THESIS

"I AM NOT A BAD FRIEND FOR HAVING BOUNDARIES": EXPLORING THE NEED

FOR AND CREATION OF SUPPORT BOUNDARIES IN FRIENDSHIPS

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Summer 2022

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ABSTRACT

"I AM NOT A BAD FRIEND FOR HAVING BOUNDARIES": EXPLORING THE NEED

FOR AND CREATION OF SUPPORT BOUNDARIES IN FRIENDSHIPS

Although research effectively depicts the benefits of social support and support recipient experiences, less scholarship explores discrepancies and challenges in supportive communication. This research study investigates support provider experiences and offers new insight for challenges that might arise in supportive contexts. Two primary goals motivated this research: understanding what conditions influence providers' need for support boundaries and what communicative strategies are utilized to create them. Qualitative research methods were utilized, and 22 semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted. Analysis of 865 pages of texts illustrates how various conditions, both personal and relational, drove providers to need support boundaries. Participants described four primary themes to explain their need for support boundaries: *ineffective involvement*, *relational transgressions*, *protecting the self*, and *network negotiations*. Various sub-themes were identified, and all participants detailed numerous conditions that contributed to their need for support boundaries. Participants utilized three central strategies to enact support boundaries with their friends: *direct communication*, *indirect communication*, and *collaborative communication*. The findings depict existing discrepancies between support provider and recipient needs, and that boundary creation, when enacted skillfully, is an effective way to protect themselves and the relationship. Ultimately, this exploratory study emphasizes the importance of support boundaries and positions boundary creation in supportive contexts as an enriched area for further investigation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The past two years have encompassed the most challenging and most rewarding moments of my academic life, none of which would have been possible without my irreplaceable support system. I am overwhelmed with gratitude, as so many people have encouraged my growth and believed in my ideas. Thank you for standing by me as I (try to) navigate life and thank you for making this project possible.

First, I want to give my biggest thank you to my incomparable advisor, Dr. Meara Faw. Her dedicated mentorship, never-ending encouragement, and brilliant expertise has impacted me in countless ways. This project would not exist without her continuous support, which includes limitless brainstorming sessions and bringing me back to earth when my ideas are simply way too big (which is… basically always). She has invested so much energy into enhancing my skills as a teacher and scholar. And most importantly, she has continued to believe in me through it all – even when I haven't believed in myself. I feel extremely fortunate to have Dr. Faw's advice, investment, and support through hectic graduate school life.

I am also deeply thankful for my committee members: Dr. Elizabeth Parks and Dr. Kelley Quirk. Dr. Parks has supported me since my first semester of graduate school, when she validated and helped me manage my struggles with the reading load (haha). Her critical-cultural commitments have contributed to my project in meaningful ways, and she consistently posed important questions for me to reflect on as I continue with boundary-related research. Dr. Quirk provided unique methodological insight and helped me narrow the scope of qualifying participants. I am very grateful for the significant efforts and brilliant insight of my committee members throughout this process.

Additionally, my appreciation goes to the two departments that have fostered my love for studying communication. The University of South Dakota's Department of Communication Studies initially sparked my interest in studying relational communication. I am forever grateful for the four years I had in Vermillion, learning from incredibly passionate faculty and peers. I want to thank Dr. Jill Tyler for being the first person to encourage me to pursue graduate school. Additionally, I want to give a massive thank you to my undergraduate thesis advisor, Dr. Leah Seurer for all that she has done for me. After switching my thesis concept during January of my senior year, Leah graciously agreed to take me on as an advisee. While I was struggling with some personal challenges, Leah supported me and helped me finish my thesis project. Still today, Leah provides me immense insight and support from states away. I will never be able to effectively express the gratitude I have for her.

I am also incredibly thankful for my time at Colorado State University. CSU's Department of Communication Studies has enhanced my ability to conceptualize my ideas, prompted me to consider various scholarly commitments, and supported my research. Our department awarded me a research grant, which allowed me to compensate my participants for their time and enriched insights. Additionally, the vibes of our department are immaculate – growth-promoting, somewhat ridiculous (in the best ways), and immensely supportive. I am especially thankful to all the graduate students who have been with me the last two years. I would not have made it without you.

Finally, I want to thank all of my friends and family for their support. To my parents, Rick and Trish, thank you for your patience, investment, and unconditional love. Thank you for encouraging me and believing in me, especially when I am exhausted and questioning my abilities. To my siblings, Morgan and Hunter, thank you for always asking about my projects,

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CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

Social support literature has well-documented the positive relational and health outcomes of supportive communication (e.g., Albrecht & Adelman, 1987; MacGeorge et al., 2011), but less scholarship has investigated when support is harmful. Social support functions in various forms and can be influenced by different dimensions, including the context of the situation and the relationship between the support seeker and support provider (Cutrona & Russell, 1990). Support recipient-focused research has illuminated that not receiving helpful or desired support can lead to hurt feelings, negative relational consequences, and support gaps (e.g., Davis & High, 2019; High & Crowley, 2018; McLaren & High, 2019). Additionally, Wortman and Lehman (1985) explicated how support provision can lead to feelings of uncertainty and being overwhelmed. There are still significant gaps in assessing the challenges and downsides of social support. Additionally, minimal research has exclusively examined support provider experiences and how support provision might be detrimental or challenging for the providers themselves. To mitigate and manage negative outcomes of support, providers can protect themselves by creating and enacting support boundaries.

For this study, *support boundaries* are defined as a support provider's effort to decrease or eliminate another person's unwanted disclosures and/or support-seeking. Although literature gives insight to how and when people disclose, less is known about how others stop disclosure. Theories like Communication Privacy Management (CPM; Petronio, 2002) assess how and under what circumstances individuals disclose private information. According to CPM, both information owners and co-owners enact boundaries and privacy rules to manage the shared private information (Petronio, 2002). While CPM provides insight for how disclosures are

currently conceptualized and offers a framework for disclosure boundary creation and management, gaps exist in understanding how individuals may need and enact boundaries to manage *others'* disclosures in certain supportive situations. In contrast to theories like CPM, I argue that evaluating support boundary creation is one communicative pathway for thinking about supportive interactions and the conditions that lead support providers to no longer offer support. Investigating the creation of support boundaries will contribute to what is currently known about the dark sides of social support (or when social support results in negative and/or antisocial outcomes), as well as advancing comprehension of the complexity of support provider experiences.

