In Search of Perfect Boundaries? Entrepreneurs' Work-Life Balance

Abstract

Purpose – Does the self-employed nature of entrepreneurs' business ventures mean that they have perfect boundaries between their work and nonwork lives? Drawing on border theory, this study examines entrepreneurs' work-life balance (WLB) in terms of how they construct and manage the borders between their work and nonwork lives.

Design/Methodology/Approach – The authors adopt a qualitative research approach to enhance their insight into entrepreneurs' WLB using border theory. The study benefits from its empirical focus on Nigerian migrants in London who represent a distinct minority group living in urban areas in the developed world. Data for the study was collected over a three-month period, utilising semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection.

Findings – The study's findings indicate that entrepreneurs prioritise 'work' over 'life' and reveal that entrepreneurs have little desire for boundaries as they work everywhere, which makes long working hours prevalent among them. Furthermore, the findings bring to the fore the prevalent social anomaly of entrepreneurs preferring to be unmarried, single, and even divorced as a result of or associated with the entrepreneurs' boundaries creation and management.

Research Limitations/Implications – The extent to which the findings of this research can be generalised is constrained by the limited and selected sample of the research.

Theoretical Implications – The article highlights the fluidity and permeability of the boundaries between entrepreneurs' work/nonwork domains and the frequency of border crossing, which is almost uncontrollable, especially from the work domain to the nonwork domain. We describe this as work/nonwork border blurring.

Practical Implications – Research on human resource management (HRM) in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) or businesses in which entrepreneurs operate is still under developed. The issue of the size and the nature of an organisation (i.e. labour or product market influences, ownership structures, etc.) have profound implications for human resources (HR) structures, policies, and practices and the quality of the WLB of entrepreneurs. Research on HRM and entrepreneurship is still evolving. Consequently, HRM in several entrepreneurial business ventures is sometimes (if not often) organisationally fluid and ad-hoc. The main implication for this work environment is that there may be little structure in HRM policies and

processes to help self-employed entrepreneurs in their ability to comprehensively manage border crossing and to achieve WLB.

Originality/Value – This article provides valuable insights into entrepreneurs' work/nonwork boundaries, which is hugely influenced by the commodification of time and money. It also enriches work-life border theory and its social constructionist perspective.

Keywords: Border theory, Work-life balance, Entrepreneurs, Nigeria, Self-employed

Introduction

In today's world of extreme jobs (Hewlett and Luce, 2006), extreme parenting (Jong, 2010), and a fervent search for 'balance' (Trunk, 2007), understanding how individuals construct and manage the boundaries between their work and nonwork lives is critical (Annik *et al.,* 2016; Gordon *et al.,* 2017; Trefalt, 2013). This is perhaps the reason boundary management, in the context of the interrelationship between a person's work and personal life continues to receive increased attention within organisational studies (Clark, 2000; Kreiner *et al.,* 2009; Shumate and Fulk, 2004). The majority of these studies, however, exclusively focused on intersects and the relationships between employees and their organisations with respect to the boundaries between work and home/family domains. An entrepreneurs' jobs can be very stressful, balancing the work and nonwork obligations is often difficult (Forson, 2013). Entrepreneurs are unique in that they 'take on the risk' between buyers and sellers (Barringer and Ireland, 2016). Entrepreneurs are employers of labour; they are not employed (Fayolle and Gailly, 2008). There are more than 582 million entrepreneurs in the world (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2018). Furthermore, an increasing number of people around the world continue to launch entrepreneurial ventures to establish themselves as entrepreneurs (Nair and Pandey, 2006). The success of entrepreneurs depends largely on their imagination, vision, innovativeness, ability to take risks and sometimes dare traditional cultural and societal etiquettes (Mathew and Panchanatham, 2011). For entrepreneurs, financial

success, personal satisfaction, and ability to balance work and nonwork responsibilities are crucial success factors (Kirkwood, 2016).

However, the implication of these factors on the boundaries between entrepreneurs' work and nonwork lives is yet to be fully explored. Helping employees to achieve a satisfactory balance between their work and personal lives has been one of the dominant issues in human resource management (HRM) in recent years (Adisa *et al.,* 2017; Parris *et al.,* 2008). Indeed, many researches have investigated employees' work-life balance (WLB) within the organisational setting (Adisa *et al.,* 2017; Carlson *et al.,* 2009; Eby *et al.,* 2005). Over 200 academic articles have been published on employees' work-family conflict, work-family enrichment, and work-family interface using diverse samples from diverse countries (Adisa *et al.,* 2016; Parasuraman and Greenhaus, 2002; O'Driscoll *et al.*, 2006).

Nevertheless, nearly all these studies concentrate on the work and family lives of employees who work for traditional organisations. Over four decades ago, Kanter (1977) explained the 'myth of separate worlds' and the inexorable nexus between work and home lives. She argued that organisations are structured in such a way that their leaders are inconsiderate of or ignore employees' lives outside of work. What then are the approaches and attitudes of self-employed entrepreneurs, who constitute the leadership of their various businesses, towards WLB? According to Clark (2000), people shape their environments and they are also shaped by their environments. This dual status of determining and being determined by one's work

and nonwork environments necessitates a study of how self-employed entrepreneurs construct the boundaries between their work and nonwork lives to achieve WLB. There is, therefore, a need for research on how entrepreneurs create, maintain, or change boundaries (between their work and personal lives) in order to simplify, classify, and make sense of the world around them.

