When Worlds Collide in Cyberspace: 
How Boundary Work in Online Social Networks Impacts Professional Relationships

Ariane Ollier-Malaterre
Rouen Business School
aom@rouenbs.fr

Nancy P. Rothbard
The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania
nrothbard@wharton.upenn.edu

Justin Berg
The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania
bergj@wharton.upenn.edu

December, 2012
Forthcoming, *Academy of Management Review*

**Key words:** Boundary work, Online social networks, Work-nonwork preferences for Integration and Segmentation, Self-enhancement, Self-verification, Respect, Liking, Relationships.

**Note:** We thank our editor, Kevin Steensma, and the three anonymous reviewers who provided insightful comments. We thank the Wharton Center for Leadership and Change Management and the Wharton Global Initiatives Research Program for funding. We thank participants at the 2011 Wharton People and Organizations Conference and members of the Contemporary P@thways of Career, Life and Learning Research Center of Rouen Business School for their helpful comments on prior versions of this paper. We thank Tarani Merriweather Woodson for her helpful research assistance.
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ABSTRACT

As employees increasingly interact with their professional contacts on online social networks that are personal in nature, such as Facebook or Twitter, they are likely to experience a collision of their professional and personal identities that is unique to this new and expanding social space. In particular, online social networks present employees with boundary management and identity negotiation opportunities and challenges, because they invite non-tailored self-disclosure to broad audiences, while offering few of the physical and social cues that normally guide social interactions. How and why do employees manage the boundaries between their professional and personal identities in online social networks, and how do these behaviors impact the way they are regarded by professional contacts? We build a framework to theorize about how work-nonwork boundary preferences and self-evaluation motives drive the adoption of four archetypical sets of online boundary management behaviors (open, audience, content, and hybrid), and the consequences of these behaviors for respect and liking in professional relationships. Content and hybrid behaviors are more likely to increase respect and liking than open and audience behaviors; audience and hybrid behaviors are less risky for respect and liking than open and content behaviors but more difficult to maintain over time.
As the world becomes increasingly connected through social media, employees are interacting more with co-workers, supervisors, and other professional contacts on online social networks. Some of these online networks, such as Facebook or Twitter, are social spaces where interactions can be personal as well as professional. Participation in such networks results in a potential collision of professional and personal worlds that may open up opportunities as well as create challenges for employees as they strive to establish and maintain respect and liking in the eyes of their professional contacts (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000; Kossek, Noe, & Demarr, 1999; Phillips, Rothbard, & Dumas, 2009). When interacting in online social networks, employees move from offline interactions, where disclosure and feedback are tailored within particular conversations and guided by clear physical cues (Goffman, 1956), to interactions characterized by open disclosure to broad audiences, some of which are not readily visible (Boyd, 2007; Donath & Boyd, 2004; Ryan, 2008). Thus, in the new world of work, collisions of one’s professional and personal domains are increasingly frequent online. This presents new opportunities and challenges for boundary management and identity negotiation in cyberspace that are not directly addressed in past theory and research on these processes in physical space (e.g., Ashforth et al., 2000; Kreiner, 2006; Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2009; Nippert-Eng, 1995; Rothbard, Phillips, & Dumas, 2005; Swann, Johnson & Bosson, 2009). Although scholars have begun to investigate challenges for individuals using social media more generally (Donath & Boyd, 2004; Ellison, Steinfeld, & Lampe, 2007; Forest & Wood, 2012), little is known about how employees manage the boundary between their professional and personal identities on online social networks and what this means for their professional relationships.

To guide theory and research on online boundary management, we build a framework that extends boundary theory into the new and expanding world of online social networks. We
propose that employees’ online boundary management behaviors are driven by a combination of their preferences for segmentation vs. integration of their professional and personal identities (Ashforth et al, 2000; Kreiner, 2006; Rothbard et al., 2005) and their motives for self-enhancement or self-verification (Brown, 1990; Brown, 1991; Kwang & Swann, 2010; Pfeffer & Fong, 2005; Sedikides & Strube, 1995; Swann, 1983; Swann, 1990; Wiesenfeld, Swann, Brockner, & Bartel, 2007). We identify four sets of online boundary management behaviors that employees enact in response to these drivers, and theorize about how these behaviors influence the degree to which employees are respected and liked by professional contacts.

We focus on respect and liking as important elements of professional relationships for two reasons. First, respect and liking tap into the two core dimensions by which people formulate judgments of others—competence and warmth. Moreover, judgments of professional contacts on these two dimensions may diverge based on interactions on online social networks that mix the professional and personal (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Fiske, Xu, Cuddy, & Glick, 1999; Hamilton & Fallot, 1974). Second, respect and liking are highly desirable in organizations and have been related to a number of important outcomes (Cuddy, Glick, & Beninger, 2011), including supervisory performance ratings (Lefkowitz, 2000; Robbins & DeNisi, 1994), group commitment (Tyler & Blader, 2003), leader-member exchange (Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Wayne & Ferris, 1990), and group performance (Gruenfeld, Mannix, Williams, & Neale, 1996; Jehn & Shah, 1997). Recent studies show that self-disclosure in online social networks can significantly affect liking and individuals’ impressions of others more generally (Forest & Wood, 2012; Weisbuch, Ivcevic, & Ambady, 2009). In this way, employees’ boundary management behaviors in online social networks can help or hurt their professional relationships and thus hinder their career success (Cuddy et al., 2011; Dutta, 2010).
Because research on social media is still relatively new, many empirical questions around employees’ experiences on online social networks remain unanswered. However, a recent review of Facebook-related research (Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012) points to benefits such as keeping in touch with strong and weak ties and in particular crystallizing otherwise ephemeral relationships (Ellison et al. 2007), yet also points to evidence that employees are struggling with issues of identity presentation and relationships among groups and individuals. In particular, studies focusing on hiring decisions show that the chances of applicants being offered a job increase if their Facebook profile emphasizes family values or professionalism, but decrease if a profile contains inappropriate material, such as alcohol and drugs (Bohnert & Ross, 2010). While management research to date has not directly examined the impact of employees’ behavior in online social networks on their professional relationships, we draw on this emergent body of evidence to argue that the way employees interact with their professional contacts on online social networks impacts the respect and liking they receive from them (Stopfer & Gosling, in press). Thus, by building a theoretical framework of online boundary management, we open up new lines of research on a fast-growing phenomenon that has important implications for employees, managers, and organizations.

BOUNDARY MANAGEMENT: FROM PHYSICAL SPACE TO CYBERSPACE

Boundary management of multiple identities is a classic organizational challenge. Following the second industrial revolution, the boundary between professional and personal life was cited as one of the essential features of a bureaucratized society (Weber, 1968), leading employees to enact different identities when they interacted in a professional setting versus a personal setting with family and friends (Ashforth et al., 2000; Kossek et al., 1999; Nippert-Eng, 1995; Rothbard et al., 2005). Boundaries have been defined as "mental fences" (Zerubavel, 1991:
2) used to simplify and order the environment or “physical, temporal, emotional, cognitive, and/or relational limits that define entities as separate from one another” (Ashforth et al., 2000: 474). Employees have come to rely on boundaries to delineate their professional and personal domains and avoid the co-activation of incongruent facets of their identities (Rothbard & Ramarajan, 2009). To some extent, these boundaries are reified through social cues regarding norms and expectations that guide behavior in each of these domains (Nippert-Eng, 1995). However, boundary management is an active, ongoing process (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000), and employees either reinforce or lessen boundaries during social interactions. For example, they may befriend work colleagues and invite them into their homes.

A key reason why employees navigate their multiple identities in this way is to maintain or enhance their professional relationships (Dumas, Phillips, and Rothbard, in press; Phillips et al., 2009; Roberts, 2005). On the one hand, the professional domain often includes strong and clear norms and expectations of what constitutes appropriate professional behavior (Bloor & Dawson, 1994; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufman, 2006). Thus, employees who enact their personal identities in ways that are seen as inappropriate in the professional domain lose respect in the eyes of their professional contacts. On the other hand, employees’ professional contacts may appreciate seeing aspects of their personal identities, as personal self-disclosure and frequent interactions tend to increase liking (Collins & Miller, 1994; Saegert, Swap, & Zajonc, 1973). Therefore, if employees can effectively manage the boundaries between their professional and personal identities such that they engage in some personal disclosure in their interactions without violating professional norms, they will be more respected and liked by professional contacts.