This project has two primary goals. First, this research explores what contextual and relational experiences prompt support providers to need support boundaries. Second, this paper examines what communicative strategies support providers utilize to create and enact their support boundaries. With limited work explicating how people work to minimize or stop others' unwanted disclosures in interpersonal contexts, the current study attempts to expand understanding by conducting in-depth interviews with support providers. In the pursuit of understanding support boundary creation, I specifically analyze a variety of support provider experiences within friendship contexts. I start by defining the different types of support and explicating how various supportive contexts may distinctively influence the enactment of support boundaries. Then, I synthesize what is currently known about the outcomes of support, with a specific focus on provider experiences. Additionally, I identify existing boundary-related theories and integrate their notions into initial conceptualizations and questions about support boundaries.

CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Support

Various fields differ in their definitions and conceptions of social support, but

communication scholars generally agree that "the study of 'social support' *is the study of*

supportive communication: verbal and nonverbal behaviors intended to provide or seek help"

(MacGeorge et al., 2011, p. 323). While other fields like sociology and psychology implicitly

consider the role of communication in supportive interactions, communication scholars believe

that support is primarily communicative and must be evaluated as such. This perspective aims to

understand how individuals utilize messages to create, maintain, and shift supportive

interactions. Additionally, communication scholars aim to understand the relational outcomes of

support, which is de-emphasized in other fields (MacGeorge et al., 2011). As noted by Faw

(2018), "Because support is dyadic by nature, it is important to consider the support provider

when assessing the potential outcomes of a supportive interaction" (p. 206). In assessing support

boundary creation, the communication perspective provides a beneficial framework for

considering how the needs of a support recipient may lead to boundary creation by a support

provider, how communicating boundaries may influence the well-being of the support provider,

and the relational outcomes boundary setting may have on both interactants.

Types of Social Support

In the communication field, support is viewed as multifaceted and often categorized into

two main forms: nurturant and action-facilitating support. Nurturant support includes emotional,

esteem, and network support (Rains et al., 2015). Although each type of support has distinctive

goals and communicative strategies, nurturant support generally serves the support seeker's

emotional needs (i.e., validation, encouragement, etc.) related to a specific stressor (Cutrona & Russell, 1990). *Emotional support* functions by making someone feel cared for and providing comforting messages to them (e.g., Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Helgeson, 1990). Validating someone's frustration is an example of emotional support. *Esteem support* "represents the bolstering of a person's sense of competence or self-esteem by other people" (Cutrona & Russell, 1990, p. 322). For example, if an individual is struggling with their self-worth, a friend can provide esteem support by reminding them that they are a good person. Finally, *network support* helps individuals feel connected and valued within a larger group (Parks & Faw, 2014). Offering to introduce a friend to a new connection who may be able to relate more to their situation is an example of providing network support.

Action-facilitating support includes informational and tangible support, which aim to problem-solve (i.e., find solutions) around a particular stressor (Rains et al., 2015). *Informational support* is understood as providing information surrounding a stressor in order to facilitate problem-solving (Langford et al., 1997). Giving advice surrounding a source of conflict or sharing information regarding a health diagnosis are two examples of informational support. *Tangible support* provides people with goods or services in times of stress (Cutrona & Russell, 1990). Paying someone's rent or cleaning a person's apartment when they are feeling overwhelmed are both examples of tangible support.

Substantial research shows that all forms of social support can result in various health and relational benefits (e.g., Berkman et al., 2000; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Goldsmith & Albrecht, 2011). Benefits include higher self-esteem and well-being, as well as lower levels of stress and depression (Berkman et al., 2000). Moreover, effective social support can lead to positive relational outcomes, such as higher levels of intimacy and attachment (Berkman et al., 2000).

However, supportive interactions can also have negative relational impacts. Faw (2014) found that individuals experiencing a lack of support felt isolated and engaged in less disclosure with their friends. Additionally, McLaren and High (2019) found that ineffective support results in hurt feelings and relational dissatisfaction. While the bulk of communication research emphasizes the positive outcomes of support, it is much more complicated than that. Some studies show that support can result in worse health outcomes, which may be explained by researchers "measuring amount or frequency of support [overlooking] quality and appropriateness" (Goldsmith & Albrecht, 2011, p. 337). As such, scholars have acknowledged the importance of evaluating specific aspects of support and their correlation to potential benefits (Goldsmith & Albrecht, 2011). It is equally as important to examine aspects of support that may lead to negative outcomes. As such, support can play a key role in determining whether relationships thrive or whether they buckle under the challenges of interdependent life. One theory in particular, the theory of resilience and relational load, provides a useful framework for thinking about how support can affect relationships in important ways.

Theory of Resilience and Relational Load

The theory of resilience and relational load (TRRL; Afifi et al., 2016) examines how relational maintenance, emotional reserves, and communal orientation can generate potential relational outcomes of resilience or relational load (see Figure 1 below). Individuals experience resilience in their relationship when they effectively adjust to the stress they experience (Afifi et al., 2016). In contrast, relational load occurs when people do not adjust effectively and stressors damage the relationship (Afifi et al., 2016). Furthermore, "resource depletion and relational load could make individuals in the relational system more susceptible to poor mental, physical, and relational health" (Afifi et al., 2016, p. 665). Exploration of support provider experiences must

Figure 1
Representation of the theory of resilience and relational load (Afifi et al., 2016).

consider the assumptions underlying TRRL while assessing why and how providers might need

support boundary creation.

