior change enhanced participants' own perceptions of digital well-being. The intervention helped raise the issue into their consciousness and made them more mindful of the influence their phone use had on their lives. Timothy said that, before the intervention, "it was just a click and I'm in [my phone]."

It was so mindless. Just click, click, click because I have to.” Conrad added, “My phone felt like an extension of my body. It’s just been a part of who I am and what I do at all times, and I realize that feels unhealthy.”

Several participants viewed their behavior change as an accomplishment and realized that even small changes in behavior were noticeable and acceptable. As Andrew said,

I’ve [gained] an understanding that it’s good to have those personal and work boundaries, but I perhaps don’t need to police them so heavily all the time. Maybe a little blending is okay—like I can check work email but then decide not to respond until later. But now I control that.

A significant aspect of the motivational interviewing intervention was to co-create strategies that could help participants change their behavior in a way that would last. This process included back-and-forth dialogue with participants to brainstorm specific tactics, identify who or what would help implement those tactics, and determine how to measure their effectiveness. Examples of strategies included utilizing time limit functions on apps that consumed disproportionate amounts of time, charging their phone across the room rather than at their bedside at night, and moving time-wasting apps off of their main screen.

Reflecting on this process, Rachel acknowledged that the behavior change she made with her phone directly influenced her ability to unashamedly manage boundaries. “Controlling your boundaries in [res life] is not a failure!” Antonio, who during the initial interview said, “My phone is my co-pilot. I’m just conditioned to always be connected,” was able to manage the compulsion to use his phone after the intervention. “It’s no longer my constant default to grab my phone. I realized I could use these hours for extra things.” Similarly, prior to intervention, Jonathan said, “I am terminally online. I am absolutely compelled to be constantly connected whether I want to or not.” After raising the concept of digital well-being into his consciousness, he said, “Having good boundaries means saying *no* to yourself sometimes, and now I know how to not feel inexorably fused to my work [through my phone].”

An important aspect of digital mindfulness was acknowledging that phone abstinence was not necessarily a viable option. Sabrina noted that her phone was a primary method of self-care: “[It is] my decompression tool. It’s the thing I use at the end of a long day to tune out of my work life and distract myself from obligations.” Phones were still viewed as a primary connection to the world outside of work.

IMPLICATIONS

This research provides important insight into how newer professional staff integrate digital technology use into their lives. Despite the challenges they identified, participants acknowledged that phones retained a prioritized space

in their lives even though they produced challenges related to creating and maintaining work/life boundaries. Participant responses reinforced previous research by Rankin and Gulley (2018), which highlighted the traits that characterize live-in professionals who are extreme “integrators” (p. 70). Participants experienced cognitive discomfort as they wrestled with expectations for what work/life balance could and should look like, particularly as they compared their experiences to those of their peers who did not serve as live-in professionals. Phones created an additional layer of connection that allowed work life to more easily blur into personal life, creating challenges even when participants acknowledged that their preferred approaches to work/life balance mirrored the expectations of other Millennial and Gen Z peers (Black, 2023; Neville & Brochu, 2019).

Therefore, it is important to consider how to help professionals manage phone use and integrate it into the work/life equation rather than seeking a perfect balance. Senior- and mid-level leaders can demonstrate a willingness to engage in honest dialogue with live-in staff about the complexities of their relationships with their phones and to make explicit any implied or assumed expectations that have created undue pressure for entry-level staff around constant connection.

Staff at all levels need to identify the pros and cons of phone use in their work and identify the issues that derive from constant connection, including boundary setting. Conversations about phone use could be integrated into supervision with the utilization of motivational interviewing techniques to elicit behavior change. By naming phone use as an important part of housing work, leaders can help create and maintain healthy work/life boundaries and can promote developmental opportunities for staff to set tangible, attainable, and measurable goals around their digital well-being; create venues for reflection; and encourage and reward digital behavior change.

Future research might identify specific subgroups of professionals (e.g., professionals of color, those with families, and other identities) in order to understand specific cultural or identity-related perspectives and job-specific characteristics that might influence perspective (e.g., hall type and size, hourly versus salaried staff).

CONCLUSION

The results of this research may assist student affairs professionals by providing insight into the value that newer professionals place (and the burden derived from) digital connections and social media use, as well as providing deeper insight into the growing field of digital well-being and its place on our campuses. The process of raising into consciousness the role of phone use and the act of creating lasting behavior change had a significant impact on participants’ own perceptions of work/life boundaries. By engaging in the motivational interviewing process, participants were able to identify the value they placed on phone use and how it tethered them to their work.

The need for professionals to understand and support students in the ways they function with technology has created areas of concern with work/life balance, boundaries, and burnout among professionals who serve those students. As we continue to focus energy on learning how technology affects our sense of self, our habits, and our views of the world, it is important to understand how it is affecting our sense of well-being—our mental and physical health as well as our interpersonal relationships—and how it is affecting those who work in the student affairs field.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Staff often struggle with maintaining effective boundaries in the absence of explicit expectations about availability within live-in positions. What are the implicit and explicit expectations about digital connection at your institution? Are those expectations different for salaried versus hourly employees?
2. For those who have known careers with and without constant digital connection, how do you perceive this shift?
3. What procedures could you put in place to ensure the support of your team in maintaining effective boundaries in the digital age? How would this affect the perception of your institution's residential life operations?
4. Does the promotion of digital well-being in our staff contribute to the education of our students (defining urgency versus crisis, promoting patience and civility when requesting assistance)? In what ways might this promotion prove educational by example?

Discussion questions were developed by Bridget Reeland, senior associate director for university housing services at Illinois State University.