However, to date, little theory has shed light on the boundary work that employees do when interacting on online social networks. Here, we focus on online social networks that are
personal in nature and pervasive enough such that employees receive connection requests from professional contacts (e.g., Facebook or Twitter). With a variety of features including biographical profiles, photo sharing, and public comments (Boyd, 2007), these online social networks are becoming a key forum for relationship development and maintenance (Ellison et al., 2007). Recent data point to a blurring of the professional and personal domains on these online networks, which exacerbates the need for active boundary management. For instance, younger employees are connected on Facebook to an average of 16 coworkers (Millennial Branding, 2012) and 41 percent of Facebook users think it is irresponsible to ignore a friend request from a coworker (Ketchum Global Research Network, 2011). While most of the literature on online social networks focuses on privacy (see for instance Boyd, 2007; Lewis, Kaufman, & Christakis, 2008; Martin, 2009; Solove, 2007), a few studies report evidence of individuals conducting online boundary work through self-censorship (Lampinen, Tamminen, & Oulasvirta, 2009; Skeels & Grudin, 2009), adjusting profile visibility (Tufekci, 2008), customizing profiles to disclose different information to different individuals (Donath & Boyd, 2004; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008), and creating multiple profiles (Stutzman & Hartzog, 2012).

A great deal of personal information is often disclosed in these online forums. However, a key feature that distinguishes such online interaction is that the information disclosed is much less tailored to a particular conversation. In face-to-face and other individualized interactions such as email or phone calls, employees can manage the boundary between their professional and personal identities by controlling the amount and nature of personal information that they disclose to professional contacts over time, and by adapting such disclosure to particular dyadic relationships (Collins, 1981; Goffman, 1956). In online social networks, personal information is disclosed in a non-tailored fashion. Compared with feedback and comments made in offline
work interactions for instance, online information is shared with a potentially broader audience, and is also persistent in time and easily searchable (Boyd, 2007). Because of this, when two professional contacts first connect in a primarily personal online social network like Facebook, they are granted access to a bevy of personal information about each other all at once, perhaps including content the focal person was unaware of or had forgotten. When a new relationship starts offline, individuals also exchange a large amount of personal information initially, yet this information is tailored and directed in a personalized manner in the conversation between the individuals (Goffman, 1956; Taylor, 1968; Worthy, Gary, & Kahn, 1969). By contrast, connecting in online social networks unleashes a flood of self-disclosure in the form of an archive of information that is not tailored to the particular relationship or situation, and its original context and meaning may be skewed (Boyd, 2008). The recent “timeline” feature of Facebook is a vivid illustration of a non-tailored chronological display of a vast amount of information. In addition, this information may be easily searchable and retrievable using search engines and websites that collect available information on a given individual and his or her connections (Boyd, 2007). Such a flood of non-tailored self-disclosure—especially at the beginning of a professional relationship—is an experience that seems to be unique to connecting in online social networks.

A second key feature of online interaction is that even after the initial flood of self-disclosure, the sharing of personal information continues between the contacts without access to the type of visible social cues—including facial expressions, vocal tones, and body language (Mehrabian, 1971)—that normally help reinforce norms and scripts in physical space by providing critical information about how one should behave in social interactions (Collins, 1981, 2004; Goffman, 1959). Online social networks that are personal in nature essentially put users in
one large, invisible room with “Friends” or connections from various social worlds, which often include both the professional and personal. Employees interact with a visible audience (e.g., contacts who frequently interact with the employee or are available to chat at the time the employee logs in) that makes salient particular social identities (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This prompts them to use the social scripts they associate with these particular in-groups (Tajfel, 1970). Meanwhile, out-group members might be in the invisible audience — that is all the other contacts, including professional contacts, who may not be salient in employees’ mind as they share information (Boyd, 2007). Employees often use the visible audience as a guide to recreate social cues and post information that is appropriate for these contacts. However, in doing so, they also unwittingly disclose that information to invisible audiences, for which the personal information might not be as appropriate. Employees can navigate online social networks without physical cues to some extent, using self-categorization processes (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). Yet, without the physical and social cues that typically help communicate and enforce norms in physical space, they are more likely to fall prey to false consensus biases (Ross, Greene, & House, 1977) and overestimate how much their professional contacts share their understanding of what constitutes appropriate disclosure of information in online social networks.

In addition to the challenges of managing the information employees disclose about themselves in online social networks, an employee’s professional or personal contacts can disclose information regarding the employee and provide public or semi-public feedback on information the employee discloses (Boyd, 2007). For instance, an employee may suffer reputational consequences from a coworker’s comment implying that she does not work hard, even if that is actually not the case. Employees could also be embarrassed by personal comments made by their friends and family members that their professional contacts also see. The
asynchronous and public or semi-public nature of the interactions thus constrains employees’ choices regarding boundary management and identity negotiation, since employees need to consider to whom it might be appropriate to connect and what information to share – not only in terms of what they themselves disclose online but also what others may disclose about them.

Taken together, these challenges suggest that managing boundaries between the professional and the personal is qualitatively different in cyberspace than in physical space, and for many employees, such boundary management is more difficult online than offline (Ashforth et al., 2000; Kossek et al., 1999). If employees want a boundary between their professional and personal identities on online social networks, they have to actively construct and maintain it themselves. This creates ongoing challenges for employees who face social pressure to enact different norms, roles, and scripts within their professional and personal domains. The ways in which employees deal with these challenges significantly influence the degree to which their professional contacts like and respect them, as suggested by emerging empirical evidence (e.g., Bohnert & Ross, 2010; Forest & Wood, 2012). However, theory and research to date have not directly addressed how and why employees manage boundaries between their professional and personal identities in online social networks, or how this affects the way their professional contacts regard them.

**ONLINE BOUNDARY MANAGEMENT: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

**Motivational Drivers and Online Boundary Management Behaviors**

We develop a framework to explain the motivational drivers of online boundary management behaviors. Drawing on social network theory, we build on the premise that employees, when interacting in online social networks, address two fundamental questions: how they structure their ties in the networks and what type of information they share with their ties
(Burt, 2004; Granovetter, 1973; Podolny, 2005). On the one hand, employees can manage their structural social capital—i.e., to whom they are connected in the network (Nahapiet & Goshal, 1998). In particular, they can choose whether to be connected to professional contacts at all or keep professional contacts separate from personal contacts. On the other hand, employees can manage their relational social capital—i.e., the nature and richness of the information that is exchanged with their connections (Nahapiet & Goshal, 1998). Thus, they can choose what and how much personal information to disclose to their professional contacts. Employees’ answers to these questions about with whom they communicate and what they communicate in their online social networks form the basis for our framework.

Two key identity navigation processes may guide employees’ answers to these two fundamental questions: boundary work as informed by work-nonwork boundary preferences (Ashforth et al., 2000; Kreiner, 2006; Rothbard et al., 2005) and identity negotiation as informed by self-evaluation motives (Sedikides, 1993; Swann, Pelham, & Krull, 1989). We use identity navigation as a broad term encompassing both boundary work—i.e., constructing mental frameworks to delineate how roles and social identities are merged or separated (Ashforth et al., 2000), and identity negotiation—i.e., processes “whereby relationship partners reach agreements regarding ‘who is who’” (Swann et al., 2009: 81). First, we contend that employees’ answers to the question of with whom they communicate in online social networks primarily correspond to whether they prefer to mentally organize their social worlds such that facets of their professional and personal identities are segmented vs. integrated (Ashforth et al., 2000; Kreiner, 2006; Rothbard et al., 2005). Second, we contend that employees’ answers to the question of what they communicate in online social networks primarily correspond to whether they choose to present themselves to the world in ways that verify or enhance their existing self-views (Sedikides, 1993;
Swann et al., 1989). The interactions of these two separate cognitive processes drive employees’ boundary management behaviors in important and predictable ways.

First, based on prior work on boundary management, we expect that the preference to segment vs. integrate one’s professional and personal identities is an important driver of whom employees are motivated to connect with in online social networks and how they structure these ties (Ashforth et al., 2000; Kreiner, 2006; Rothbard et al., 2005). In particular, employees who have a greater desire to segment their professional and personal identities are likely more attentive to and concerned with classifying the domain in which their contacts belong, and in response, will engage in efforts to keep different classifications of contacts separated in their online social world (just as they do in the physical world). Segmenting domains enables employees to avoid the psychological discomfort and conflict caused by the co-activation of personal and professional identities that are not compatible (Rothbard & Ramarajan, 2009). For instance, employees who prefer to segment their identities may feel uncomfortable posting family pictures in online social networks if their supervisor, co-workers, or other professional contacts can see them. By contrast, employees who prefer integrating their identities are not likely to manage their online audience as actively. Instead, they are more likely to deliberately seek out network ties across domains, creating a large pooled audience of both professional and personal contacts. Thus, segmentors should be motivated to more actively construct boundaries between their professional and personal contacts in online social networks than integrators.

