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The Relationship Between Work Boundary Strength and Employees' Organizational Identification: The Moderating Role of Work Boundary Preference Congruence

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A R T I C L E I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

Weak work boundaries are increasingly favored by employees for facilitating work-nonwork balance and have been adopted by many organizations as a management strategy to enhance employees' organizational identification. However, does employees' organizational identification increase as work boundaries shift from strong to weak? Existing research has not provided consistent and affirmative answers. Drawing on social exchange theory and person-environment fit theory, this paper argues that both excessively weak and excessively strong work boundaries reduce employees' organizational identification, revealing an inverted U-shaped relationship between work boundary strength and organizational identification. This relationship is moderated by the congruence between work boundary strength and employees' preferences for such boundaries. These hypotheses are verified through questionnaire surveys, polynomial regression, and three-dimensional response surface analysis.

1.Introduction

A work boundary refers to the spatial, temporal, and psychological distinction between an employee's work and nonwork domains, reflecting the degree of integration between work and family life[1]. Work boundaries vary in strength based on their resistance to nonwork intrusion into the work domain[3]. A strong work boundary strategy involves strict penalties to curb nonwork behaviors at work, while a weak work boundary strategy allows employees autonomy over work time, location, task execution, and handling nonwork matters during work hours.

With the rise of knowledge workers, dual-career families, and single-child couples, and the growing presence of post-80s and post-90s employees in the workforce, weak work boundary strategies have gained popularity to meet employees' family needs, pursuit of individuality, and desire for quality of life[1,4]. A survey of 1,318 office workers by South Korean recruitment portal Saramin found that 67.2% of respondents preferred flexible work arrangements (e.g., flexible hours and locations) characterized by weak work boundaries[5]. The Blue Book of Women's Lives: Report on the Status of Chinese Women also showed that 70.6% of surveyed women hoped for weak work boundary arrangements after childbirth[6].

For organizations, implementing such policies aims to elicit positive employee outcomes (e.g., organizational citizenship behaviors, proactive work attitudes) in return for meeting employee demands[7]. Organizational identification is the foundation of such positive attitudes and behaviors—employees only exhibit autonomous work spirit and proactive conduct when they genuinely identify with their organization[8,9]. This raises critical questions: Does organizational identification increase as work boundaries weaken? What is the exact relationship between work boundary strength and organizational identification? What factors moderate this relationship?

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Existing research presents conflicting findings: some studies find that weakening work boundaries boosts organizational identification[10,11], while others conclude the opposite[12,13]. Social exchange theory explains that the impact of organizational policies on employees depends on perceived benefits[14,15]. When employees perceive organizational support, they reciprocate with positive attitudes. However, excessively weak boundaries trigger role switching, stress, and anxiety, eroding perceived organizational support and reducing organizational identification[1,16]. Excessively weak boundaries also blur role identities, weakening employees' perception of their organizational identity[17].

Employees' preferences for work boundary strength vary: some prefer weak boundaries for family needs, while others favor strong boundaries due to career or economic pressures[18-20]. Person-environment fit theory posits that positive psychological and behavioral outcomes occur when individual characteristics align with environmental features[21]. Thus, this study proposes that the relationship between work boundary strength and organizational identification is moderated by the congruence between boundary strength and employee preferences.

Verifying these hypotheses resolves inconsistencies in prior research and provides a theoretical basis for managers to tailor work boundary strategies to different employees. Using questionnaire data from 331 employees across 10 enterprises, this study employs polynomial regression and three-dimensional response surface analysis to test the relationships among work boundary strength, work boundary preference, and organizational identification, and proposes practical implications and future research directions.

2.Theoretical analysis and hypotheses

2.1.Work boundary strength and employees' organizational identification

Organizational identification stems from the consistency between individual self-cognition and organizational cognition, reflecting employees' emotional attachment, sense of belonging, pride, and loyalty to the organization[17,22]. High organizational identification fosters a shared fate mindset, enhancing work initiative, ownership, performance, and reducing turnover intention[23-27].

Organizational identification is shaped by organizational-level factors (e.g., corporate reputation, organizational justice, perceived organizational support, communication, leadership style)[28] and individual-level factors (e.g., personality, work stress, organizational trust, job satisfaction, well-being)[29,30]. Weakening work boundaries (e.g., increasing permeability between work and nonwork) is recognized as an effective way to improve organizational identification[3], and flexible work arrangements have been empirically linked to higher identification[10,11].