This article posits that the WLB of people who are employed by organisations (employees) is not the same as the WLB of self-employed entrepreneurs. This is because self-employed entrepreneurs may enjoy some level of freedom and independence, more so than is enjoyed by employees of regular organisations (Sullivan, 2018). This is especially the case now that the physical location of the workplace is blurred and extended by mobile information technology (Adisa *et al.*, 2017). A clear weakness in most of the previous studies on the conflict and/or balance between employees' work and nonwork lives is that they consider the family/home as the employees', or only their nonwork duties/obligations (Ashforth *et al.*, 2000; Clark, 2000; Frone, 2003; Kreiner *et al.*, 2009). Employees are not automatons whose lives revolve helplessly just around work and home, as many of these studies assume. Other things also matter.

Drawing on border theory, this study aims to make two contributions. First, it enriches and advances the understanding of self-employed entrepreneurs' (a unique segment of the labour market) WLB. Second, it contributes to the literature on work-life border theory with a specific emphasis on self-employed entrepreneurs. The

term 'border' and 'boundary' are used interchangeably in this article. They are not separately defined; rather, they are used to refer to the demarcation between work and nonwork domains. The remainder of this article is organised as follows: there will be a brief explanation of the relationship between work and private life. Border theory will then be contextualised. The relevant literature on boundary flexibility and permeability will be reviewed, followed by a description of the research methods, a report of the study's findings, and a discussion of the findings. Thereafter, the implications for theory and practice will be presented, and recommendations for future research will conclude the article.

Relationship Between Work and Private Life

In assessing WLB, it is essential to understand the relationship between an individual's work and private life. Work is presumed to have negative and debilitating effects on private life, especially those aspects of work where technology is able and has been permitted to creep (Eikhof *et al.*, 2007). The term WLB comprise three words: work, life, and balance. Work means the time and energy that an employee is contracted to expend in return for reward, which is usually financial (Clutterbuck, 2003). This definition does not exactly cover the work of entrepreneurs, who are not contracted to work for financial benefits in return for their work. Rather, they often work for their clients/customers for financial rewards in return. Even though work is a source of satisfaction that gives a person a sense of purpose and accomplishment (Gambles *et al.*, 2006; Guest, 2001), work can also have a debilitating effect on a person's private life and this must be contained in order to achieve WLB

(Eikhof *et al.*, 2007). Life or nonwork means life outside work, which a lot of people misconstrue to mean home/family (Osoian *et al.*, 2011; Warhurst *et al.*, 2008). According to Guest (2001, p. 8), '"life" means the rest of life after work'. The aspirations to fulfil one's obligations in these important spheres give rise to 'balance'. Parris *et al.* (2008, p. 105) argue that the customary use of the word 'balance', which gives 'equal weight to work and non-work activities is a misnomer'. The word 'balance' does not mean allotting equal time and energy to activities in both the work and nonwork domains (Clarke *et al.*, 2004). Rather, it means 'satisfaction and good functioning at work and at nonwork domains, with minimum of role conflict' (Clark, 2000, p. 751). For Kesting and Harris (2009, p. 47), it means 'allowing employees some degree of flexibility over when, where, and how they do their work'. Work and life are separate, yet intertwined domains that provide employees with a meaningful sense of existence (Guest, 2001). The border between them is, therefore, key to achieving desirable WLB.

Contextualising the Border Theory

The article draws on border theory to frame the investigation of how entrepreneurs create, maintain, or change boundaries (between work and personal lives) to simplify, classify, and make sense of the world around them. This is because the border theory provides an excellent framework for understanding the ways individuals construct and navigate these boundaries (Clark, 2000). It is often assumed that actors are motivated to manage their work and nonwork borders such that 'balance' is achieved (Schieman and Glavin, 2008).

Border theory focuses on the boundaries between work and nonwork domains, which exist along a continuum of complete segmentation to achieve balance (Ashforth *et al*., 2000; Clark, 2000; Nippert-Eng, 1996). Border theory has been applied in diverse contexts (such as art, architecture, organisation theory, anthropology, etc.) to answer a wide variety of research questions (see Ashforth *et al*., 2000; Katherine, 1991; Kreiner *et al*., 2006). Boundaries are 'physical, temporal, emotional, cognitive, and/or relational limits' (Ashforth *et al*., 2000, p. 474) which help people to distinguish one domain from another (Trefalt, 2013). Usually, boundaries delimit the perimeter and scope of a given domain for example, a role, a home, a workplace (Kreiner *et al*., 2009).

Therefore, the work and nonwork domain exist along continuum of segmentation to integration of roles (Nippert-Eng, 1996). High segmentation implies that the physical and temporal boundaries between work and nonwork roles create separate and distinct domains; by contrast, high integration is when 'no distinction exists between work and nonwork domains' (Nippert-Eng, 1996, p. 567). This social construction of boundaries, in order words, means that 'Segmentors have two key rings, one for work, the other for the house and integrators affix all keys to one key ring' (Warhurst *et al*., 2008, p. 10). Boundaries can be constructed along a continuum from flexible and permeable (weak) to inflexible and impermeable (strong) (Clark, 2000). Weak boundaries are open to influence and are prone to merging aspects of categories, whereas strong boundaries are closed to influence and prone to dividing

aspects of categories (Ashforth *et al.*, 2000; Hartmann, 1991; Kreiner *et al.*, 2009). Individuals differ in the manners in which they construct their boundaries (Clark, 2000; Nippert-Eng, 1996).

