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THE NAVIGATION OF BOUNDARIES IN ONLINE SOCIAL SPACES

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Social media blur everyday distinctions between what is public and private, online and offline, and professional and personal, creating an imaginary of a boundary-free digital world. Researchers have attended to the ways in which individuals navigate this new environment, for example by examining how individuals negotiate privacy in these spaces, however much less consideration has been given to the other ways in which social boundaries are established. This paper deconstructs the digital imaginary of a boundary-free digital world and explores the boundary work that takes place with using digital social spaces. By examining boundary placement processes and boundary navigation, this study attempts to provide a description of boundary work in the emerging social media environment. In doing so, it highlights the important function that connection and disclosure through social media platforms play in social classification processes and thinking.

Boundaries and Boundary Work

“Boundary” is a metaphor used to delineate the “physical, temporal, emotional, cognitive, and/or relational limits that define entities as separate from one another” (Ashforth, Kreiner and Fugate, 2000, p. 474). Though often unseen, boundaries are integral to the way individuals order their environment and reveal how individuals’ identity is structured (Zerubavel, 1991). They arise in environmental contexts, as with making a distinction between home and work; in role identity, such as with distinguishing between being a parent and worker; and in privacy negotiation, such as with limiting disclosures to select individuals. The many varied and complex roles that individuals play in everyday life provide significant opportunity for establishing boundaries, and for boundary crossings and transition, i.e., the psychological movement between roles and contexts (Ashforth, Kreiner and Fugate, 2000).

Individuals differ in the degree of flexibility and permeability of the boundaries that segment their lives. Flexible boundaries allow individuals to change the time and location in which a role is enacted or to allow private information to be relayed to another; flexibility is often thought of as the ‘when’ of boundaries (Sundaramurthy and Kreiner, 2008), and is often tied to role and environmental contexts. The more inflexible

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a boundary is, for example, the greater the constraints on role performance in alternative environments (Ashforth, Kreiner and Fugate, 2000), and the less opportunity for role identity failures. Permeability refers to the degree to which an individual physically located in one domain must be psychologically concerned with another (Hall and Richter, 1988), and refers to the substance of our categorizations. Boundaries that are permeable allow individuals to transition easily between spheres; rigid boundaries, on the other hand, limit the ability to perform roles in alternative spheres.

Studies of boundary work, or the strategies, principles, and practices by which we create and maintain cultural categories and role identity (Nippert-Eng, 1996a), are illuminating because they provide insight into the ways in which individuals create and understand their environment and self, and for how they give meaning to everyday life. Significant attention has been paid to the examination of work-family boundaries in offline contexts (e.g., Ashforth, Kreiner and Fugate, 2000; Nippert-Eng, 1996a, 1996b; Rothbard, Phillips and Dumas, 2005), but few studies have examined how boundary transitions or boundary work are carried out in online spaces.

Boundary-relevant Characteristics of Social Media

Social media platforms are designed to address multiple audiences as one, and this quality of broadcast alters the control an individual has over the intended audience for disclosure (Tufekci, 2008). This can result in user-generated content becoming decontextualized for other viewers; in disclosures being communicated beyond the imagined audience (Litt, 2012); or in 'context collapse,' the convergence of disparate social contexts into a single space (boyd, 2008). These conditions challenge the processes associated with boundary establishment and maintenance, processes which are especially important to relational development (Altman and Taylor, 1983) and to the regulation of privacy (Petronio, 2002). Social media platforms, and their propensity for context collapse, have some impact on boundary flexibility; however, by their very nature, they increase the level of boundary permeability between social spheres significantly. The proliferation of social media, and their widespread adoption, elevates the significance that boundary work and boundary transitions have to everyday living.

Method

Using data collected through in-depth, face-to-face interviews with 23 social media users between the ages of 45 and 65 years, this study explores attitudes and the strategies used, often in combination, in the processes of social boundary placement and navigation. The interview data was thematically analyzed and clustered into an explanatory framework consistent with the interview texts.

Findings

Analysis reveals connection activity on social media platforms is an important site for the construction and maintenance of social boundaries. The strategies used by participants to place social boundaries and make them more rigid were responsive to the characteristics of digital media that foster boundary permeability, and especially context collapse. Integrating boundary work, or the strategies that participants used to navigate and make boundaries more permeable, consisted of social behaviors as well as discursive tactics, and served to integrate multiple environments into a single forum

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and multiple roles into a unified identity. These practices and dispositions often result from accumulated life experiences, and distinguish social media use at midlife as unique from that of persons in earlier life phases. Importantly, the articulation of social media boundary placement and navigation processes underscores some of the inconspicuous ways in which these technologies have shaped everyday life.

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