Social exchange theory clarifies this mechanism: employees reciprocate perceived organizational support with stronger organizational identification. However, excessively strong or weak boundaries generate negative outcomes[33]:

Excessively strong boundaries are perceived as control rather than support, triggering employee and family dissatisfaction and reducing identification[10].

Excessively weak boundaries cause frequent role switching, stress, and identity ambiguity, undermining perceived benefits and organizational identification[12,13,17,34].

Hypothesis 1: Work boundary strength has an inverted U-shaped relationship with employees' organizational identification.

2.2.The moderating role of work boundary preference

Clark's Boundary Maintainer Theory states that work boundaries are co-maintained by employees and organizations[35]. Employee preferences range from full segmentation (strong boundary preference: separating work and nonwork entirely) to full integration (weak boundary preference: handling nonwork matters while working), with most employees falling between these extremes[35].

Person-environment fit theory (demand-supply perspective) argues that organizational resources (weak work boundaries) interact with employee needs (boundary preferences)[40]. When studying the impact of organizational boundary strategies, employee attitudes must be considered[36,37], as congruence between organizational and employee attitudes generates positive effects[38].

Environmental deficit: Organizational boundary strength exceeds employee preference (insufficient weak boundaries).

Environmental surplus: Organizational boundary strength is lower than employee preference (excessively weak boundaries).

Supply-demand balance: Boundary strength matches employee preference[41].

Only congruence between boundary strength and preference maximizes organizational identification. Additionally, Warr's Vitamin Model suggests that even with perfect congruence, excessively high/low boundary strength still harms outcomes (extra depletion effect)[42,43].

Hypothesis 2: Employees' work boundary preference exerts a congruence-moderating effect on the relationship between work boundary strength and organizational identification. Organizational identification rises as boundary strength approaches employee preference and declines as it deviates; identification drops more sharply when boundary strength exceeds preference than when it falls short.

Hypothesis 3: Under perfect congruence, organizational identification varies with boundary strength. Identification is lower when boundary strength and preference are excessively high or low, and highest at moderate levels.

3.Research methods

3.1.Variable design and measurement

All scales were adapted from mature foreign instruments, using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Control variables included gender, age, tenure, position, education, and income.

Work boundary strength: Measured with Hecht et al.'s 8-item unidimensional scale, assessing organizational work boundary rigidity.

Work boundary preference: Adapted from Hecht et al.'s scale to ensure structural and content consistency with the boundary strength scale (per Kristof's fit measurement principles), with 8 items measuring employee preferences for boundary strength by revising Kreiner's scale.

Organizational identification: Measured with Mael & Ashforth's 6-item unidimensional scale, a widely adopted tool for organizational identification.

3.2.Research sample

Since the specific application context of the measurement tools used in this study has changed, and the Work Boundary Preference Scale was developed by modifying Kreiner's four-item version based on contextual requirements, a pilot survey was conducted to refine the questionnaire. A total of 150 questionnaires were distributed, with 96 valid responses collected, yielding a 6 4% validity rate. Building on this pilot, the formal survey was designed to accurately measure employees' organizational identification across varying levels of work boundary intensity. To account for the diversity in work boundary intensity and individual preference differences, the study targeted enterprises in cities such as Nanjing, Suzhou, and Shanghai that implement flexible work locations, flexible working hours, or other soft work boundary strategies. Additionally, to minimize self-report bias and enhance causal attribution validity, the formal survey was conducted during two periods: October–December 2014 and January–February 2016. Data on work boundary intensity and preferences were drawn from the first survey, while organizational identification data were obtained from the second survey.

In the first formal survey, a total of 397 questionnaires were distributed, with 328 valid questionnaires actually recovered, yielding a sample validity rate of 82.62%. Building upon the initial survey, an additional 328 questionnaires were distributed in the second round. The final sample included 255 valid responses: 51.76% male, 48.24% female; 29.41% under 30, 67.06% 30–50, 3.53% over 50; 18.04% college education or below, 72.94% bachelor's, 9.02% master's or above; 5.10% tenure ≤3 years, 15.29% 3–5 years, 43.53% 6–10 years, 36.08% over 10 years; 20.78% general staff, 30.59% frontline managers, 48.63% middle/senior managers; 16.47% monthly income ≤¥4,000, 24.71% ¥4,001–6,000, 34.12% ¥6,001–8,000, 24.70% over ¥8,000.