A clear weakness of previous works on border/boundary theory is the classification of home/family as forming the entire life domain (see Ashforth *et al.*, 2000; Clark, 2000; Nippert-Eng, 1996). However, home is just one aspect of life. Life involves more than home (Osoian, 2011). It encompasses 'a myriad of activities including leisure, socialisation, community, and voluntary activities' (Warhurst *et al.*, 2008, p. 10). Therefore, this study's investigation and classification of 'life' are extended beyond the home/family. Drawing on the key concepts of border theory, the frequency of border crossing from work domain to the nonwork domain will be examined, and vice versa. The research presented here is intended to further advance the understanding of work-life boundary management with a focus on self-employed entrepreneurs.

Boundary Flexibility and Permeability

The work and nonwork domains are two asymmetric spheres with a penetrable or permeable space (border) between them (Clark, 2000). The two main characteristic of borders are flexibility and permeability, and borders may differ in their strengths depending on the degree of their flexibility and permeability (Bulger *et al.*, 2007). Border flexibility is the capacity of the border to shift back and forth (Berg and Piszczek, 2012; Cousins and Robey, 2015). Flexibility can also be defined as the

malleability of the border between two or more roles (Desrochers and Sargent, 2004) or the ability of the border to expand or contrast to accommodate the demands of another domain (for example, an employee working from home takes the opportunity to collect the children from school) (Desrochers *et al.*, 2012). In fact, flexibility addresses the question of when and where a role can be enacted (Sundaramurthy and Kreiner, 2008).

Border permeability, however, refers to the extent to which a domain's border is easily penetrated by the thoughts or behaviour connected with another domain. For Ashforth *et al.* (2000, p. 474), 'permeability is the degree to which a role allows an employee to be physically located in the role's domain but psychologically and/or behaviourally involved in another role'. The permeability of any border determines the extent of integration or segmentation of the content of the bounded domains (Kreiner *et al.*, 2009). For example, an employee who can switch easily from nonwork-related responsibilities to deal with work-related issues and vice-versa is said to have a highly permeable border (Glavin and Schieman, 2011). Permeability, according to Nippert-Eng (1996, p. 280), is part of a boundary's 'structural profile'. It is the ability of one pre-defined role to encroach upon the physical and temporal territory of another (Pleck, 1984). Permeability is, thus, central to employees' movements across the border.

Research Method

Given the paucity of empirical research on border management among self-employed entrepreneurs, an exploratory qualitative research approach is adopted in this study to advance the understanding of how entrepreneurs create and manage the boundaries between their work and nonwork lives. A qualitative approach allows for detailed accounts of the *processes* and *nuances* under investigation (Kreiner *et al.*, 2009). The research participants are Nigerians domiciled in the UK. This group was chosen because African constitutes an industrious but marginalised minority group living in the urban, developed world that may experience unfair treatment and much less access in paid work employment (Adkins and Jae, 2010; Watson, 2009). Although culturally and ethnically diverse, Nigerians share many similarities with the various ethnic groups (Africans) living in the UK. Semi-structured interview is used in this study because it is based on human conversations and enables interviewees to provide responses conveniently through a discourse of complex interpersonal conversation (Qu and Dumay, 2011). Furthermore, scholars have called for increased use of qualitative methods for studying WLB (Eby *et al*. 2005; Neal *et al.*, 2006).