Second, employees’ motives to present themselves to others in a positive and socially desirable manner (self-enhancement) or to behave in a manner that confirms their own positive and negative self-views (self-verification) are likely to play an important role in shaping the content they disclose in online social networks. We focus on self-enhancement and self-
verification because these two self-evaluation motives have received extensive attention and empirical support and have been frequently contrasted in the literature (See Anseel & Lievens 2006; Sedikides, 1993; Swann, 1990; Swann et al., 1989 and see Kwang & Swann, 2010 for a meta-analysis). In addition, both involve evaluations of the self that concern how people want to be seen by others (and thus the content they share online), rather than more internally focused self-evaluation motives such as self-assessment and self-improvement. Whereas preferences for segmentation vs. integration lie on opposite ends of a continuum (Rothbard et al., 2005), self-enhancement and self-verification are essentially different routes to self-evaluation rather than opposite motives. Self-enhancement suggests that when people self-evaluate, they want to enhance their positive self-concept and protect it from negative information. Thus, they will selectively attend to and promote self-relevant information that has favorable implications for the self and avoid such information that has negative implications (Sedikides, 1993). In contrast, self-verification drives people to seek affirmation of their pre-existing self-concept, such that they will attend to and promote either positive or negative self-relevant information as long as it is consistent with their self-views (for reviews, see Swann, 1983, 1990). Therefore, although not on a continuum, self-enhancement and self-verification represent very different approaches to self-evaluation and identity negotiation. 

Although online social networks create new opportunity structures to display identity cues and select interaction partners (Swann, 1987), they also constrain the flexibility of self-

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1 Research examining self-enhancement and self-verification motives suggests that individual differences such as narcissism (John & Robins, 1994; Paulhus, 1998), self-esteem (Baumeister, Tice, Hutton, 1989), self-certainty (e.g., Pelham & Swann, 1994; Swann & Ely, 1984) and uncertainty avoidance (Roney & Sorrentino, 1995), the rushed vs. calm nature of the environment (Hixon & Swann, 1993; Swann & Schroeder, 1995) or the stage of the relationship (i.e., qualifying or established) influence which motive will be used by an individual at a particular time (Swann, 1990). For example, narcissists are more likely to self-enhance (John & Robins, 1994; Paulhus, 1999). Also, individuals are more likely to suspend their motive to self-verify when relationships are in a “qualifying stage” where they are trying to prove themselves to one another, especially in the context of asymmetric relationships with superiors (Swann et al., 2009).
presentational behaviors because disclosure and interactions cannot be easily tailored to dyadic interactions and roles are often enacted simultaneously. In offline interactions where people activate and enact situated identities (Alexander & Weil, 1969) and role-specific conceptions (Swann et al., 2009), employees can choose to self-enhance with specific professional contacts such as supervisors and to self-verify with others such as peers. However, when interacting online, employees must make dominant or macro choices that apply to broad groups of contacts. For instance, if their dominant choice is to self-verify, perhaps because they are connected with mostly peers or because their personal contacts are most salient in their minds, then their other professional contacts (supervisors, subordinates, etc.) may access the same self-verifying information, restricting employees’ ability to self-enhance towards these contacts. Even if they tend to first verify positive self-views, over time they are bound to also share negative information about themselves, perhaps when seeking emotional support (Ellison & al., 2007).

This self-verifying disclosure of vulnerability may have very different implications for respect and liking in the eyes of professional contacts than a macro choice driven by self-enhancement.

Employees seeking self-enhancement are more likely to try to share information that helps manage the impressions others form of them (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Schlenker, 1980; Swann et al., 1989). Since employees who self-enhance have a desire to see themselves, their actions, traits, and attitudes in the most positive light (Pfeffer & Fong, 2005), we expect that they will seek favorable evaluations and feedback so as to achieve a high level of personal worth (Morrison & Bies, 1991; Sedikides & Strube, 1995). Thus, they will actively try to make positive impressions (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Roberts, 2005; Schlenker, 1980), and be more likely to regulate the information they share on online social networks as well as the information disclosed by others about them. By contrast, employees who prefer to ensure the consistency and
stability of their self-views (i.e., self-verification; Swann, 1983) may disclose a more diverse array of positive and negative self-relevant information, with the expectation that the audience they reach, or part of this audience, gives them feedback that confirms their positive and negative self-views. In sum, self-enhancers are motivated to actively control the information they disclose online as a way to positively impress professional contacts (Brown, 1990; Brown, 1991; Sedikides & Strube, 1995), whereas self-verifiers are more likely to share both positive and more negative information as a way to receive confirmation of their self-views (Kwang & Swann, 2010; Swann, 1983; Swann, 1990; Swann, Pelham, & Krull, 1989; Wiesenfeld et al., 2007).

By crossing these two identity navigation processes into a 2 X 2 matrix, we develop a conceptual framework of four motivational drivers of online boundary management and four corresponding sets of archetypal online boundary management behaviors (see Table 1). While the motivational drivers capture employees’ desires regarding with whom they connect and what they share on online social networks, the archetypal behaviors capture the actions these desires are likely to drive employees to take on online social networks to construct and maintain their professional and personal identities over time. Table 2 provides examples of these four sets of behaviors, which are meant to be illustrative but not exhaustive.

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2 We conceptualize the temporal nature of online boundary management behaviors as analogous to personal projects, which are defined by Little (1983: 273) as “a set of interrelated acts extending over time…intended to maintain or attain a state of affairs foreseen by the individual”. This conceptualization places individuals in a specific, stable context that shapes their motivations to engage in online boundary management for a meaningful, but not permanent stretch of time (Little, 1983; McGregor & Little, 1998). This is in line with the notion that the two motivational drivers in our framework have been construed as stable individual preferences within a given social context, but are not personality traits and thus may change over an individual’s life course. More specifically, scholars have posited that preferences for segmentation vs. integration are stable in a given life stage (Kossek & Lautsch, 2012) and that self-enhancement and self-verification motives are associated with firmly held self-views, which are also likely to be relatively stable within a given set of relationships or contexts but are not permanent over time (Swann et al., 1989; Swann, Polzer, Seyle, & Ko, 2004). Thus, employees’ motivations may shift as a result of significant life events and changes such as switching to a new workgroup, job, occupation, or organization that is more or less open to personal self-disclosure than the previous one (Edmondson, 1999; Polzer, Milton, & Swann, 2002). As such, employees are most likely to enact particular boundary management behaviors for an extended stretch of their career, but are unlikely to enact the same behaviors throughout their entire career.
Open boundary management. Employees who make a macro choice to self-verify on online social networks, perhaps because they are mostly connected with peers and personal contacts, and who also prefer to integrate their professional and personal identities, are unlikely to perceive many boundary challenges. These employees may thus engage in open behaviors, which we define as a very simplified approach in which employees do not construct boundaries separating their professional and personal identities, but instead present themselves as the person they perceive themselves to be and fully enact their personal identity in online social networks to a broad audience. Open behaviors result in no active boundary management across professional and personal identities. They entail disclosure of both positive and negative self-verifying content and acceptance of disclosures and feedback provided by their connections. For instance, employees might show positive unconventional facets of themselves that are not usually expressed in their work environment (such as an investment banker writing children’s comic books) or negative facets of themselves (such as discussing a professional setback or an ongoing divorce) to receive confirmation of their self-views (Swann, 1983). In this case, professional and personal domains are often merged as employees strive for consistency in their self-views and integration across both domains (see Table 2 for examples). Therefore, we propose that:

Proposition 1: Employees are more likely to engage in open boundary management behaviors in online social networks when they combine self-verification motives and preferences for integration of their professional and the personal identities.
**Audience boundary management.** Not all employees who make a macro choice to self-verify on online social networks are comfortable integrating their professional and personal identities. Some prefer to segment these identities and are thus more likely to engage in *audience behaviors*, which we define as employees constructing and maintaining a boundary between their professional and personal contacts by restricting professional contacts from online social networks that they deem personal in nature. An example is setting up private profiles and ignoring or denying connection requests from certain professional contacts (see Table 2 for more examples). Employees who prefer to keep their professional and personal identities separate (Ashforth et al., 2000; Kreiner, 2006; Rothbard et al., 2005) and seek to display self-verifying identity cues to selected interaction partners (Swann, 1983, 1987) are likely to protect their online identities from unsolicited disclosures and feedback and to reach out to contacts who may validate their self-views. They may strive to avoid co-activation of their professional and personal identities that might cause them psychological discomfort (Rothbard & Ramarajan, 2009). In particular, these employees may want to self-verify by posting personal and family pictures and expressing intimate feelings or views of the world, yet at the same time not want to share this personal information with their professional contacts and have them comment on it. Indeed, self-verification does not mean that individuals necessarily disclose self-verifying information to everyone they encounter, rather that when they do disclose information they look to confirm their self-views (Swann et al., 2004). Thus, those employees who wish to self-verify, but also to segment their professional and personal identities, will see the boundary challenges in online social networks as about restricting the professional contacts with whom they are willing to connect in online social networks that are personal in nature so that they can more freely share personal information and interact with those who they do accept as connections. Thus, audience
behaviors enable the disclosure of positive and negative self-verifying personal information within the personal domain and prevent its disclosure to certain professional contacts.