3.3.Reliability and validity analysis

Although all scales in the questionnaire were derived from established instruments, changes in translation, revision, and practical application scenarios necessitated refining the questionnaire based on exploratory factor analysis results, followed by confirmatory factor analysis using actual survey data.

First, exploratory factor analysis was conducted using the pre-research data on three variables: work boundary intensity, work boundary preference, and organizational identity. The Bartlett's test results showed KMO values of 0.90,0.83, and 0.89, all statistically significant, indicating suitability for factor analysis. These variables collectively accounted for 71.63%,63.89%, and 71.08% of the total variance, respectively. All item factor loadings exceeded 0.7, meeting Comrey et al.' s criterion of ≥0.45, confirming that all items could be retained.

Table 1. Results of exploratory factor analysis for each variable (n=96)

Variable	Measurement Entry	Factor Loading	Cronbach's a	Total Variance Explanation
Work Boundary Strength	Item1	0.88	0.94	71.63%
	Item2	0.85		
	Item3	0.84		
	Item4	0.83		
	Item5	0.83		
	Item6	0.89		
	Item7	0.83		
	Item8	0.83		
Work Boundary Preference	Item1	0.81	0.92	63.89%
	Item2	0.80		
	Item3	0.81		
	Item4	0.83		
	Item5	0.81		
	Item6	0.80		
	Item7	0.73		
	Item8	0.81		
Organizational Identification	Item1	0.88	0.92	71.08%
	Item2	0.88		
	Item3	0.82		
	Item4	0.88		
	Item5	0.90		
	Item6	0.73		

Subsequently, using data from the formal survey, confirmatory factor analysis was employed to assess the reliability and validity of the three variables. In terms of reliability, the Cronbach's Alpha values for work boundary intensity, work boundary preference, and organizational identity were 0.9 6,0.89, and 0.81, respectively—all exceeding 0.8, indicating that all scales in this study possess strong reliability. Regarding validity, except for the work boundary preference scale, all scales have been extensively validated by scholars domestically and internationally across various contexts, ensuring their content validity. The work boundary preference scale, being derived from the work boundary intensity scale, also enjoys adequate content validity assurance.

4.Data analysis

4.1.Descriptive and correlational analysis

The correlation coefficient matrix reveals a significant negative correlation between work boundary strength and organizational identification (r = -0.43, p <0.01), consistent with the findings of most scholars [10,12], though this does not imply a purely linear relationship between them. There is a significant positive correlation between work boundary strength and work boundary preference (r = 0.32, p <0.01), while work boundary preference shows a negative correlation with organizational identification (r = -0.34, p <0.01).

Table 2. Descriptive and correlation statistics (n=255)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Gender	1.00								
Age	-0.31	1.00							
Years of Service	-0.22**	0.68**	1.00						
Education Level	0.04	-0.18**	-0.09	1.00					
Position	-0.16*	0.19**	0.22**	0.34**	1.00				
Income	-0.15*	0.07	0.17**	0.42**	0.55**	1.00			
Work Boundary Intensity	0.07	-0.06	0.05	0.20**	0.18**	0.19**	1.00		
Work Boundary Preferences	0.03	-0.02	0.08	0.03	0.12*	0.01	0.32**	1.00	
Organizational Identity	-0.05	0.08	0.00	-0.03	0.01	0.02	-0.43**	-0.34**	1.00
Average Value	0.52	2.91	4.11	2.89	2.38	3.67	3.81	3.17	2.94
Standard Deviation	0.50	0.75	0.84	0.60	0.93	1.02	0.73	0.62	0.66

4.2.Hypothesis test

In research on matchability, the most commonly used method historically has been the "difference method," which involves subtracting the scores of two identical attribute scales for environmental and individual factors, with the absolute value or square of the difference serving as the evaluation criterion. However, this approach has significant limitations, such as reducing the reliability of conclusions and conflating the effects of environmental and individual factors. More importantly, it fails to capture the three-dimensional relationship among individuals, their environment, and their performance outcomes. Addressing these shortcomings, Edwards et al. proposed using polynomial regression equations combined with three-dimensional response surfaces to characterize how individual-environment match affects outcome variables. Accordingly, this study employs Edwards et al. 's methodology to analyze the impact of the match between job boundary strength and employees' job boundary preferences on organizational identification.