The empirical study was conducted in London, where over one million Nigerians live (Olowoopejo, 2013). Two popular African places of worship (a church and a mosque) were selected as sites to recruit the research participants because these sites regularly attract a large numbers of Nigerian migrants to their congregations. While no incentives were offered for participation, 43 people expressed their interest in the
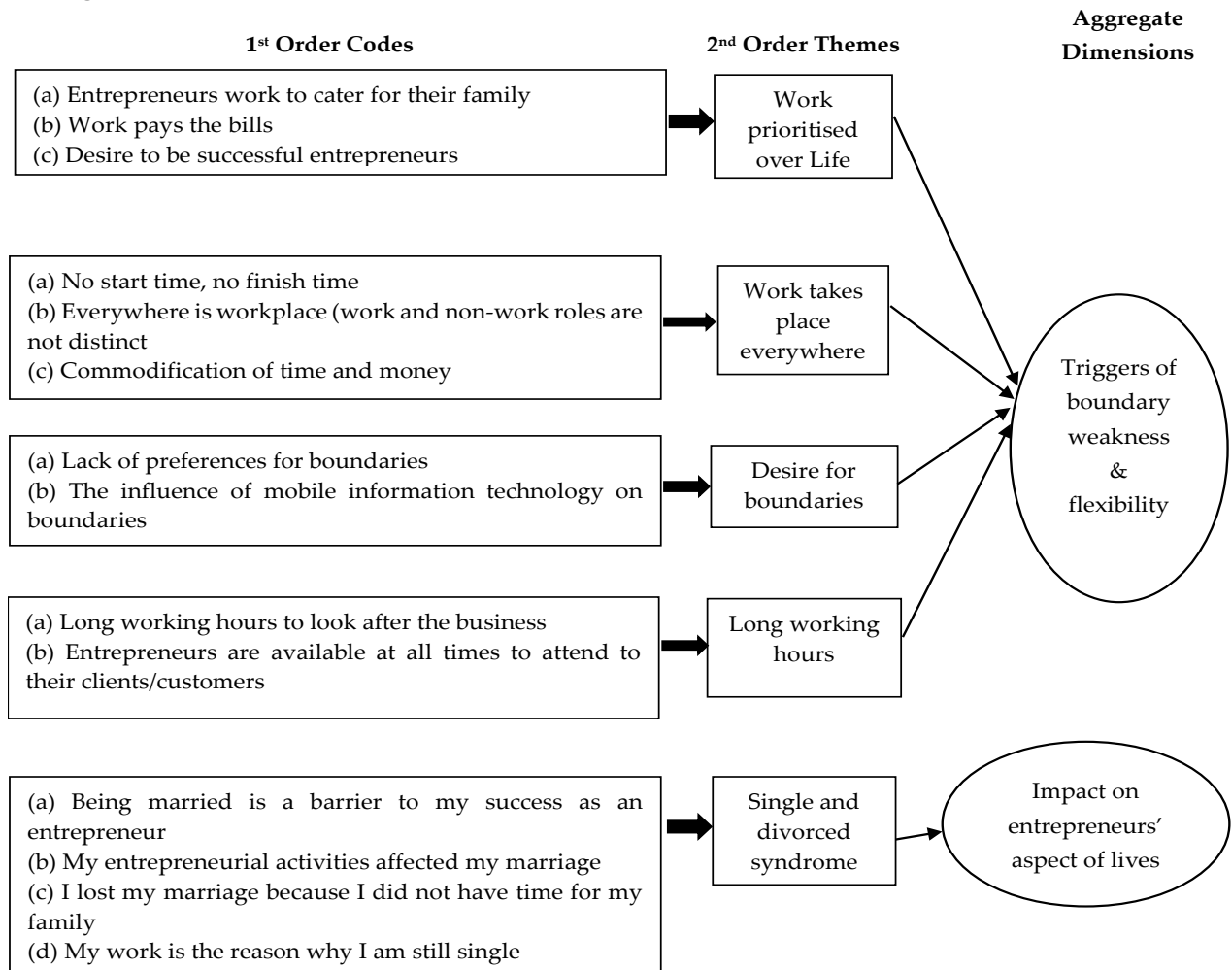
study by completing a short questionnaire detailing their employment status and their availability for interview. The following purposeful sampling criteria were devised to select the interviewees (Patton, 2002). First, the participants were required to be Nigerians and resident in London. Second, the participants were required to be self-employed entrepreneurs whose trading company is legally registered in the UK. Third, the participants were required to have other roles aside from their work roles that would give rise to the need for them to create and manage boundaries between these roles. In all, 23 individuals met the sampling criteria (Table 1). The participants comprised males and females with care responsibilities, aged between 34 and 52 years old. On average, the participants had spent 10 years living in the UK and eight years as self-employed entrepreneurs. The interviews were conducted over fifteen weeks in 2018. The research was approached through the reflective lens of 'microstoria', a narrative turn in contemporary social theory that uses of authentic contemporaneous storylines to illuminate social life (Boje, 2001; Imas *et al.*, 2012; Maclean *et al.*, 2016). Microstoria is an appropriate tool for theorising social order and studying marginalised individuals (Muir, 1991). This makes it appropriate for studying the under-researched area of enquiry: the WLB of self-employed entrepreneurs. The participants were interviewed at different places and times that were convenient for them and the interview process. All interviews were digitally recorded, each lasting approximately 90 minutes. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the interviewees were given pseudonyms to preserve confidentiality. The interviewees were invited to relate their experiences of their work and nonwork

roles and how they manage these roles to achieve WLB. This helped to generate reflexive data from the participants.

Insert Table 1 about here

The data was inductively analysed, adhering closely to the guidelines for naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) and constant comparison techniques (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). These approaches provide the basis for the rigorous collection and analysis of qualitative data. Furthermore, they provide the basis for clear delineating themes and aggregate dimension (Gioia *et al*., 1994). The researchers identified the initial concepts (conceptual coding) in the data and grouped them into categories (open coding). Axial coding was then undertaken, whereby the researchers searched for the relationships among these categories, which then facilitated assembling them into higher order themes. Furthermore, the data structure was developed with the aggregate dimensions of the triggers of boundary weakness and flexibility in order to explore the viability of boundary crossing and boundary management explanations (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Data Structure

1st Order Codes	2nd Order Themes	Aggregate Dimensions

(a) Entrepreneurs work to cater for their family
(b) Work pays the bills
(c) Desire to be successful entrepreneurs
→ Work prioritised over Life

(a) No start time, no finish time
(b) Everywhere is workplace (work and non-work roles are not distinct
(c) Commodification of time and money
→ Work takes place everywhere

(a) Lack of preferences for boundaries
(b) The influence of mobile information technology on boundaries
→ Desire for boundaries