     Broadly, TRRL depicts how one's communal orientation and/or communal discrepancies

influence their communication maintenance behaviors and discrepancies (Afifi et al., 2016). In

other words, when people view stress as a 'we' problem in their relationship, they have a

communal orientation, which influences the way they communicate about stress. Afifi and

colleagues (2016) argue that communal orientation impacts stress management in the following

ways: a stronger sense of 'we-ness' results in behavior (e.g., investing time and effort into the

relationship) that increases emotional reserves and minimizes stress and the emotional reserves

can be drawn upon when stress naturally occurs. Communication maintenance behaviors include

positive and validating everyday interactions that make individuals feel valued within their

relationship (Afifi et al., 2016). In contrast, communication maintenance discrepancies occur when people's investments are not reciprocated or their desires are not met (Afifi et al., 2016). Communication maintenance and discrepancies influence emotional reserves, which "reflect the accumulation of investments (i.e., maintenance) and discrepancies in investments" (Afifi et al., 2016, p. 667). TRRL explicates how maintenance behaviors or discrepancies result in security appraisals and behaviors or threat appraisals and behaviors (Afifi et al., 2016). Security appraisals and behaviors allow people to avoid the depletion of resources, including their emotional reserves, which allows them to prioritize the preservation of their relationship (Afifi et al., 2016). Showing affection and investment toward a relational partner will make them feel cared for, which contributes to emotional reserves and prompts relational preservation. Threat appraisals and behaviors can lead to depletion "because energy is being expended protecting and regulating one's self, exacerbating stress" (Afifi et al., 2016, p. 671). For example, if someone's friend has not been investing in their relationship (e.g., being disengaged when they are together, being malicious, etc.), they might begin to prioritize their own needs instead of the relationship. According to TRRL, threat appraisals and behaviors are an attempt at self-preservation (Afifi et al., 2016). All these exchanges can lead to resilience and growth or relational load in relationships. Moreover, individuals who are experiencing resilience may not enact support boundaries, but those suffering from relational load might have an increased need for boundary creation in order to maintain their own self-preservation.

TRRL helps us understand why support providers might need support boundary creation. For instance, if a person experiences communication maintenance discrepancies (e.g., a lack of reciprocity in support) in their relationship, their emotional reserves might become depleted. This depletion, if not addressed over a period of time, could lead to their engagement with threat

appraisals in the relationship (e.g., "I just could not be that support system anymore"), activating their need for self-preservation. Support boundary creation might represent one attempt at preserving oneself in a supportive context where the relationship has reached a point of relational load. Additionally, TRRL allows us to consider why support providers may *not* need boundary creation. If communicative maintenance behaviors in a relationship are appropriately reciprocated and both interactants' relationship needs are met, both relationship partners are more likely to enact security appraisals their corresponding behaviors, building emotional reserves and leading to relational preservation (Afifi et al., 2016). Considering the investments required to offer and give social support, TRRL is a beneficial framework to evaluate how providers experience benefits and challenges when supporting their friends.

Benefits of Social Support

Support Recipient Benefits

Supportive interactions can build emotional reserves, prompting relational preservation and minimizing potential depletion. When it comes to the communication of social support, scholars have dedicated significant attention to documenting the positive health outcomes that result from receiving satisfying support (e.g., Berkman et al., 2000; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Goldsmith & Albrecht, 2011). For example, those with strong social ties and easy access to support are more likely to be in better health than those who do not have access to support (Cohen & Wills, 1985). On the other hand, people who consistently experience stressful life events and do not have access to positive support may experience poor mental health outcomes, shifts in physical health behaviors (e.g., substance abuse), and lack of self-care (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Additionally, support results in lower stress levels and better mental health outcomes (Priem & Solomon, 2015), greater uncertainty reduction (Albrecht & Adelman, 1987), and

positive relational outcomes (MacGeorge et al., 2011), all of which spell good outcomes for support recipients.

Beyond its positive effects on health, social support is also closely related to positive relational outcomes. As illuminated by the forms and functions of social support, "supportive communication can signal care, commitment, interest, compassion, and even love" (MacGeorge et al., 2011, p. 324). These positive interactions can result in beneficial relational outcomes, such as a sense of closeness and long-term relational thriving (Feeney & Collins, 2015). It is important to note that relational history may influence supportive outcomes in unique ways (Vangelisti, 2009). There may be immediate, positive reactions to received support, but interactions can also be understood at a macro-level as well. As Vangelisti (2009) notes, "at the macro-level, the behaviors, thoughts, and feelings that influence the way people evaluate acts of support can be examined in terms of the ongoing patterns that characterize people's relationships" (p. 45). With TRRL in mind, the consistent patterns that exist within the supportive interactions of a given relationship may lead to resilience or relational load, explaining important relationship experiences and outcomes beyond a single supportive interaction.

Support Provider Benefits

If support providers are not experiencing maintenance discrepancies or the need for self-preservation, their support outcomes may also be positive and beneficial. Significant research considers the benefits of social support generally and for the support recipient, but a much smaller body work investigates *how* and *why* giving someone support may be beneficial for the provider. Through offering support to others, providers may experience increases in their self-esteem, sense of self-worth, and feelings of closeness to the support recipient – all of which

contribute to positive perceptions of the supportive interaction (Brown et al., 2003; Inagaki & Orehek, 2017). In addition, the general relational satisfaction created by participating in supportive relationships may generate a buffering effect to minimize the potential costs of giving support, and, as a result, providers may experience fewer negative emotions during supportive interactions (Lu & Argyle, 1992). Moreover, support provision can result in reduced stress and better general health, both physically and mentally (Brown et al., 2013; Inagaki & Orehek, 2017).

In order for providers to experience positive outcomes from supportive interactions, the context of the support situation must meet certain criteria. Inagaki and Orehek (2017) assert that two primary factors influence the outcomes of support provision for providers: "(a) whether an individual freely chooses to give support and (b) whether [they think] the support is effective" (p. 110). In this way, research shows that the benefits of support provision are minimized when the support provider feels obligated to continue offering support that they no longer desire to provide (Inagaki & Orehek, 2017). For example, if an individual no longer wants to provide esteem support to their friend after their breakup but continues to support them anyway, the support provider is less likely to experience the benefits of support provision due to their feelings of obligation. Despite the widely acknowledged positive outcomes associated with supportive communication, social support can also result in negative personal or relational costs. In these circumstances, TRRL asserts that individuals may engage in self-preservation tactics (e.g., enacting various support boundaries) to avoid relational load.