5.Conclusions and discussion

5.1.Research conclusions

This study, grounded in social exchange theory and individual-environment fit theory, proposes two hypotheses: (1) a nonlinear relationship exists between work boundary intensity and employee organizational identification, and (2) employees 'work boundary preferences mediate this relationship through fit adjustment. Using polynomial regression and three-dimensional response surface methods, the hypotheses were validated as follows: First, an inverted U-shaped relationship exists between work boundary intensity and organizational identification. The linear relationship between work boundary intensity and organizational identification showed a significant negative correlation, corroborating previous findings while contradicting some scholars' claims of a positive correlation. When incorporating the square term of work boundary intensity into the model, an inverted U-shaped curve emerged: organizational identification increases as boundary intensity decreases, but declines again when intensity falls below the inflection point of 2.78 (measured using Likert's five-point scale). This conclusion not only validates previous scholars 'similar views but also reveals that the inconsistency in findings regarding their relationship stems from researchers typically focusing on specific work boundary strategies—for instance, merely examining how particular remote work arrangements or flexible scheduling affect employees' organizational identity. In reality, however, the intensity of boundaries varies across different boundary strategies, and the relationship between varying boundary intensities and employees' organizational identity differs accordingly.

Second, the alignment between work boundary intensity and employees 'preferences for work boundaries significantly influences organizational identification. Organizational identification declines when employees' preferred work boundary intensity exceeds or falls below the level provided by the organization. Only when the actual work boundary intensity closely matches employees 'preferences does it foster stronger organizational identification. This occurs because greater discrepancies between the organization's boundary intensity and employees 'preferences lead to unmet needs, resulting in reduced perceived support and consequently lower identification. Additionally, the graph reveals that the curve when work boundary intensity is below employees' preferences is smoother than when it exceeds their preferences. Specifically, assuming employees' work boundary preference is WBP, work boundary intensity is WBS, and organizational identification is OI: when WBS <WBP with a change of ΔWBS, the change in organizational identification is ΔOI_1; when WBS> WBP with the same ΔWBS change, the change is ΔOI_2. Thus, $\Delta OI_1 < \Delta OI_2$. The primary reason is that, although employees do not demonstrate higher organizational identification when WBS does not align with WBP due to unmet subjective preferences, it is undeniable that weaker work boundaries—at least compared to stronger ones—allow employees more energy and time to handle non-work matters. Consequently, organizational identification in the first scenario is less sensitive to changes in work boundary intensity than in the second scenario.

Third, when the intensity of work boundaries aligns with employees' preferences for such boundaries, differences in boundary intensity (or preference) lead to varying levels of organizational identification. Notably, when both boundary intensity and preference are moderate (as measured at 2.65 in this study), employees exhibit the highest level of organizational identification.The objective of Dahua is not only to develop strategies that align work boundary intensity with employee preferences but also to maintain both at a moderate intensity level whenever possible. This approach is essential because, among the factors influencing the relationship between work boundary intensity and organizational identification, employee subjective preferences are supplemented by influences from family and social relationships. Consequently, under matching conditions, different levels of work boundary intensity—by providing varying resources for handling non-work matters such as family and social obligations—lead to differing degrees of organizational identification. Based on the study's sample, most employees objectively require a work boundary intensity of 2.65 to better balance their subjective preferences and familial needs. When both work boundary intensity and employee preferences exceed 2.65, while the organization's offerings align with preferences, this intensity proves insufficient to motivate employees to allocate sufficient resources for non-work tasks, potentially causing family dissatisfaction and negatively impacting organizational identification. Conversely, when the alignment value falls below 2.65, a lower-intensity work boundary may satisfy preferences but allows engagement in time-consuming non-work activities like gaming or reading novels, thereby increasing stress perception and weakening organizational identification.