(a) Long working hours to look after the business
(b) Entrepreneurs are available at all times to attend to their clients/customers
→ Long working hours

Triggers of boundary weakness & flexibility

(a) Being married is a barrier to my success as an entrepreneur
(b) My entrepreneurial activities affected my marriage
(c) I lost my marriage because I did not have time for my family
(d) My work is the reason why I am still single
→ Single and divorced syndrome → Impact on entrepreneurs' aspect of lives

Finally, similar themes were gathered into different dimensions to form the emergent themes. These techniques form a 'recursive process-oriented, analytic procedure' (Locke, 1996, p. 240), which ensures that saturation has been achieved. The final data structure is illustrated in Figure 1. It is important to note that the quotations below represent the views and experiences of the overwhelming majority of the participants.

Findings

Our study focuses on how self-employed entrepreneurs create and manage boundaries between their work and nonwork lives to achieve balance. Drawing on

border theory, this study identifies the following themes: *'Work' is prioritised over 'life', work takes place everywhere, desire for boundaries, long working hours, and single and divorced syndrome* as factors associated with entrepreneurs' creation and management of boundaries.

Work is Prioritised Over Life

Employees that work in traditional organisations are naturally expected to experience difficulties in combining their work and nonwork responsibilities due to the required commitments and expectations from their various employers (see Adisa *et al*., 2017; Adisa *et al*., 2016; Eikhof *et al*., 2007). One would expect that entrepreneurs would enjoy a great deal of WLB because of the self-employed nature of their business ventures. On the contrary, this study's findings suggest that entrepreneurs prioritise work over life due to their desires to be successful and their various financial commitments, both in the UK and in Nigeria. A participant commented:

> "I don't earn salaries from nobody, my work pays my salaries, which I use to sort out my family's financial needs. I also need to support my family in Nigeria. I am physically and psychologically engrossed in my business, I pay more attention and spend more time attending to it than any other thing. More so, my primary aim of being in London is to make money" (Clara).

Clara values her work and channels most of her time and energy to attending to her work commitments, more so than her nonwork activities in order to be able to fulfil her financial commitments. Another participant explained why he prioritises work over life:

> "I migrated to the UK to make money and for that reason my work takes up more than 60% of my time, energy, and attention…I also want to be a successful entrepreneur" (Lookman).

Another participant puts it more succinctly:

> "I came to London to make money. My work pays my bills, provides for my immediate family's financial needs, and cares for my parents' and siblings' financial needs in Nigeria. Also, I am determined to make a success of my business…it takes a whole lot of my time" (Ajoke).

Motivated by financial obligations and the desire for success, the participants seem to prioritise work over life. Most of the participants are their family's breadwinners, and they take on many responsibilities. They give precedence to their work over their lives. This has a major impact on how they create boundaries between their work and life domains. The border between work and life would be impregnable because activities in life domains are not their top priority.

Work Takes Place Everywhere

For the majority of the participants, work takes place everywhere, and this considerably negates the 'segmentors' notion of keeping work and nonwork domains separate in order to create and maintain boundaries between the two domains (Nippert-Eng, 1996; Zerubavel, 1991). An overwhelming majority of the entrepreneurs are 'integrators, who hardly create clear borders between work and nonwork domains. One participant commented:

> "Well, I don't work 9am to 5pm, and I am not confined to an office. I am a self-employed entrepreneur. I take credit for my success, and I accept the blames for my success. For these reasons, I really do not

have boundaries between my work and nonwork activities. I work anytime and everywhere, and I think I am cool with that" (Flora).

Participants also commented on the commodification of time and money, which influences the creation of boundaries between their work and nonwork lives. Folu describes their utilisation of time as an important requisite for making money, stating that:

> "People who work for organisations may have starting and finishing times. They may not want to work outside their workplace. I am self-employed. Every minute of my life counts. I don't have work time and nonwork time. I work all the time, regardless of where I am, because I need to make money. For example, I had to cut short the church service last time because I had to urgently attend to some customers" (Folu).

Other participants also commented on time and work boundaries and their significance in being successful entrepreneurs:

> "Time is money. I don't have a time or place where I cannot work. I work everywhere, and I think it is absolutely important for the success of my business. Placing boundaries between work time and nonwork time, workplace, and nonworkplace will negatively affect my business….so I don't do it" (Aminu).

> "Time is precious, and it is money. I am always with my laptop which facilitates my working at anytime and anywhere. Everywhere is my office" (Laide).

The commodification of time and money together with the participants' desire to make success of their businesses do not only depict entrepreneurs as 'integrators', who essentially remove boundaries between the work and nonwork domains; but also illustrate the shifts between and the significance of time and place boundaries.

Desire for Boundaries

Since the majority of the participants prioritised work over life, their desire to create distinct boundaries between work and nonwork domains is almost non-existent. Even though the participants acknowledged that permeable borders make them work more, they consciously desired permeable boundaries for the progress of their businesses. One participant commented:

> "Look, I want to make a lot of money, so I work more because I work at all times and everywhere…that's what is required to be a successful entrepreneur. I don't like boundaries, they will hinder my entrepreneurial skills and success" (Ola).