Challenges of Social Support

The dark sides of social support are significantly less researched and understood than the benefits of supportive interactions. In recent years, scholars have argued that social support can

be both helpful and harmful at the same time (e.g., in cases of tough love) (Faw et al., 2019).

Furthermore, Faw et al. (2019) found that parents utilized tough love after trying other avenues

of communication first, which may represent parents' attempt to set boundaries in their parent-

child relationships. Scholars have additionally aimed to understand *how, when,* and *why* support

leads to negative outcomes (e.g., Afifi et al., 2013; Kramer et al., 2014; Ray et al., 2020). Ray et

al. (2020) found that mixed messages in support (i.e., messages that include both highly

supportive as well as ineffective or even hurtful content) tend to have negative effects, with the

extent of the negative outcomes dependent on the frequency of negative statements in the

supportive message. In other investigations, emotional contagion (i.e., the transfer of emotions

from one individual to another) can lead to negative consequences for those who "catch" the

negative feelings of a person experiencing a challenge or problem (Kramer et al., 2014).

Additionally, co-rumination in supportive conversations can lead to negative outcomes (e.g.,

stress and dissatisfaction) for support recipients dependent on their perception (positive or

negative) of the support they receive (Afifi et al., 2013). To explore support boundaries (i.e., how

providers minimize or eliminate support-seeking), it is necessary to consider what experiences

may lead to reducing or ending disclosures and evaluate the implications of existing

communication theories on privacy, disclosure, and avoidance. According to TRRL, relational

investment discrepancies occur in relationships when there is a lack of reciprocity and/or

challenges surrounding a person's sense of autonomy, which may lead individuals to engage in

self-preservation tactics (Afifi et al., 2016).

Support Provider Challenges

Autonomy and Reciprocity. Fear of providing ineffective support, lack of autonomy, or

an absence of reciprocation are all negative feelings that may lead support providers to create

various support boundaries. Lu and Argyle (1992) argued that helping others "can lead to negative reactions, especially when it suggests the incompetence of the recipient, reducing [support provider's] autonomy, or can't be reciprocated in any way" (p. 123). For example, if a friend continuously seeks support about a workplace conflict and the disagreement has not been resolved, the provider may need to create support boundaries because of their friend's continual negativity and frustration (Lu & Argyle, 1992). The provider may feel obligated to continue offering this support while simultaneously feeling frustrated that the situation has remained the same, indicating that their support has been ineffective. As such, these relational strains could cause depletion of emotional reserves and contribute to relational load. This can ultimately threaten a support providers sense of public image, or face, creating greater complications and challenges in their support provision.

Attempting to maintain a positive public self-image (i.e., face) is a central aspect of human interaction (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Goldsmith, 2008). Goffman's (1967) original concept of *face* was expanded by Brown and Levinson (1987) to include two distinct types of face: *positive face* and *negative face*. Both types of face are associated with different social and relational needs. More specifically, they are associated with "the desire to have one's identity liked and accepted by at least some others (positive face), and the desire to have one's autonomy respected (negative face)" (Goldsmith & MacGeorge, 2000, p. 235). Providing support to another person has the potential to threaten both aspects of a support provider's face (MacGeorge et al, 2004). For example, feelings of obligation (as outlined in the example above) threaten a support provider's negative face by limiting their sense of freedom in supportive contexts. Similarly, potential threats to one's likability or positive face might occur if the provider offers support that is deemed awkward, ineffective, or unskilled. Furthermore, Goldsmith (1994)

argued that these face threats can impact the perceived effectiveness and quality of support provision when individuals do not know what to say in supportive contexts. Face complicates the supportive process, and might lead providers to making decisions that minimize their agency, increase their provision, and ultimately lead to relational load.

Reciprocity (or lack thereof) may also lead to complications for support providers. In both short-term and long-term relationships, reciprocity is needed to maintain positive relational outcomes. Various factors do, however, influence one's expectations of reciprocity (Altman, 1973). Reciprocity is generally defined as receiving equal investment in return from relational partners and is often expected (Buunk & Schaufeli, 1999), but expectancies might vary based on relationship type (e.g., parent-child relationships are often expected to have imbalanced investments at different times) (Afifi et al., 2016). Furthermore, reciprocity is vital in supportive communication and "must be present for the support to continue" (Langford et al., 1997, p. 96). Support reciprocity (i.e., equal support quantity and quality from everyone involved) influences outcomes of support, as well as individuals' desire to continue providing support. Therefore, if a support provider is consistently helping their friend and not receiving any help in return, they will likely begin to desire support boundaries to minimize their unreciprocated investments. For instance, consider the workplace conflict example. If the supportive interactions consistently revolve around the workplace conflict and never the experiences of the other individual, the support provider could experience irritation about the lack of reciprocity they are getting from their friend. Some research shows that in certain situations, support can lead to rumination and emotional burnout – both of which can lead to negative personal and relational outcomes (e.g., Afifi et al., 2013; Byrd-Craven et al., 2008; Snyder, 2009).

Rumination and Burnout. Rumination and burnout are two support consequences that may lead to relational load. Any disclosure can contribute to positive relational and health benefits, but it depends heavily on the nature of the disclosure and the nature of the response (Afifi et al., 2013). *Verbal rumination* occurs when an individual repeatedly and frequently discloses their problems and negative emotions to another person (Afifi et al., 2013). Due to the negative nature of verbal rumination compared to self-disclosure generally, these interactions are more likely to result in negative mental health outcomes for the discloser (Afifi et al., 2013). Support recipients also experience negative outcomes (e.g., stress and dissatisfaction) dependent on the perceived usefulness of the support they receive in rumination contexts (Afifi et al., 2013). Furthermore, consistent negativity can lead to detrimental relational outcomes and pose a challenge for people to be around the discloser (Afifi et al., 2013). Providers may hesitate to spend time with or provide support to people who consistently ruminate about their problems. Furthermore, the support provider's response to rumination may result in relational changes, altered stress levels, and mental health concerns (e.g., Byrd-Craven et al., 2008; Rose, 2002).