5.2.Theoretical significance

First, this study establishes an inverted U-shaped relationship between work boundary intensity and employee organizational identification, concluding that employees exhibit higher organizational identification when work boundary intensity is moderately to highly intense. This finding not only addresses scholars 'call by Lin Zhong et al. to avoid focusing solely on the impact of work boundary strategies on employees but also emphasize the need to examine their effects on organizations, while also responding to Wei Huimin et al.' s observation that existing research findings on work/non-work boundaries often conflict and requires further investigation into underlying causes[13].

Additionally, this research enriches the literature on work/non-work domains and provides a theoretical foundation for identifying optimal work boundary strategies to enhance organizational identification. Second, the study reveals that employees' preferences regarding work boundary intensity mediate the relationship between work boundary intensity and organizational identification. Ashforth et al. argue that understanding the interaction between individual and organizational factors is essential to elucidating the mechanisms underlying enhanced organizational identification[9]. Guided by this perspective, this study examines the interrelationships among work boundary intensity, boundary preference, and organizational identification. The conclusions not only advance research on antecedent variables of organizational identification but also address gaps in studies examining the combined influence of individual and organizational factors, thereby supplementing the Individual-Environment Fit Theory.

Finally, building upon the conclusion from the traditional individual-environment fit theory—that employees exhibit higher organizational identification when work boundary intensity mismatches their preferences—a further intriguing finding emerges: under conditions where work boundary intensity aligns with preferences, organizational identification varies across different levels of work boundary intensity, reaching its peak when both intensity and preference are moderate. While traditional fit theories typically posit optimal performance under perfect individual-organization alignment, the impact of variations in fit parameter values has been largely overlooked. Thus, this study not only supplements existing theories on work boundaries but also enriches the conceptual framework of the individual-environment fit theory.

5.3.Practical insights

First, organizations should adopt a moderately intense work boundary strategy, as this approach most effectively enhances employees 'organizational identification. Both overly lax strategies—such as remote work arrangements—and overly strict ones—like prohibiting all non-work activities in the workplace—are ill-suited to current contexts. When work boundaries are too lenient, organizations can increase office hours to strengthen them; conversely, when boundaries are overly rigid, adopting more flexible working hours can mitigate their impact. Second, implementing work boundary strategies must account for individual employee preferences. Since preferences vary—some favor stricter boundaries while others prefer more lenient ones—a one-size-fits-all approach fails to satisfy all employees' needs and undermines the strategy's positive effects on organizational identification. Therefore, organizations should tailor boundary strategies to align intensity with individual preferences. Finally, organizations should proactively promote moderately intense work boundaries. When boundary intensity matches employee preferences, different boundary levels yield varying degrees of organizational identification. Based on this study's sample, a moderately intense boundary strategy (2.65) aligns best with employee preferences. Therefore, organizations can proactively encourage employees to favor work boundaries of moderate intensity in two ways: first, during employees 'socialization process, by employing proactive communication and training initiatives to modify their original preferences and align them toward moderate boundary intensity; second, when hiring new employees, prioritize selecting candidates whose preferred work boundary intensity matches the organization's requirements.

5.4.Research gaps and future prospects

While this study yields several valuable conclusions, it also reveals certain limitations and directions for future research: First, the intensity of work boundaries, preferences regarding work boundaries, and employees' organizational identification were all derived from self-reported data.Future research could employ supervisor evaluations, peer assessments, or a combination of these methods to obtain more objective data. Secondly, the study's scope was limited to a subset of employees across several organizations; this sampling limitation may compromise the representativeness of findings. Future studies should expand the sample using random sampling to enhance the scientific validity of conclusions. Thirdly, factors such as marital status, childbearing status, dual-income households, and parental assistance may influence how work boundary intensity affects organizational identification. Therefore, future research should control for these variables. Fourthly, while employees' work boundary preferences affect the relationship between work boundary intensity and organizational identification, other moderating factors—such as an organization's implementation strength of boundary strategies, employees' ability to execute these strategies, and family support—require further investigation. Fifthly, the mediating mechanisms linking work boundary intensity and organizational identification remain unclear. Current theoretical explanations suggest that role ambiguity, role conflict, and organizational trust may explain this relationship, though empirical validation is needed.

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