Another participant explained:

> "Boundaries? No boundaries. Create boundaries between work and nonwork, and you will fail…you can't do that. Maybe if I work for an organisation or for someone, then I would definitely want boundaries between work and nonwork activities. But this is my business, boundaries will limit my potential, affect my customers (because they won't be able to reach me at all times) and it will also affect my profits, so no boundaries" (Rauf).

Another participant commented on the impact of mobile information technology on the creation of boundaries. Mobile information technology enhances the entrepreneurs' work, ensuring that it is not confined to traditional times and space. One participant commented:

> "I don't have boundaries. With my laptop and IPad and of course the wireless internet service, there are no boundaries…everywhere is

my workplace. For example, I was on the train to Paris last week. I worked on my laptop throughout the journey" (Ade).

Another participant commented:

"I don't do boundaries between work and nonwork, because it will give my business setbacks. Aside from that, mobile information technology, such as laptops, IPad, IPhone, Blackberries, etc., actually make working everywhere and anytime easy, and I love it. It makes me work more, though, but its fine" (Bambo).

The desire to have boundaries between work and nonwork domains is not popular among the participants. All of the participants do not want a demarcation between their work and nonwork lives. They desire permeable boundaries that will enable them to work at any time and everywhere.

Long Working Hours

The data indicated that, on average, the participants spend 13 hours per day, including weekends and bank holidays, working on their businesses. There was no substantial difference between the genders of the participants in terms of the hours that they work. However, the male entrepreneurs worked slightly more hours than the female entrepreneurs (see Table 1). Generally, the participants work very long hours to look after their businesses and to fulfil the 24/7 requirement of the global economy. All of the participants believe that long working hours is an important requirement for entrepreneurial success. One participant commented:

> "I told you that I work for 10 hours per day…that is the minimum. There are times that I work a lot more than that. I need to put in longer hours to achieve success" (Flora).

Another participant commented:

> "I work as many hours at home as I work at the office, otherwise my business will suffer. The clients want to be able to reach you at any time, and I have to live up to that. The good thing is that I am my own boss…I can schedule and reschedule my time and activities" (James).

Subomi explained the danger of working reduced hours or measuring working time for an entrepreneur:

> "As an entrepreneur, I normally work for longer hours to attend to my customers and to put things in order. I can't start to set starting and finishing work times because it will affect my success. An entrepreneur may choose to work reduced hours but she may lose customers because her customers will go elsewhere when she is not available. So, in this era of a 24/7 economy, long working hours are required for entrepreneurial success."

Long working hours have a huge impact on the creation and management of boundaries between entrepreneurs' work and private lives.

Unmarried, Single, and Divorced Syndrome

The participants recounted the impact of their status as entrepreneurs on their marital statuses, which is important. Four participants attributed their single status to the demands of their businesses. The participants described their status as

entrepreneurs as very demanding and time-consuming which they dread to combine with marital responsibilities. The four participants cited this as one the reasons why they have not yet married. One of the participants commented:

> "I have really worked hard to bring my business this far. It takes up a lot of my time…at the least, I work 12 hours every day. Even when I'm at home, I am either attending to a client online or talking to friends who are also entrepreneurs about work. As a Nigerian woman, I will definitely not be able to do all of these things when I am married. That is why I am sort of delaying marriage…yes, my work is the reason why I am still single" (Joy).

Joy's comment resonates with other participants' ordeals which described how entrepreneurs struggle with combining marital relationships and responsibilities with their entrepreneurial activities. One participant commented:

> "My entrepreneurial activities are time-consuming and very demanding…they affected my marriage. I did not have time for my wife, and she often complained about my attitude of bringing work home and working late. She eventually divorced me when she could not take it any more" (Ike).

Another participant said:

> "I lost my marriage because I did not have time for my family. My business takes up a lot of my time. I work at all times even at home, and my husband was really not happy about it. We ended the marriage when he asked me to choose between my work and the marriage. Of course, I opted for the former because I have invested so much of my life in it" (Funmi).

Out of the 23 participants, 8 are divorced and they all attributed the main cause of their marriage breakdowns to a lack of time for their families and their attitude of bringing work home, which eventually ended their marriages.