Another potential negative outcome of support specifically for support providers is burnout. *Burnout* is a negative experience resulting from excessive stress that leads not only to exhaustion, "but also depersonalisation [sic], feelings of ineffectiveness, and lack of achievement" (Nunn & Isaacs, 2019, p. 5). Substantial literature demonstrates how social support can prevent or alleviate burnout in various contexts, including workload management (e.g., Avanzi et al., 2018; Kirmeyer & Dougherty, 1988), nursing (Medland et al., 2004) and caregiving (e.g., Penson et al., 2000; Snyder, 2009). Furthermore, literature investigating burnout in informal caregiving relationships provides insight for how offering continuous help and support can actually *lead* to burnout (e.g., Pirraglia et al., 2005; Reed et al., 2020; Ybema et al,

2002). Research must expand to further evaluate how being asked to give too much support can create burnout for support providers in various contexts. If providers experience the negative impacts of burnout, they may be unable or unwilling to continue providing support, resulting in a need to create support boundaries. Furthermore, when support providers experience more discrepancies related to support than maintenance and investment, they may attempt to preserve themselves over the relationship by creating and enacting different forms of support boundaries.

Need for Boundary Creation

Provider and Recipient Discrepancies

In supportive contexts, providers and recipients might face discrepancies because of differing wants and needs. Reflecting on the foundational work of Wortman and Lehman (1985) is essential when specifically attempting to understand support provider experiences. Their scholarship provided insight into the discrepancies that exist between the needs of providers and recipients within supportive contexts. Unfortunately, there are multiple ways that support attempts fail, and these shortcomings can negatively impact a recipient and their relationship with the provider (Wortman & Lehman, 1985). Most of these failures stem from support providers prioritizing their own needs above the needs of support recipients. For example, Wortman and Lehman (1985) acknowledged that shutting down conversations about the stressor, which may be an implicit attempt at setting a boundary, might result from providers feeling fear about managing their emotions during the interaction and wanting to avoid potential stress and emotional contagion resulting from a difficult conversation. Engaging in avoidance or discouraging communication about the stressor may be a support provider's attempt at setting boundaries *implicitly* in order to prioritize their self-preservation. Rather than explicitly describing their inability to provide support in certain ways, providers might avoid the

conversations entirely. Moreover, the negative emotions, stress, and uncertainty surrounding

support provision can lead providers to enact ineffective support strategies (Wortman & Lehman,

1985). According to Wortman and Lehman, other factors that might lead to boundary creation

include the following:

> Open discussion of feelings may also be discouraged because they place implicit
> demands on the support provider to resolve the victim's problems, and hence intensify
> the feelings of helplessness. Finally, displays of distress may have threatening
> implications for the support provider's future. Support providers may worry that they will
> be repeatedly faced with new demands brought by the victim's plight, as well as with
> interpersonal interactions that are difficult and draining (p. 469).

This provides potential insight into why boundary creation may occur in supportive contexts. If a

support provider begins to feel helpless or drained, they might begin to engage in self-

preservation tactics and enact support boundaries.

In an attempt to combat discrepancies between the recipient and provider needs,

Wortman and Lehman (1985) posed that providers should try to manage their emotions during

supportive disclosures and withhold comments or advice unless specifically sought. I argue that

management of provider-recipient discrepancies is too complex for these suggestions to be

effective in all situations. Emotions can be difficult to manage depending on the context of the

situation, particularly if they arise unexpectedly (Thompson et al., 2008). For instance, if a loved

one discloses details about their traumatic experience, managing one's emotions could become

particularly challenging compared to a supportive interaction surrounding a daily hassle, like

getting caught in traffic. For example, Pederson and Faw (2019) found that individuals

experiencing secondary victimhood felt significant amounts of anger and a lack of forgiveness

towards the person who hurt their loved one in more severe contexts. Furthermore, support

providers can experience negative outcomes by simply *listening* to the disclosure (e.g., Lewis &

Manusov, 2009; Michelson & Kluger, 2021). Instead of expecting providers to manage their

emotions during disclosures as the only approach for addressing potential discrepancies in supportive interactions, providers may instead enact agency by creating and communicating support boundaries to preserve themselves and their relationships.

Wortman and Lehman (1985) provided foundational insight for how and when support attempts fail for support recipients, and their work highlights the need to consider how failure can be experienced and understood by multiple interactants – not just support recipients. In fact, research demonstrates that some of the most effective support for recipients might feel like a failure for providers (e.g., Faw et al., 2019; Wortman & Lehman, 1985), meriting the need to explore support boundaries. Considering all the aforementioned research, I pose the following research question:

RQ1: What conditions lead providers to need support boundaries in friendships?

Support Boundary Creation

Substantial scholarship has examined the discrepancies and relational conditions that influence privacy and disclosure (Crowley & Faw, 2014; Derlega & Chaikin, 1977; Parks, 2017; Petronio, 2002), but minimal research has investigated the process and enactment of boundaries for limiting others' disclosure. In the case of supportive communication, research into *support marshaling* highlights the complex interplay interactants use to manage the ways they receive support (Crowley, 2015). The current project investigates support boundaries, which are defined as the effort providers make minimize or eliminate unwanted disclosures and support-seeking from others. Elaborating upon various existing communication theories, such as CPM and support marshaling, will provide initial insight for conceptualizing how individuals manage the sharing of private information through support boundaries.

Relational Boundaries

While the concept of support boundaries has received limited empirical investigation, more is known about relational boundaries. Individuals may manage existing communication maintenance behavior and discrepancies through the creation and enactment of various relational boundaries, which work to both self-preserve and preserve one's relationship. Communication boundaries are understood as complex and intricate processes that are omnipresent in personal relationships:

> We define ourselves and fit into our social world by drawing lines around ourselves, our relationships, and the groups to which we belong. But boundaries are also inherently problematic. They must be managed. They are often difficult to identify. They overlap (Parks, 2017, p. 172).