**Proposition 2:** Employees are more likely to engage in audience boundary management behaviors in online social networks when they combine self-verification motives and preferences for segmentation of their professional and personal identities.

**Content boundary management.** In contrast to employees who make a macro choice to self-verify in online social networks, some employees present themselves online in a primarily self-enhancing way, perhaps because of personality traits (e.g. John & Robins, 1994) or because important relationships are still in a qualifying stage when they make their macro choices (Swann et al., 2009). When these employees also prefer integration of their professional and personal identities, they are likely to engage in *content behaviors,* which we define as managing their identities primarily through actively controlling what information they disclose—but not the people to whom they disclose—in online social networks. They may for instance broadcast professional achievements they are proud of or post polished family pictures that might enhance their status or likeability (See Table 2 for more examples). Their desire for integration means that they are motivated to connect with their professional contacts online rather than exclude them from their online personal lives. However, because they strive to enhance their image in the eyes of their professional contacts (Sedikides, 1993; Sedikides & Strube, 1995), they are likely concerned with managing the information they share with this integrated audience. As such they may purposefully select professional and personal information that they believe will enhance the impressions their professional contacts have of them and may elicit positive feedback (Lampinen et al., 2009). In short, employees who use content behaviors think of the boundary challenges as
about presenting the most ideal image of themselves to a broad set of professional and personal contacts (Roberts, 2005).

**Proposition 3**: Employees are more likely to engage in content boundary management behaviors in online social networks when they combine self-enhancement motives and preferences for integration of their professional and personal identities.

**Hybrid boundary management**. While audience and content behaviors are relatively straightforward, they do not work well for employees who prefer to both keep their professional and personal contacts separate (Ashforth et al., 2000; Kreiner, 2006; Rothbard et al., 2005) and enhance their image in the eyes of professional contacts in online social networks (Sedikides, 1993; Sedikides & Strube, 1995). These employees may not want to forego the benefit of connecting and sharing information with professional contacts on online social networks. They view boundary control as entailing both with whom they connect in online social networks and what information they communicate to their connections. In response to these dual challenges, such employees may craft more sophisticated online boundary management behaviors that we term “hybrid behaviors”, which we define as the concurrent management of audience and content boundaries such that employees divide their professional and personal contacts into separate audiences and tailor the content they disclose to each audience. For instance, managing lists in online social networks (as illustrated in Table 2) is an attempt to recreate separate spaces in which one can disclose different information and receive feedback in a separate and more tailored manner. In implicit recognition of the hybrid approach, Google+, one of the newer online social networks, has enabled users to more easily categorize people from different life domains into separate “Circles”. Other hybrid behaviors are temporal, such as when employees adjust the content in and access to their profiles when transitioning to a new career stage
(DiMicco & Millen, 2007). Employees who use hybrid behaviors may be driven to match their content to their audience because they have a focus not only on prevention of inappropriate information spilling over from the personal to the professional domain, but also an equally strong desire to actively construct and enact a positive professional image (Roberts, 2005).

**Proposition 4**: Employees are more likely to engage in hybrid boundary management behaviors in online social networks when they combine self-enhancement motives and preferences for segmentation of their professional and personal identities.

**Consequences of Online Boundary Management Behaviors for Respect and Liking**

Having theorized about how and why employees use different online boundary management behaviors, we next examine how using each of these behaviors influences the degree to which employees’ professional contacts respect and like them. Respect and liking are separate dimensions of positive regard that can have different predictors and consequences (Hamilton & Fallot, 1974; Prestwich & Lalljee, 2009) and therefore often need to be distinguished (Wojciszke, Abele, & Baryla, 2009). Drawing on Wojciszke and colleagues’ (2009) distinction between respect and liking, we define *respect* as the degree of deference or positive regard with which one views another person, and we define *liking* as the degree to which one is fond of and feels a sense of attachment with another person. Respect judgments are based on agentic information, such as the appropriateness and intellectual quality of the information being shared (Wojciszke et al., 2009). Respect is a key component of perceived competence (Fiske et al., 2007) and contributes to maintaining a positive social identity, which is an antecedent of self-esteem, well-being, psychological engagement with the group, group inclusion and cooperation, and career success (Cuddy et al., 2011; Tyler & Blader, 2000). Liking judgments are based on communal information, such as the warmth and valence of the
information being shared (Wojciszke et al., 2009). Liking is an important component of perceived warmth (Fiske et al., 2007) and contributes to trusting relationships and friendships at work (Brass, 1984). Respect and liking, thus, contribute to positive interpersonal relationships, group commitment, and cooperation, which in turn may lead to enhanced decision-making and performance (Jehn & Shah, 1997).

We build on the premise that the respect and liking of employees in the eyes of their professional contacts depend on employees’ ability to manage their professional and personal identities online in ways that mirror what their professional contacts would consider appropriate behavior in offline interactions. Because work organizations are usually strong situations (Mischel, 1973) where employees face institutional pressures to behave in a rational, professional manner (Bloor & Dawson, 1994; Pratt et al., 2006), the norms, roles, and scripts within employees’ professional domains may be especially salient, strong, and actively enforced in the minds of their professional contacts (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). However, on online social networks, professional contacts have access to personal information that they otherwise would not have seen in the context of an offline tailored conversation. As such, respect and liking are only protected or enhanced when employees’ online behaviors conform to the norms, roles, and scripts that their professional contacts expect of them in offline interactions.

Because we are interested in the consequences of using online boundary management behaviors for workplace outcomes, we focus on average degree of respect and liking, defined as the aggregation of the judgments of the focal employee by each of his or her professional contacts. Our propositions concern the impact online boundary management behaviors have on the average degree of respect and liking as compared to if the focal employee does not participate in online social networks at all. Thus in our definition of average degree of respect
and liking, we include all professional contacts, not just those with whom an employee is connected online. We focus on average—as opposed to dyadic—respect and liking because employees’ online behaviors are non-tailored by nature and are thus seen by groups of multiple contacts (at best separate groups of contacts in the case of hybrid boundary management). In addition, compared to dyadic respect and liking, average respect and liking are more likely to impact collective organizational outcomes (Lincoln, & Miller, 1979), such as group performance (Gruenfeld & al., 1996), group-serving behaviors (Tyler & Blader, 2000), or resource mobilization and information sharing in groups.

There are several reasons self-disclosure in online social networks might influence the degree to which a focal employee is respected and liked by his or her professional contacts. First, professional norms may influence these relationships. Norm violations are especially harmful to respect and liking in work contexts where strong norms convey clear images of what constitutes appropriate professional behavior (Bloor & Dawson, 1994; Chreim, Williams, & Hinings, 2007). Employees who are not consistent in online social networks with how their professional contacts, on average, expect them to behave in offline interactions will lose credibility or upset their professional contacts because they violate norms enforced by the group. What constitutes normative acceptable self-disclosure will vary across professional relationships, depending on how formal each dyadic relationship is. However, professional norms generally impose limitations on personal self-disclosure offline and online. For instance, posting a picture of oneself in a bathing suit on one’s online profile might be well received by a co-worker who is also a close friend, but not by more formal professional contacts, who may be in the invisible audience, not salient in the employee’s mind. Thus, enacting one’s professional and personal identities online in ways that fail to mirror the degree and nature of personal disclosure that is
expected of one in offline interactions harms the way one is regarded on average by professional contacts. Because individuals tend to forget part of their audience online (Boyd, 2007), employees often unintentionally fail to mirror their offline professional norms by disclosing too much or inappropriate personal information. Conversely, highly cautious employees end up disclosing too little about themselves or being too controlling about the feedback they receive (e.g., by deleting others’ comments or preventing anyone from commenting on their profiles). Consequently, they can be perceived as uptight or cold by online professional contacts, as warmth and likability are associated with the degree and nature of personal self-disclosure in online social networks (Forest & Wood, 2012; Rothbard, Berg, & Ollier-Malaterre, 2012; Weisbuch et al., 2009). 

