Border-crossing and Management between Work and Life Domains Described by Women in the U.S. Apparel Industry

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Women have been one of the driving forces in the globalization of the apparel industry and hold dominating managerial and executive positions in many apparel businesses in the United States. (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006). The growth in the female labor force has posed women to face particular challenges society imposes, which is only exasperated by the difficult economic times. Many women still fall into traditional gender roles and bear the majority of the domestic duties and emotional work (Strazdins & Broom, 2004), causing diversions and sacrifices on her career. This inability to sustain a continuous career and have a satisfying personal life may result from the struggle of work-life balance. Many women working in the apparel industry now face difficulties in maintaining their devotion to their job when personal demands call. The U.S. apparel industry has been described as hyper-dynamic (Dyer & Ha-Brookshire, 2008), referring to the highly competitive nature of the apparel industry. Clark's (2000) work-family border theory gave a richer framework for understanding how women working in the U.S. apparel industry manage and negotiate their work and life domains and the borders between the domains in order to attain balance. In these work and life domains, an individual classifies him or herself and others into various social categories, such as, organizational membership, religious affiliation, gender, and age cohort, according to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1985).

The aim of this study was to gain a deep understanding of the border management among women in the U.S. apparel industry. To achieve this objective, a qualitative case study approach was taken to delve deeply into these women's internal struggle. Five women working in the apparel industry in New York City (NYC) and Philadelphia were purposively chosen as each of them has had ranging characteristics of years in the industry [from 6 to 15 years], job positions [from production assistant to business owner], and personal life stages [from single to married with a child], while they all lived through similar career demands. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, field observations, and photo elicitations, over a two-day period per participant in October 2011. In following Clark's (2000) theory, data collection and holistic data analysis focused on: (a) events or situations triggering border-crossing and (b) border nature influencing border-crossing. Unique themes were generated and interpreted.

In exploring the borders phenomena, first, triggering events and effects revealed two theme categories (a) grand view border-crossing and (b) everyday border-crossing. For the grand view, three themes emerged (a) chaotic stage, (b) fight stage, and (c) calm stage. In the chaotic stage, Summer, a product developer in NYC, described "because I don't have job security, I don't feel secure in my personal life. That is why I am day to day." The consuming work domain seemed to lead these women to have very little left for their life domain, "work is 90% of my life and it

should only be 50%." Due to life triggering events, such as getting married, Courtney, a designer in NYC, transitioned from the chaotic "working late all the time" to the fight stage. She fought to balance her work and life domains in maintaining a very ridged border between her domains, as she describes, "I try to be good at it (balancing). I think that is partially because I am someone who leaves their work at work." Due to career triggering events, such as being laid off, two of the women seemed to move from the chaotic stage to the calm stage, as they "didn't want that life anymore" and was "tired of that lifestyle." Second, in everyday border-crossing events, the border nature and management were revealed in three themes (a) work consuming life, leaving the question "what is my life?"—the chaotic stage; (b) keeping work and life separate, but "not too far separated"—the fight state; and (c) work and life blending together as "there is not a clean line—the calm stage" In the chaotic stage, the women quickly seemed to cross from their life to work domains, however, even after leaving work, they struggled leaving their work domain and fully occupying their life domain. In the fight stage, Courtney battled to keep her work and life domains equal and separate with a ridged border. In the calm stage, Mary, a consultant in NYC, described, "it is kind of a luxury that I get to see him "my son" while I am working. If he needs me I am accessible."

This research includes many important contributions. First, this research offers opportunities for not only the participating women, but other working women, to realize they are not alone in their struggle with work-life balance. Professional consultations and mentoring could be useful to help facilitate these women's career while fulfilling their personal lives. Second, corporate human resource departments could utilize the findings to construct realistic expectations for women employees, such as flexible work hours and location, to accommodate fluctuating professional and personal priorities. Businesses could help to cultivate a work environment that is more sustainable with reasonable work expectations and more supportive role models. Finally, findings could greatly help textile and apparel educators for guidance and educational purposes in preparing students for a future in the apparel industry. Further research opportunities could include comparing the themes discovered in this study to working men.

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