Boundary creation is an unavoidable but complicated communication practice that determines who gets to know what parts of our lives or even be considered a relational partner (Parks, 2017). Two prominent relational boundaries are the *self-boundary* and *dyadic boundary* (Derlega & Chaikin, 1977; Parks, 2017). Self-boundaries are, "modified by self-disclosure. We maintain a barrier around ourselves which is based on nondisclosure" (Derlega & Chaikin, 1977, p. 104). Put another way, self-boundaries reflect the lines we draw between what information is kept completely private, known only to ourselves, versus the information we choose to disclose to others. These boundaries are built using nondisclosure strategies to distinguish between what is wholly private information and what can be shared. The dyadic boundary is defined as, "the boundary within which it is safe to disclose to the invited recipient and across which the self-disclosure will not pass" (Derlega & Chaikin, 1977, p. 104). Dyadic boundaries include the decision to disclose to another person with confidence that the other person will not share that information beyond the dyad. Dyadic boundaries allow individuals to feel confident that their private information will not be disclosed to third parties against their wishes and represent the essential element of trust in close relationships (Derlega & Chaikin, 1977).

Both dyadic and self-boundaries explain what information is and is not revealed, as well as what information relational partners can and cannot seek or share (Derlega & Chaikin, 1977). Self and dyadic boundaries are shaped by an individual's agency to choose whether to they want to disclose their private information. In support boundary contexts, these concepts may be expanded: The individual who is being disclosed to (i.e., the support provider) may attempt to enact boundaries surrounding the seeker's disclosure. Rather than limiting their own information sharing, they seek to limit others' disclosure. Regardless, notions from dyadic boundaries may align with communicative strategies that providers utilize in support boundary creation. Relational boundary scholarship considers how people disclose and withhold information from one another, which is further investigated and understood with Communication Privacy Management (CPM) theory.

Communication Privacy Management Theory

CPM is an enriched area of scholarship that provides valuable insight surrounding disclosure and privacy (Petronio, 2002). As noted by Petronio and Child (2020), CPM acknowledges that private information is owned by individuals who have the right to choose when and to whom they want to disclose their information. Individuals select people that are allowed to know their private information and engage in disclosure by opening their *privacy boundaries*, where the private information exists and is protected (Petronio & Child, 2020). *Boundary permeability* refers to how much access others have to an individual's private information (Petronio & Child, 2020), and disclosures and boundaries are further influenced by privacy rules.

There are two prominent types of privacy rules: *core privacy rules* and *catalyst privacy rules* (Petronio & Child, 2020). Core privacy rules are shaped by, "stable and predictable factors

of privacy regulation across time, such as the influence of culture on privacy management decisions" (Petronio & Child, 2020, p. 77). Examples of core privacy rules in supportive contexts include Burleson and colleagues' (2007) scholarship investigating emotional support patterns for men. Results depicted that men in the United States have been reluctant to provide sensitive support messages due to the potential feminization of their actions (Burleson et al., 2007). As such, gender constructs core privacy rules for how individuals might provide or limit their social support. On the other hand, catalyst privacy rules are influenced by, "more variable factors that influence privacy choices, such as, when a person is unexpectedly caught off guard by a spouse who reveals 'I have filed for a divorce'" (Petronio & Child, 2020, p. 77). Examples of catalyst privacy rules include Ray and colleague's (2019) research on emotional support in cancer contexts. Lack of support surrounding cancer diagnoses has negative relational outcomes, which creates a sense of obligation for potential support providers (Ray & Veluscek, 2018). In contrast to recipient needs, support providers might not give support to individuals with cancer due to source-focused, recipient-focused, relationship-focused, or context-focused reasons (Ray et al., 2019). Core privacy rules are more predictable, whereas catalyst privacy rules are unpredictable (Petronio & Child, 2020). Often, these rules work to manage the discrepancies surrounding disclosure decisions, but they may be relevant in efforts to minimize or eliminate disclosure as well.

CPM acknowledges that *boundary coordination* occurs when the owner and co-owner(s) of private information cooperate to construct and regulate privacy rules (Kennedy-Lightsey et al., 2012). According to CPM, boundary coordination is a dyadic process that occurs after the initial disclosure (Kennedy-Lightsey et al., 2012). In supportive contexts, support marshaling (i.e., how individuals manage the way they receive support) is an example of boundary coordination from a

support seeker's perspective (Crowley, 2015). As noted by Wortman and Lehman (1985), there are omnipresent discrepancies between the needs of providers and recipients. These discrepancies are juxtaposed by boundary coordination, because the owners and co-owners of the private information and the supportive situation have differing needs. As such, creation of support boundaries could be a unique form of boundary coordination, where the provider and recipient co-construct what can and cannot be disclosed and sought in supportive contexts. Furthermore, following initial attempts to create support boundaries, providers and recipients may continue to engage in boundary coordination as time, their relationship, and the stressors progress. Despite the current gaps in scholarship regarding the elimination of disclosure, some scholarship grounded in CPM investigates when and why individuals avoid communicating about certain topics (e.g., Caughlin, 2004).