Even in work environments where norms are unclear, weakly enforced, or open to personal disclosure, a second reason online social network behaviors impact average respect and liking is that the information that employees disclose can make them appear to be less prototypical members of the group (Tyler & Blader, 2000) and therefore not a good fit with the organization. For instance, coworkers in an oil drilling company might respect and like an employee less who posts about active involvement in environmental protection groups. Below, we first discuss the specific consequences of the four sets of online boundary management behaviors in our framework for average respect and liking, and then the role of employees’ capabilities as well as social feedback and organizational norms in shaping these behaviors and consequences.

**Consequences of open behaviors.** Open boundary management behaviors are consistent with the underlying philosophy of social media that privacy is obsolete and that sharing is preferable to hiding (Boyd, 2008). Yet, as discussed above, this may not be the best approach in
many professional contexts, in which online personal disclosures may violate offline norms. Because employees who use open behaviors may reveal too much or inappropriate personal information given the norms in their professional domains (Pratt et al., 2006), or let their contacts reveal too much or inappropriate personal information about them, professional contacts may feel that the open employee does not understand or is incapable of upholding the norms and scripts required of him or her in the professional domain and does not fit with the group (Tyler & Blader, 2002). In this way, employees who use open boundary management behaviors can inadvertently lose respect by revealing too much or inappropriate information to a broad audience of professional contacts (Phillips et al., 2009), and in turn may be perceived as not worthy of trust regarding important decisions or sensitive information (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Williams, 2001, 2007; Zand, 1972). An extreme example is offered by the case of a young professional who complained about her boss in unprofessional terms on Facebook while having him as a contact, and consequently was publicly ridiculed by her boss on her Facebook Wall and then fired (World News Australia, 2009). Because of the non-tailored nature of interactions on online social networks and the potential for others to comment and provide public feedback, open boundary management behaviors offer little protection for average respect in the eyes of a professional audience. Therefore, we propose:

**Proposition 5a.** Open boundary management behaviors are likely to undermine average respect among one’s professional contacts, due to the vast amount of non-tailored professional and personal information that is self-disclosed or revealed by one’s connections to a broad audience.

Open boundary management behaviors also have implications for the degree to which an employee is liked by his or her professional contacts. Because liking is often based on
homophily, or individuals’ attraction to similar others (Blau, 1977; Byrne, 1971), open behaviors may increase liking in the eyes of some professional colleagues, for example, when a co-worker shares the focal employee’s values. However, research on homophily suggests that organizations are more heterogeneous than friendship networks in that organizations offer fewer opportunities for choice homophily, or the propensity to choose similar others, such that professional contacts are likely to be much more diverse in terms of values (McPherson & Smith-Lovin, 1987). While disclosed homophilous values may lead some professional contacts to like employees who use open behaviors, dissimilar values that are disclosed by employees themselves or their contacts may lead many professional contacts to like them less (Harrison, Price, & Bell, 1998; Phillips et al., 2009). Therefore, we contend that while there are some professional relationships in which open behaviors do not harm and even increase liking, on average, open behaviors are more likely to undermine liking in the eyes of a broad set of professional contacts:

**Proposition 5b.** Open boundary management behaviors are likely to undermine average liking among one’s professional contacts, due to the vast amount of non-tailored information that is self-disclosed or revealed by one’s connections to a broad audience.

**Consequences of audience behaviors.** Audience behaviors impact the way one is regarded in several ways. Contrary to open behaviors, audience behaviors protect employees from losing respect by preventing the over-disclosure of information by themselves or others to a broad audience. For instance, young employees or new graduates applying for jobs maintain respect by excluding professional contacts from their profiles on networks that are personal in nature, perhaps because their profiles include provocative party photos, so that their visible online behavior mirrors offline professional norms. In professional settings that value discretion,
audience behaviors help employees to be seen as worthy of trust regarding important decisions or sensitive information (Mayer et al., 1995; Williams, 2001), rather than careless, indiscreet, or unaware of boundaries. On the other hand, since audience behaviors are based on the segmentation of professional and personal contacts and on self-verification motives, they deprive employees of opportunities to enhance their professional image through broadcasting their competence and achievements to professional contacts. Thus, while audience behaviors help maintain respect at work, they are unlikely to help increase it relative to the baseline of not participating in online social networks.

Proposition 6a. Audience boundary management behaviors are likely to maintain, but not increase, average respect among one’s professional contacts because they do not allow one to broadcast competencies and achievements to broadly relevant work audiences.

Audience boundary management behaviors have costs in terms of liking because they can lead employees to exclude some professional contacts from the selected audience. Ignoring or denying connection requests might be socially off-putting or embarrassing because it makes the boundary highly visible. Despite employees’ own preferences for segmenting their professional and personal identities, some of their professional contacts may expect to connect and share with them in online social networks (Skeels & Grudin, 2009). When the boundary is more visible, in particular in triadic settings where professional contacts are connected to a mutual acquaintance and can see that the focal employee who uses audience behaviors has accepted this mutual acquaintance’s connection request and not theirs, they may feel excluded. Further, since employees who use audience behaviors prefer to keep professional and personal identities separate, they can miss out on interpersonal connections online that could help enhance liking in
the offline relationship. Ignoring connection requests or accepting them only in networks that are professional in nature such as LinkedIn may signal distrust (Lewicki, McAllister, & Bies, 1998) and thus paint the employee as cold (Fiske et al., 2007) and less likable. Therefore, we propose that audience behaviors may have negative consequences for average liking:

**Proposition 6b.** Audience boundary management behaviors are likely to undermine average liking among one’s professional contacts due to professional contacts feeling excluded from one’s online life.

**Consequences of content behaviors.** Employees who use content behaviors make conscious efforts to present themselves in a way that is likely to generate approval from members of their broad audience. To do so, they will typically downplay attributes that would make them seem less attractive and emphasize attributes that would lead to a positive assessment of them by others. Deciding what content to disclose thus enables employees to manage their professional identities, promoting an appearance of competence and suitability for a professional role (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Thus, unlike audience behaviors, content behaviors enable employees to accept connection requests from professional contacts and to share information that might be of interest or helpful to their professional contacts. A key benefit to this approach is to promote oneself to a broad professional audience, by choosing content that is interesting, appealing, or indicative of expertise or high status—e.g., flattering family pictures, impressive achievements, or glamorous activities (Schlenker & Weingold, 1992). Further, unlike open behaviors, content behaviors entail a careful monitoring of the information disclosed by oneself and others, thereby enabling employees to keep potential mismatches between their beliefs and values and those of their professional contacts private. Thus, in professional settings that value limited disclosure of information, content boundary management behaviors enable employees to
mirror their offline behavior and thus interact in a socially appropriate way (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Thus, content behaviors are likely to enhance average respect among one’s professional contacts.

**Proposition 7a.** Content boundary management behaviors are likely to increase average respect among one’s professional contacts because they allow one to broadcast self-enhancing information to a broad set of work audiences.