Figure 2: Entrepreneurs' Boundary Movements
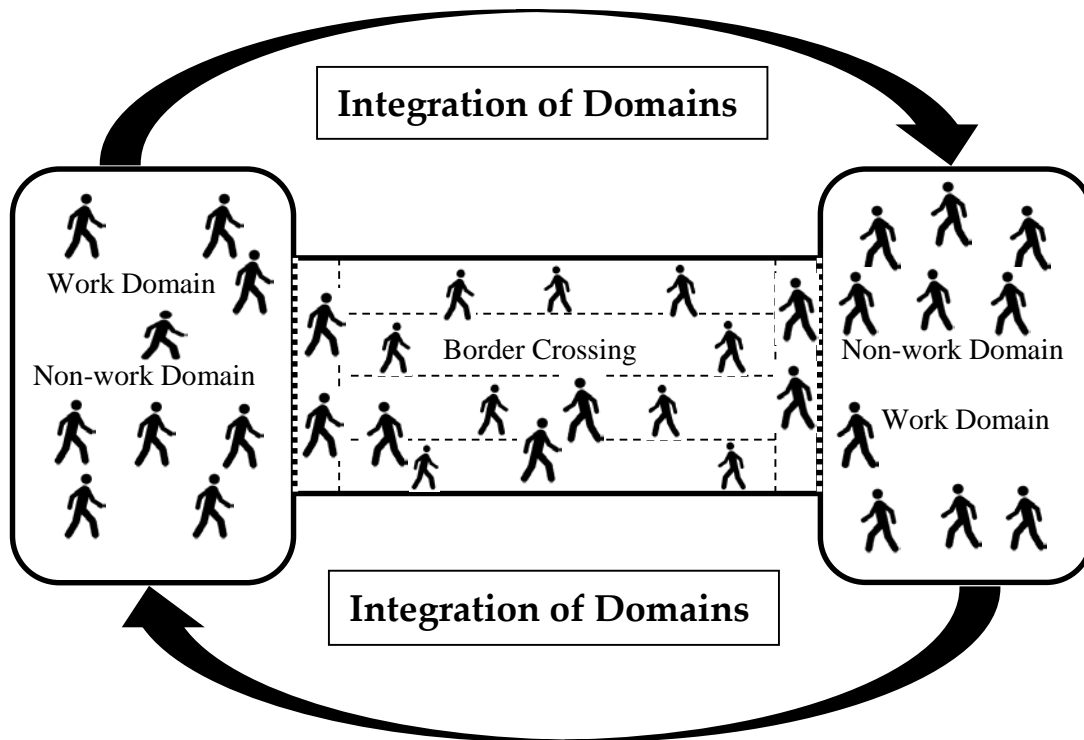
Source: Derived from the data

Figure. 2 shows the porosity of the border termed 'work/nonwork border blurring'. It also shows the profound overlaps between the entrepreneurs' work and nonwork domains, making a case for 'boundaryless' borders. There is basically no distinction between entrepreneurs' work and nonwork domains as work activities occur in both domains, and so do life activities. A great deal of role integration occurs in order to achieve entrepreneurial success, thus blurring work-life boundaries.

Discussion

This study has provided empirical evidence on entrepreneurs' boundaries between their work and nonwork lives, which is scarce in the literature. Drawing on border theory (Clark, 2000), this study has examined how entrepreneurs create and manage

the borders between their work and nonwork lives. For some people, whatever happens at work, stays at work, and whatever happens outside the work domain also remains there. For entrepreneurs, however, the parameters of the work-nonwork interface are not demarcated (see Figure 2). Entrepreneurs experience excessive and frequent role blurring due to the thin and very weak borders that exist between their work and nonwork lives. The borders are extremely porous making work-life interference among entrepreneurs bi-directional and a norm rather than an exception. This phenomenon is described by Kreiner *et al*. (2009, p. 719) as 'allowing differential permeability'. The participants' financial commitments (both in their domicile and native countries) and their keen desire to be successful trigger their prioritisation of work over life. This, consequently, results in very weak boundaries.

Researchers have, therefore, argued that thin or weak boundaries are open to influence and are prone to merging aspects of categories because flexibility and permeability happen the most in the border area (Ashforth *et al*., 2000; Clark, 2000; Hartmann, 1991; Kreiner *et al*., 2009). Entrepreneurs characteristically regard and shift their attention predominantly to the work domain because it is crucial to making money and being successful, and they tend to move with the work domain everywhere they go. This is consistent with the boundary theory tenet that individuals often act proactively to shape the work/nonwork boundary to suit their needs (Ashforth *et al*., 2000; Clark, 2000). As described by Nippert-Eng (1996), entrepreneurs are integrators who keep one key ring for both work and nonwork.

Entrepreneurs make no distinction between the domains. Thus, work activities take place in the nonwork domain and nonwork activities also take place in the work domain (see Figure 2). The idiosyncratic commodification of time and money by entrepreneurs gives them little or no control over what takes place in which domain. The notion of 'time is money, and money is precious' has turned everywhere into a workplace for entrepreneurs, with no start and no finish time for work.

The success of achieving a satisfactory conception of boundary depends on individuals' preferences for boundaries (Mellner *et al.*, 2014; Rodrigues *et al.*, 2015). This is because individuals differ in the extent to which they fence off their work life from their nonwork life (Nippert-Eng, 1996). Additionally, the establishment of boundaries by individuals is a matter of personal preference (Rothbard *et al.*, 2005). The findings of this study reveal that entrepreneurs, regardless of their marital status, desire permeable boundaries (see Figure 2) which enable them to attend to their customers/clients at all times. de Man *et al.* (2008) and Kossek *et al.* (1999) hypothesised that the higher the preference of an employee for integrating the roles of each domains, the more permeable the work/nonwork boundary is. The study found that preferences for domain role integration is further enhanced by mobile information technology, such as laptops, IPads, smartphones, mobile internet service connections, etc. which allow entrepreneurs to move around and attend to their work activities.