Topic avoidance is "the act of intentionally evading or dodging certain issues or subjects" (Holland & Vangelisti, 2020, p. 311). As noted by Guerrero and Afifi (1995), self-protection and relationship-protection are the two primary motivators for topic avoidance. Self-protection attempts to "avoid judgement, criticism, and embarrassment, as well as wanting to avoid feeling vulnerable" (Guerrero & Afifi, 1995, p. 280). In contrast, relationship-protection aims to avoid conflict and potential damage to a relationship (Guerrero & Afifi, 1995). Similarly, TRRL explicates that support providers may experience discrepancies between wanting self-preservation and desiring to protect their relationship (Afifi et al., 2016). As such, self-protection and relationship-protection are likely also motivators for support boundary creation. An excess in support seeking, especially with a lack of reciprocity and communication maintenance from the support seeker, can risk of one's self-preservation as sustained support provision may push a person to burnout, emotional contagion, verbal rumination, or a host of other negative outcomes

(Afifi et al., 2016). To manage these tensions, a provider may weigh the costs and rewards to determine whether a support boundary is what they need. Furthermore, topic avoidance provides insight for how support providers could implicitly or explicitly enact boundaries. By stating "I don't want to talk about that", a support provider explicitly engages in topic avoidance. If a provider does not want to explicitly state they cannot or will not provide support anymore, they could intentionally avoid topics that trigger support seeking or even the support seeker entirely.

CPM explicates how individuals co-construct privacy rules and boundaries about their private information with those they select to be co-owners (Petronio, 2002). Boundaries and boundary coordination are further depicted in topic avoidance literature (e.g., Caughlin, 2004; Guerrero & Afifi, 1995). In social support contexts specifically, support marshaling provides insight for how recipients draw boundaries around the efforts of other people and their support provision (Crowley, 2015).

Support Marshaling

In recent years, scholars have started to investigate support marshaling, which is defined as "an active process that refers to the communicative strategies that individuals employ to influence network members in ways that increase the likelihood of achieving goals" (Crowley et al., 2020, p. 632). In other words, support marshaling explains how individuals create boundaries surrounding the support that they receive and accept. There are four dimensions of support marshaling strategies: approach-direct, approach-indirect, avoidance-direct, and avoidance-indirect (Crowley, 2012; Crowley & Faw, 2014). Contrary to hypotheses and other communication scholarship, research has found that individuals are equally likely to utilize indirect and direct support marshaling strategies (Crowley & Faw, 2014). Furthermore, boundary setting through support marshaling "is a clear example of network structuring as partners are

limiting contact with unsupportive network members" (Crowley & Faw, 2014, p. 255). Support marshaling scholarship provides insight for how support recipients engage with boundary creation, but little is known about this process for support providers. However, given what is known about the direct and indirect support marshaling strategies in combination with face concerns, it is likely that support providers utilize similar boundary creation strategies. Due to the nature of friendships, support boundary creation might be uniquely challenging in those contexts.

Friendship

Various relational expectations and outcomes are dependent on the type of relationship individuals have. Friendships are voluntary (i.e., chosen) and often founded on mutual liking and trust (Silas & Bartoo, 2007). Given their voluntary nature, the relationship could end if support boundaries are not enacted skillfully. General appreciation and trust can lead friends to engage in higher levels of self-disclosure, which often results in further relational development and growth (Silas & Bartoo, 2007). Parks & Floyd (1996) aimed to understand closeness in friendship dynamics, and their results determined that the most common contributions to closeness were "self-disclosure, support, shared interests, and explicit expression of the value of the relationship" (p. 85). These findings are significant because it shows the influence social support can have on the closeness of friendships and highlights the supportive pressure put on individuals working to create support boundaries. Friends are expected to provide support, which complicates boundary creation. In a longitudinal study examining friendships' sustained closeness, Ledbetter et al. (2007) found that relational investments and similarities contribute to the degree of closeness. Furthermore, individuals are most likely to seek support from their friends than other relationship dynamics and support-seeking happens more frequently in these

connections (Pennebaker & O'Heeron, 1984; Sias & Bartoo, 2007). Again, these factors contribute to the complexity of creating support boundaries in friendship contexts. The frequency of support seeking, as well as the voluntary nature of friendships, may influence a support provider's willingness or ability to continue offering support. As such, friendships prove to be a useful relationship dynamic in evaluating support boundary creation. With consideration to literature on privacy, disclosure, topic avoidance, and support marshaling, and friendship, I pose the second research question:

RQ2: How do providers create and enact support boundaries in friendships?

CHATPER 3 – METHODS

Participants

For the purposes of this study, participants included any individuals that self-identified as having created and enacted at least one support boundary in a friendship within the last 18 months. The 18-month time frame was selected to ensure that participants could provide sufficient details about their support context and boundary creation. To participate in a one-on-one semi-structured interview, eligible participants needed to be at least 18 years or older and fluent in English to minimize language-based miscommunication between the researcher and participants.

TRRL argues that individuals must have a certain degree of closeness to experience resilience or relational load in relationships (Afifi et al., 2016). As such, this study utilized interpersonal closeness as an eligibility factor for investigating support boundary creation. There were no constraints for the length of the friendship, but eligible participants had to rank their interpersonal closeness prior to any boundary creation as a four or higher on the Inclusion of the Other in the Self Scale (Aron et al., 1992). There are significant complexities and outcomes for the different types of social support, and the current project investigated support boundaries within all supportive situations. As such, eligible participants were required to have provided support to their friend, but there were no restrictions related to support type.

Due to the exploratory nature of this project, minimal restrictions existed around the challenges for which participants provided support. To further narrow inclusion criteria, potential participants were required to rank how they perceive the severity of their friend's problem. Specifically, Bodie and colleague's (2011) Perceived Problem Severity Scale was utilized in the

preliminary screening survey to determine eligibility. One statement related to the severity of their friend's problem was ranked on a 5-point Likert scale. Individuals who selected a 3 or lower were not eligible for participation.