In addition, because content behaviors enable employees to share personal information—even if it is carefully monitored—content behaviors can help employees be more liked by their professional contacts (Cozby, 1973; Collins & Miller, 1994). Provided that the exchange of information remains appropriate, sharing details about each other’s personal lives, thoughts, and desires indicates trust and allows individuals to discover common perspectives (Jourard & Lasakow, 1958; Jourard, 1959; Worthy et al., 1969). Moreover, employees may benefit from boundary crossovers that lead to reciprocal exchanges of information, thereby enriching professional relationships (Rothbard, 2001; Rothbard & Ramarajan, 2009). For instance, an employee may build stronger bonds with long-distance co-workers by sharing selected professional and personal information with them and giving positive feedback about theirs, for instance by regularly “Liking” their posts or commenting on them. The fact that they interact with each other not only on a professional basis but also on a personal one may help build greater closeness and liking. Therefore, we suggest that:

**Proposition 7b.** Content boundary management behaviors are likely to increase average liking among one’s professional contacts because they allow one to broadcast personal and professional information to a broad set of work audiences.
Consequences of hybrid behaviors. Hybrid boundary management behaviors, driven by both self-enhancement motives and segmentation preferences, may help individuals span domain boundaries when role identities are compatible and yet keep information separate when professional and personal identities are incompatible (Rothbard & Ramarajan, 2009). As a result, employees may be able to customize the match between content and audience, which should maximize respect and liking (Phillips et al., 2009). Because employees are aware of what content they share with which audience, hybrid behaviors can help alleviate online social networks’ challenges by encouraging more tailored disclosures. In particular, hybrid behaviors make invisible audiences more salient and limit the potential for one’s contacts to provide inappropriate information across domains since a disclosure would be seen only by contacts for whom the initial information was intended. Hybrid behaviors thus enable employees to best mirror the tailored nature of offline relationships, where some professional relationships, for instance with friendly co-workers, are less formal and allow for more personal disclosure than others, for instance with supervisors, subordinates, or customers. Hybrid behaviors thus combine the benefits of positive professional impression management (Roberts, 2005) with careful and personalized segmentation of professional and personal identities (Ashforth et al., 2000), and as such are likely to increase both average respect and liking among professional contacts.

Proposition 8a. Hybrid boundary management behaviors are likely to increase average respect among one’s professional contacts due to the sharing of self-enhancing information.

Proposition 8b. Hybrid boundary management behaviors are likely to increase average liking among one’s professional contacts due to the tailored disclosure of personal and professional information.
Trade-Offs Between Online Boundary Management Behaviors

So far, we have proposed that content and hybrid behaviors potentially have more positive consequences for average respect and liking by professional contacts than open and audience behaviors. However, employees using content and hybrid behaviors need to keep potential mismatches between their beliefs and values and those of their professional contacts private (Sedikides & Strube, 1995). This requires ongoing effort because the underlying philosophy and technical structure of online social networks encourages unrestricted and transparent sharing of information as the norm and default (Boyd, 2008). Open behaviors are very easy to use and audience behaviors do not require much skill in that they only demand a series of one-time decisions about whether to include a contact or not. By contrast, content and hybrid behaviors require ongoing effort and skillful decision-making about what content to share. And hybrid behaviors also entail decisions about with whom they will share which content, requiring that individuals invest effort and skill in setting up and maintaining lists and privacy settings to delineate their separate audiences. Moreover, content and hybrid behaviors are prone to one’s own mistakes as well as unwanted disclosures by one’s connections, which can decrease respect and liking in the eyes of professional contacts if the information disclosed is incongruent with the self-enhanced image one has been promoting, such that one appears inauthentic (Brumbaugh, 1971).

To cope with the complexity of executing content and hybrid behaviors effectively and to capitalize on the potential benefits offered by them for respect and liking, we contend that employees need online boundary management capabilities, which consist of the time, effort, and technical skill required to avoid the accidental disclosure of too much or inappropriate content to professional contacts. Consistent with the strategic management literature (e.g., Nelson &
Winter, 1982; Teece, Pisano, & Shuen, 1997), we use the term capabilities to capture not only technical ability, but also required resources (i.e., time and energy). We argue that the effectiveness of content and hybrid behaviors depends on these capabilities, such that compared with open and audience behaviors, content and hybrid behaviors have greater potential for increasing average respect and liking, yet may actually decrease respect and liking if employees are low in online boundary management capabilities.

Content behaviors may expose employees to accidental over-disclosure of personal information. Over-disclosure may occur when employees inadvertently reveal information to the wrong professional contacts, because they have forgotten about the invisible audience (Boyd, 2007). In offline interactions, individuals tend to disclose intimate information only once they have formed a dyadic boundary with someone (Derlega & Chaikin, 1977), ensuring that information disclosed to the person will not be leaked to mutual acquaintances. In online social networks, however, employees may mistakenly think they are disclosing information to only a specific person (while answering a question on someone’s “wall” for instance). Numerous incidents illustrate poor online boundary management capabilities. A particularly colorful example was a fraud fugitive being arrested because he boasted on Facebook about enjoying himself in a luxury resort, the location of which he disclosed, forgetting that police agents were part of the audience (BBC News, 2009). In addition, personal contacts can accidentally or purposefully violate the boundary between the employee’s professional and personal identities. Skeels and Grudin (2009: 101) mention an informant whose personal friends, in an effort at humor, “poked” her manager on Facebook, which she felt was embarrassing and may have lessened her manager’s respect for her. Thus, online boundary management capabilities may well
extend to managing one’s connections by, for instance, restricting the ability of others to post information on one’s profile, or by educating one’s personal contacts not to violate the boundary.

Compared with content behaviors, hybrid behaviors are costlier in terms of the time, effort, and skill required. In essence, hybrid behaviors are about pairing the appropriate content with the corresponding audience (either professional or personal). To enact hybrid behaviors effectively, employees need to be familiar with privacy settings in the given online social network and able to set them up and manage them over time (Zhao et al., 2008). They must make the effort to devise and implement the chosen behaviors (for instance, assign connections to sub-lists) and then make a myriad of small decisions on an ongoing basis to pair information with ties, and adjust their behaviors to frequent website changes (Strater & Lipford, 2008). Further, as employees’ career or life stages change and they gather more online contacts, change jobs, move organizations, or perhaps switch industries, the way they have segmented their online audiences may no longer be ideal (e.g., a former peer could become a subordinate or boss). In sum, monitoring and managing the content that is available to different audiences may require considerable time, effort, and technical skill, and thus the positive impact of hybrid behaviors on respect and liking depends on employees’ online boundary management capabilities. Mistakes easily happen such as employees accidentally posting negative comments about a co-worker in another department (that the co-worker can see or hear about from someone else), employees accidentally posting family pictures to the wrong sub-list of contacts, thus disclosing more than intended and prompting their professional contacts to realize that they probably share more online than they thought, yet not with them. In addition to mistakes, faux pas also occur through employees’ contacts sharing pictures or comments that are dissonant with what the employees themselves share. Such incidents decrease professional contacts’ respect for employees if they
reveal behavior that does not mirror their expectations (e.g. inappropriate disclosure) or makes
the employee appear inauthentic (Brumbaugh, 1971; Halpin & Croft, 1966). These mistakes can
also decrease liking by signaling distrust and making professional contacts feel excluded from
the personal online world of the employee, much as with the audience behaviors (Lewicki & al.,
1998). Therefore:

**Proposition 9a.** Employees’ online boundary management capabilities moderate the
consequences of content and hybrid behaviors, such that content and hybrid
behaviors will increase average respect and liking if employees are high in these
capabilities but decrease average respect and liking if they are low in these
capabilities.

In addition, because the goal of online social networks is to connect people, and therefore
their primary modus operandi is to integrate individuals’ social worlds (Donath & Boyd, 2004),
identity segmentation in online social networks often requires more time, effort, and skill than
identity integration. As a result, employees who want to segment their personal and professional
identities in online social networks must devote energy and develop knowledge to make the
online tools work for them. Thus, we suggest that:

**Proposition 9b.** Hybrid behaviors require greater online boundary management capabilities than
content behaviors.

**Extending the Framework: The Dynamic Nature of Online Boundary Management**

We have argued thus far that employees’ online boundary management behaviors are
relatively stable in given social contexts, such as specific phases of the career and life cycles
(Little, 1983). An important aspect of this is that once employees begin to enact a set of online
boundary management behaviors, path dependencies and eventually inertia (e.g.,
Sydow, Schreyögg, & Koch, 2009) are established as a result of the macro choices they make about whom their contacts should be and what information they should disclose to whom. For example, having accepted connections with professional contacts makes it difficult to then exclude them if one shifts to audience behaviors; removing a connection may hurt liking in the relationship and closing one’s account in order to remove connections before starting again may raise questions and suspicions. Also, having disclosed or let disclose inappropriate information makes it difficult to shift to content behaviors, unless one goes back to clean up one’s profile and asks connections to clean up their comments too.

However, we also suggest that the macro choices employees make based on their self-evaluation motives and on their preferences for segmentation or integration of their professional and personal identities are not set in stone, but rather, evolve and shift over time. The temporal nature of online boundary management is likely to follow a pattern of punctuated equilibrium, in which employees engage in the same basic set of behaviors for multiple weeks, months, and perhaps even years, but then shift their behavior in response to significant events or changes in their lives. Thus, we suggest that it takes concerted time, thought, and effort to shift one’s online boundary management behaviors and that this is not likely to happen on a day-to-day basis.