Furthermore, the entrepreneurs' work characteristics and their tendency to influence boundary permeability have been found to stretch the traditional working times and workspace, leading to increased working hours (Peshev, 2107). This is further compounded by the requirement to meet the needs of the 24/7 economy, which requires entrepreneurs to be reachable at all times. Separation of domain roles may put entrepreneurs at a disadvantage in terms of meeting these requirements. The findings presented in this study add further conceptual thought and empirical evidence to the work-life boundary debate, which has heavily been concentrated on work and home/family. Based on empirical evidence from this study, we argue that entrepreneurs' work-life boundaries are imperfect and extremely pregnable, such that work indiscriminately intrudes into nonwork life. This, in essence, means that a great deal of overlap occurs through the dismantling of boundaries. This is consistent with previous research that suggests that blurring increases the risk of work invading nonwork (e.g. Gambles *et al.*, 2006; Olson-Buchanan and Boswell, 2006). An intriguing result of this study is that there are complications associated with balancing of work and nonwork roles among entrepreneurs. For example, some participants explain that their status as entrepreneurs is the reason they are not married. This is because being married would negatively affect border crossing, which in turn would be detrimental to their entrepreneurial success. Furthermore, some participants attributed their failed marriages to excessive intrusion (frequent border crossing) of work activities into nonwork lives. Consequently, the entrepreneurs experienced much work-family conflict because their spouses did not

appreciate work intruding into family lives. It is noteworthy that marriage is quite important to Africans. African societies frown upon a person who prioritises their career over and above their family or the possibility of starting a family, or if careers negatively affect family (Mordi *et al.*, 2010). According to Perlow (1998), negotiating the boundaries between work and nonwork lives involves patterns of a relational process. which could either proclaim border crossers' spouses as 'acceptors' or 'resisters'. 'Acceptors' tolerate frequent border crossing, while 'resisters' detest it (Perlow, 1998). In this context, the participants' spouses are 'resisters'. Boundary flexibility and permeability are often identified as emancipatory means through which individuals balance their work and nonwork responsibilities (Ashforth *et al.*, 2000; Clark, 2000; Kreiner *et al.*, 2009). Yet, this does not fit with the accounts of the participants of this study. Entrepreneurial success is predicated on the entrepreneurs' ability to move freely across the borders which includes working at home, in the car, in a place of worship, etc., and at any time. Paradoxically, border flexibility and permeability, which are supposed to be a source of achieving perfect WLB, actually drift entrepreneurs towards a perfect imbalance. This, therefore, raises a salient question: Do perfect boundaries exist? It is herein argued that achieving perfect work-life boundaries, for entrepreneurs, is implausible. The self-employed nature of their business ventures, which helps them achieve good WLB, equally exerts the pressure to achieve 'entrepreneurial success.

Conclusions

The results of this study contribute to the development of theory. This study provides a holistic and nuanced picture of work/nonwork boundary management, using self-employed entrepreneurs as the study sample. The study has discussed the asymmetrically permeable boundaries between entrepreneurs' work/nonwork domains and the frequency of the ruthless, almost uncontrollable, intrusion especially from the work domain to the nonwork domain (see Figure 2). As argued earlier, the vast majority of previous research on border theory focused on the construction of boundaries between work and home/family (Ashforth *et al.*, 2000; Clark, 2000; Kreiner *et al.*, 2009; Nippert-Eng, 1996). Furthermore, the samples of their studies are employees who work in traditional organisational settings. In contrast, this study introduces the discussion about self-employed individuals in the discussion of work/life border theory and argues that perfect boundaries for self-employed entrepreneurs are difficult to achieve if not impossible. It is important that this gap is filled. A significant implication of this study's contribution is that it provides researchers and self-employed individuals with the practical reality of establishing boundaries between work and nonwork domains, which can inform researchers' future studies and help entrepreneurs to achieve WLB. This adds richness and depth to the discussion of work-life border theory.

There are also significant implications for practice from the forgoing. Obviously, engaging in any occupation requires managing work and nonwork demands to varying degrees, depending on the status of the employees/workers. However,

understanding the nature of these demands and the tactics required for managing them has many practical implications (Kreiner *et al.*, 2009). Research on HRM in SMEs or among businesses in which entrepreneurs operate is still evolving (Cassell *et al.*, 2002; Wilkinson, 1999). Based on the data presented in this study, the researchers posit that there seems to be little or no structure of HRM policies, processes, and practices to help self-employed entrepreneurs manage boundaries between their work and nonwork lives and thereby achieve WLB. Albeit, they are self-employed owning their businesses, entrepreneurs should be guided by appropriate HRM policies, processes, and practices as well as HRM best practices. This will help them harmonise their work and nonwork lives.

The potential limitations of the study provide opportunities for future research agenda. First, the extent to which the findings of this research can be generalised is constrained by the limited and selected sample of the research. Therefore, future research may study a diverse sample of entrepreneurs perhaps in different context – developed and developing nations; similar to suggestion made by (Dobbs and Hamilton, 2007). This may reveal the dynamics of the boundaries and boundary work tactics among different groups of people potentially in different contexts. Second, future research may use a quantitative approach using cross-sectional or longitudinal data to examine the construction and management of boundaries between work and life among self-employed entrepreneurs. Third, understanding who an entrepreneur is a very elastic phenomenon, from the very micro-level

business venture managed for basic survival worth a few hundreds or thousands to huge well-known billionaire entrepreneurs whose businesses are worth several billions; managing WLB of entrepreneurs is a huge continuum. Future studies might carefully categorise entrepreneurs to determine at what size an entrepreneur might, for example, be more like a paid employee than like the borderless and boundaryless individual this research finding has evidenced.

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