What, then, prompts employees to reexamine their macro choices and corresponding online boundary management behaviors?

First, there are important turning points that people encounter, stemming from significant changes to one’s role, career, or life stage or from critical events that are likely to compel employees to reexamine their online boundary management. A clear example of this is when students apply for jobs. They often shift from a situation where the majority of their interactions are characterized by self-verification motives to one where self-enhancement is the dominant
motive. It may not be until they have passed the “qualifying” stage of obtaining a new job, settling into the company, and feeling comfortable with others that they shift back to a state where their self-verification motives are dominant again. In this scenario, we would suggest that individuals are likely to change their online behaviors from either open or audience behaviors to either content or hybrid behaviors depending on their preferences for integration or segmentation. Another example of how going through a particular career or life stage alters one’s online behaviors is employees who opt for more time-consuming behaviors such as hybrid behaviors and make conscious decisions to change to content behaviors, which are simpler and easier to use, when they enter a career or life stage in which they lack time. Such a shift may be reversed when they regain enough time to act in line with their full preferences. In addition, critical events can make employees aware of the need to manage boundaries in online social networks. For instance, an employee may realize that she has been disclosing more information than intended, such as the songs she was listening to on the Internet or photos from long ago. Likewise, witnessing a colleague or friend’s online faux-pas might prompt employees to revisit their macro choices so that they disclose less information (content behaviors) or to a more targeted audience (audience or hybrid behaviors).

Second, the feedback employees receive from their professional and personal contacts also triggers shifts in macro choices. Such feedback is provided through processes of (a) iterative identity negotiation (Swann et al., 2009) and (b) enforcement of organizational and occupational norms (Bloor & Dawson, 1994; Pratt et al., 2006). While online social networks offer new opportunities for employees to make identity claims, these claims are made in a public or semi-public context where others assess their reliability and provide feedback accordingly (Boyd, 2007). Thus, online boundary management is typically not a one-way imposition of the self’s
desires on the audience, but rather, an iterative process that is negotiated between self and audience over time. Since clarity, continuity, and compatibility are important premises of successful identity negotiation (Swann et al., 2009), employees may for instance tone down exaggerated self-enhancement behaviors if their professional contacts make comments that undermine or fail to support their impression management efforts. By contrast, employees may disclose more due to interaction rituals (Collins, 1981, 2004) in which sharing personal information and receiving positive feedback about it, such as “Likes” and encouraging comments from professional contacts, generates emotional energy.

In addition, feedback stemming from organizational and occupational norms (Bloor & Dawson, 1994; Pratt et al., 2006) interacts with employees’ individual preferences as they choose online boundary management behaviors. In particular, employees may tone down their self-verification strivings if they receive feedback in the workplace that information they had disclosed violated organizational norms. Similar feedback processes can lead employees to shift from integration behaviors to more segmented ones or vice-versa. Employees might revise open boundary management behaviors that have backfired and transition to audience behaviors where they can self-verify but with a segmented audience. Or conversely, they might transition from audience to content or hybrid behaviors if they become aware of strong norms to be connected online after receiving professional connection requests. Skeels and Grudin (2009: 101) cite such a situation where an informant felt he had to accept customers’ connection requests on Facebook, and subsequently started monitoring his information disclosure. Last, norms around technology, and in particular around what is appropriate to disclose to whom in a given industry or workplace, may evolve and even be codified into formal rules, triggering re-examinations of employees’ online boundary management behaviors.
In sum, despite their stability and inertia in the relative short term, online boundary management behaviors may be dynamic when examined over a longer term. Employees may shift their behaviors due to pivotal turning points, feedback, or norms. In turn, these shifts are likely to come with important implications for the average respect and liking employees receive from their professional contacts. While average respect and liking may decrease abruptly due to an accidental egregious disclosure by employees who lack the capabilities to effectively execute content or hybrid behaviors, average respect and liking may also change more gradually over time as employees’ connections respond to their behaviors online.

DISCUSSION

Online social networks pose new, complex, and often challenging opportunity structures for enacting professional and personal identities. How employees manage boundaries within these structures may help or harm their professional relationships in important ways. We have proposed a conceptual framework of online boundary management, theorizing about the key underlying drivers of four archetypal online boundary management behaviors, and the consequences of these behaviors for average respect and liking among employees’ professional contacts. In so doing, we contribute to existing theory and research on boundary work (Ashforth et al., 2000; Nippert-Eng, 1995; Rothbard et al., 2005) and self-evaluation motives that guide identity negotiation (Brown, 1990; Sedikides & Strube, 1995; Swann, 1983; Wiesenfeld et al., 2007) by extending both to the virtual world of cyberspace, where these processes are shaped by different dynamics than in physical space. In particular, this framework guides future research on boundary work and identity negotiation in a social space characterized by open disclosure to broad audiences and public or semi-public feedback (Boyd, 2007; Donath & Boyd, 2004; Donath, 2007), rather than the tailored disclosure and private feedback that characterize
interactions in physical space. In addition, by examining employees’ boundary preferences and self-evaluation motives together, this framework highlights the double-edged sword of online boundary management—although all four combinations in the 2 X 2 framework offer potential benefits, none of the four are free of significant risk, challenge, or difficulty.

Further, this framework opens up new lines of research on the dynamics between liking and respect, or warmth and competence more generally (Fiske et al., 2007; Hamilton & Fallot, 1974; Prestwich & Lalljee, 2009; Wojciszke et al., 2009). Our framework is consistent with past work showing how it is often difficult for individuals to be seen as both warm and competent at the same time (Cuddy et al., 2011; Fiske et al., 2002, 2007), but also sheds new light on how this notion may be further complicated when it comes to online boundary management. Whereas past work on social judgments in physical space has suggested that the tradeoff between warmth and competence can be overcome by sending nonverbal cues to signal both warmth and competence (Cuddy et al., 2011), our framework suggests that online social networks that are personal in nature present opportunities for sending both warmth and competence cues to professional contacts through the information one discloses. However, employees may only be able to do so through content and hybrid behaviors, which are effective only when they are implemented with few mistakes. This suggests that employees’ online boundary management capabilities are critical for these behaviors to successfully enhance both liking and respect. Compared to hybrid and content behaviors, audience and open behaviors are less beneficial overall in that audience behaviors likely have neutral outcomes for average respect and negative outcomes for average liking, while open behaviors likely have negative outcomes for both average respect and liking due to the risks they entail. A key insight derived from our framework is that hybrid behaviors, when well executed, are the most likely to maximize both liking and respect, as hybrid behaviors
enable employees to more closely approximate the customized disclosure prevalent in offline interactions by sending both warmth and competence cues tailored to their professional contacts.

Self-verification and self-enhancement motives are key in shaping whether or not employees who participate in online social networks stand to increase respect and liking among their professional contacts, in that behaviors driven by self-verification (open and audience) may be less likely to increase respect and liking than behaviors driven by self-enhancement (content and hybrid). However, preferences for segmentation vs. integration are key in determining the ratio between risk and difficulty involved in online boundary management, in that the two behaviors stemming from a preference for segmentation (audience and hybrid) may be less risky but more difficult to maintain over time compared to the two behaviors stemming from a preference for integration (open and content). This is because the technical structure of online social networks is typically geared toward integration behaviors, such that segmentation requires an ongoing set of macro choices regarding the contacts with whom one is connected. This is also because initial macro choices create inertia and path dependencies, which may be difficult to revise as employees experience changes in their professional and personal lives, or try to revisit their online boundary management behaviors to address social feedback and workplace norms.

**Future Research**

The framework we have proposed opens up important new questions for researchers considering boundary work, identity negotiation, and respect and liking in cyberspace. First, it may be fruitful to apply our framework at the dyadic level. For instance, research is needed on the role that social exchange and reciprocity norms (Gouldner, 1960) may play in shaping respect and liking in a dyad, and the impact on respect and liking in a dyad when an employee using one set of behaviors such as open behaviors interacts with an employee using another set
such as content behaviors. This may be particularly interesting for key dyads such as the supervisor-subordinate dyad, which is important for supervisory performance ratings (Lefkowitz, 2000; Robbins & DeNisi, 1994) and leader-member exchange (Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Wayne & Ferris, 1990). In addition, future research should pay attention to triadic and group dynamics in online social networks, which can impact respect and liking as discussed in the example of an employee’s boss being “poked” by her personal friends. For instance, it is likely that in online social networks that are personal in nature, the pattern of connection requests being sent and accepted in a team provides information on cohesion and in-group and out-group dynamics. Further, in addition to average respect and liking, future research should investigate the potential variance in respect and liking that online boundary management behaviors may produce. For instance, some behaviors such as audience or open behaviors may polarize professional contacts’ respect and liking for the employee.

Second, our premise that employees need to mirror their offline professional relationships, when online, prompts further examination of boundary work across the different social spaces in which individuals interact with each other. In particular, occupational and organizational norms may interact with individual preferences (Stutzman & Hartzog, 2012). Some occupations, such as journalism for instance, entail a greater need to collect information from a broad variety of sources and to monitor the information one discloses, while others, such as real estate agents, novelists or self-employed freelance consultants, involve a greater need to disseminate information and advertise one’s accomplishments. Since content or hybrid boundary management behaviors might be better suited to this latter set of occupations than audience or open behaviors, employees who recognize these norms may either adapt their online boundary management behaviors or change occupations if the conflict with their preferences is too strong.
By contrast, some occupational norms require strict professionalism, where audience behaviors may be optimal. For instance, physicians are advised to not break the physician-patient boundary on online social networks (McLean Hospital, 2010); and employees of the U.S. Justice Department are warned against connecting with judges, defense counsels, jurors, or witnesses as well as discussing a case on online social networks (U.S. Department of Justice, 2010). Future research could extend the focus of our framework on individual preferences and investigate how organizational and occupational norms might interact with individual preferences, perhaps depending on the strength of employees’ professional and organizational identification (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979) and on the relative salience of their professional and personal identities (Ashforth et al., 2000; Rothbard & Edwards, 2003). Also, while our framework focuses on online social networks that are personal in nature, boundary management may also be needed on professional collaboration sites such as Yammer where employees may choose to keep their interactions strictly professional (i.e. segmentation) or to engage in some level of personal disclosure (i.e. integration).

Third, future research may be able to provide further nuance to our framework by considering the intensity with which employees engage with online social networks. Indeed, employees may experience the need to self-enhance or self-verify with greater or lesser intensity, and they may have stronger or weaker preferences for segmentation or integration of their professional and personal identities. Thus, employees who experience these motives with low intensity may enact passive and possibly less consistent online boundary management behaviors, whereas employees who experience these motives with high intensity might be torn between self-enhancement and self-verification or between segmentation and integration and be unable to satisfy all their motives simultaneously. These employees may experience ambivalence and
devise even more integratively complex (Tetlock, 1983) ways to manage their boundaries in their efforts to self-enhance and self-verify or to segment and integrate their identities.

Fourth, future research should examine other boundaries such as hierarchical or age boundaries that are likely to require careful management, since they too collide in online social networks. Hierarchical boundaries are typically institutionalized, for instance by physical barriers at the workplace such as distinct floors or areas for different types of employees, or norms that restrict socializing to members of one's own rank (Ashforth et al., 2000; Goffman, 1956). This institutionalization does not extend to online social networks, such that professional contacts from other ranks (supervisors or subordinates) may create unique challenges for online boundary management (Boyd, 2007; Ryan 2008; Tufekci, 2008)—e.g., perhaps they might use online social networks to cross boundaries that are otherwise well established (Lewis et al., 2008). Also, social norms regarding acceptable disclosure of information in online social networks might differ according to one’s generation and/or life stage (Pfeil, Arjan, & Zaphiris, 2009).

Last, while technology is likely to change, the psychological motives and challenges people are facing given the realities of this new online world are fairly fundamental. Given that the purpose of social media is to connect people and share information, the default technical structure and philosophy of social media platforms has been—and it appears will continue to be—disclosure to as broad an audience as possible (Boyd, 2007, 2008; Donath & Boyd, 2004; Donath, 2007). Thus, participating in online social networks will involve tension between disclosure and discretion (Petronio, 2002), and between the professional and personal, regardless of the specifics of the technological platforms. The technology itself may evolve, changing the specific tactics employees use, but the underlying motives and archetypical behaviors we have
outlined will likely endure. As social media technology develops, these questions should be revisited and new opportunities for research on online boundary management may be created.

**Practical Implications and Conclusion**

Our framework of online boundary management offers practical implications for employees and organizations. Being able to create and maintain appropriate boundaries and negotiate one’s identities online are quickly becoming critical skills that most employees now need to master. Our framework highlights that employees are faced with a menu of different boundary management options, which may have positive or negative consequences for the way they are regarded by professional contacts and entail varying degrees of risk, opportunity, and difficulty. Online boundary management may even lead employees to revisit offline interactions at the workplace. For instance, they may reconsider who they view as trustworthy or not discuss online social networks with coworkers from whom they would not want to receive an online connection request. Another implication of our framework is that rather than assume that their own choices are shared by others (Ross et al., 1977), employees and employers should be aware that others’ online behaviors might be driven by different motives and circumstances than their own. To help employees with online boundary management, organizations may consider implementing policies regarding online connections and interactions with professional contacts, and provide training to support employees as they develop online boundary management capabilities. As the vast amount of social interaction that already occurs in cyberspace continues to grow, employees will inevitably encounter collisions of their professional and personal identities online. We hope that our framework serves as a spark and guide for future research on how employees manage these inevitable—yet highly consequential—collisions of their social worlds within the relatively new world of social media.
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Table 1: Online Boundary Management Drivers, Behaviors, and Consequences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-evaluation motives</th>
<th>Integration</th>
<th>Segmentation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-verification</td>
<td>OPEN Boundary Management Behaviors</td>
<td>AUDIENCE Boundary Management Behaviors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Decrease average respect</td>
<td>• Protect but do not increase average respect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Decrease average liking</td>
<td>• Decrease average liking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-enhancement</td>
<td>CONTENT Boundary Management Behaviors</td>
<td>HYBRID Boundary Management Behaviors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Increase average respect</td>
<td>• Increase average respect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Increase average liking</td>
<td>• Increase average liking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Moderated by online boundary management capabilities</td>
<td>• Moderated by online boundary management capabilities (most demanding behaviors)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: Illustrative Examples of Boundary Management Behaviors on Online Social Networks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Archetypal Boundary Management Behaviors</th>
<th>Examples of behaviors (not exhaustive)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Open</strong></td>
<td>• Set up public searchable profile.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Disclose both positive and negative information in professional and personal domain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Let others comment publicly on posts and tag one in pictures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Audience</strong></td>
<td>• Set up private profiles and ignore or deny connection requests from certain professional contacts on online social networks deemed as personal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Use different sites to segment audiences, for instance a LinkedIn account for professional contacts and a Facebook account for personal contacts (Stutzman &amp; Hartzog, 2012).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Use nicknames (Tufekci, 2008) or make the profile unsearchable to avoid unsolicited requests from professional contacts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content</strong></td>
<td>• Disclose information that is flattering (e.g. achievements, good picture), glamorous (e.g. travel observations and pictures) or makes one look smart (e.g. interesting news articles).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Keep postings non-controversial (e.g. refrain from discussing politics, religion or sexual orientation).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Control pictures in which one is tagged or prevent others from tagging one in pictures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Monitor comments by others on profile or prevent others from commenting on profile.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hybrid</strong></td>
<td>• Create and maintain lists of contacts and manage what content each of these subgroups can access: e.g. create a “professional list” including all professional contacts and then exclude this list from posts containing personal information (Donath &amp; Boyd, 2004; Zhao et al., 2008). Cf. Google+ Circles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Clean up profile when transitioning from one life or career stage to another (e.g. students transitioning to first job, DiMicco &amp; Millen, 2007).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Educate connections to recognize that some conversations are personal or professional and thus refrain from commenting in ways that would cause embarrassment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ariane Ollier-Malaterre (aom@rouenbs.fr) is associate professor at Rouen Business School and visiting professor at McGill University. She earned her PhD at ESSEC Business School and CNAM Paris, France. Her research focuses on the work-nonwork interface at the individual, the organizational and the country levels.

Nancy P. Rothbard (nrothbard@wharton.upenn.edu) is the David Pottruck Associate Professor of Management at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School. Her research examines how factors outside the workplace influence people’s engagement with their work. She has also examined how people cope with these potential spillovers by segmenting work and non-work roles.

Justin M. Berg (bergj@wharton.upenn.edu) is a Ph.D. candidate in management at The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania. His research focuses on creativity, proactivity, and the meaning of work in organizations.