Out of the 22 total participants, 95% (n = 21) identified as a cis woman and 5% (n = 1) identified as gender fluid. The majority of participants identified as White/Caucasian (n = 19, 86%), with additional participants identifying as Latinx/Hispanic (n = 1, 4.5%), Black/African American (n = 1, 4.5%), and Asian/Asian American (n = 1, 4.5%). Participants ranged in age from 19 to 29 years old (M = 24.18, SD = 2.15). Additionally, participants provided demographic information for the friend with whom they enacted support boundaries. Of the participants' friends, 82% (n = 18) were identified as cis-women and 18% (n = 4) were identified as cis-men. Their friends were primarily White/Caucasian (n = 15, 68%), with an additional 14% (n = 3) identified as Latinx/Hispanic, 14% (n = 3) identified as Asian/Asian American, and 4% (n = 1) identified as Black/African American. Their friends ranged in age from 19 to 34 years old (M = 24.45, SD= 2.87). Finally, participants provided insight on characteristics of their support relationship. Their relational closeness, which was determined with the Inclusion of the Other in the Self Scale (Aron et al., 1992), ranged from 3 to 7 (M = 5.55, SD = 1.16). The participants' perception of problem severity was found utilizing the Perceived Problem Severity Scale (Bodie et al., 2011), and ranged from 3 to 5 (M = 4.30, SD = 0.72). Two participants did not disclose their perceived problem severity. The length of relationships at the time of boundary creation varied from 5 months to 20 years. On the next page, see Table 1 for a summary of demographics by friendship.

Table 1

Demographic Summary

Participant Pseudonym and Friend	Age	Race	Gender	Relationship Length at Initial Boundary Creation	Supportive Context
Jessie Friend	27 26	White/Caucasian White/Caucasian	Gender fluid Cis Man	5+ years	Jessie was supporting their friend who they originally met at work where they were crisis partners. Their friend was experiencing various challenges that were depicted as very extreme.
Delaney Friend	26 24	White/Caucasian White/Caucasian	Cis Woman Cis Woman	5 years	Delaney was supporting her friend who she originally met at work. Their friendship had phases of being in proximity and long distance. Her friend was experiencing challenges related to an abusive relationship.
Kathleen Friend	23 22	Asian/Asian American Asian/Asian American	Cis Woman Cis Man	4.5 years	Kathleen was supporting her friend who she met through being ministry partners. Her friend was experiencing challenges related to mental health and romantic relationships.
Peyton Friend	23 23	White/Caucasian White/Caucasian	Cis Woman Cis Woman	5 years	Peyton was supporting her friend who she originally met in college. Their friendship switched to long distance post-graduation. Her friend was experiencing challenges related to an unexpected breakup.
Taylor Friend	24 24	Latinx/Hispanic Asian/Asian American	Cis Woman Cis Woman	11 years	Taylor was supporting her childhood friend who lived in a different country at the time of boundary creation. Her friend was experiencing challenges related to an unexpected breakup.

Name	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Length	Description
Avery Friend	24 25	White/Caucasian White/Caucasian	Cis Woman Cis Woman	1 year	Avery was supporting her friend who she met through a mutual hobby group. Her friend was experiencing challenges related to mental health and family conflict.
Evelyn Friend	24 27	White/Caucasian White/Caucasian	Cis Woman Cis Woman	2 years	Evelyn was supporting her friend and roommate. Her friend was experiencing challenges related to mental health and anxiety.
Jodie Friend	25 26	White/Caucasian White/Caucasian	Cis Woman Cis Woman	3 years	Jodie was supporting her friend who she originally met at work. Their friendship switched to long distance at the end of their contract. Her friend was experiencing challenges related to an unexpected breakup.
Maya Friend	26 25	White/Caucasian White/Caucasian	Cis Woman Cis Woman	10 years	Maya was supporting her childhood best friend. Their friendship had phases of being in proximity and long distance. Her friend was experiencing challenges related to dating a married man and experiencing conflict with other network members.
Zoe Friend	25 26	Black/African American White/Caucasian	Cis Woman Cis Woman	20 years	Zoe was supporting her childhood best friend. Their friendship had phases of being in proximity and long distance. Her friend was experiencing challenges related to a breakup and her romantic life more broadly.

Penelope Friend	24 24	White/Caucasian White/Caucasian	Cis Woman Cis Woman	4 years	Penelope was supporting her college friend and roommate. Her friend was experiencing challenges related to mental health and borderline personality disorder.
Maeve Friend	22 22	White/Caucasian White/Caucasian	Cis Woman Cis Woman	1.5 years	Maeve was supporting her college friend who she met through her boyfriend. Her friend was experiencing challenges related to mental health and sexual trauma.
Pat Friend	29 27	White/Caucasian White/Caucasian	Cis Woman Cis Woman	1 year	Pat was supporting her friend who she met through her best friend from college. Her friend was experiencing challenges related to martial problems. Pat was also friends with the husband.
Harper Friend	24 25	White/Caucasian Latinx/Hispanic	Cis Woman Cis Woman	2 years	Harper was supporting her friend from her graduate school cohort. Her friend was experiencing challenges related to an unexpected pregnancy and tensions in her romantic relationship.
Beth Friend	21 21	White/Caucasian White/Caucasian	Cis Woman Cis Man	1.5 years	Beth was supporting her college friend who she met from a leadership cohort they were both a part of. Her friend was experiencing challenges related to COVID-19 lockdowns and academic stressors.
Madeline Friend	19 19	White/Caucasian White/Caucasian	Cis Woman Cis Woman	2 years	Madeline was supporting her college friend. Her friend was experiencing challenges related to mental health and managing day-to-day stressors.

Bailey Friend	26 25	White/Caucasian Latinx/Hispanic	Cis Woman Cis Woman	3 months	Bailey was supporting her friend from her graduate school cohort. Her friend was experiencing challenges related to mental health, isolation, and loneliness.
Amelia Friend	23 22	White/Caucasian White/Caucasian	Cis Woman Cis Woman	9 months	Amelia was supporting her friend who she met through a virtual book club. Their friendship was formed long distance, but they have met in person multiple times. Her friend was experiencing challenges related to mental health, borderline personality disorder, and family conflict.
Jasmine Friend	24 24	White/Caucasian Asian/Asian American	Cis Woman Cis Woman	12 years	Jasmine was supporting her childhood best friend. Their friendship had phases of being in proximity and long distance. Her friend was experiencing challenges related to two separate abusive relationships.
Sadie Friend	22 22	White/Caucasian White/Caucasian	Cis Woman Cis Woman	2 years	Sadie was supporting her college friend and roommate. Her friend was experiencing challenges related to family conflict and managing day-to-day stressors.
Charlie Friend	24 25	White/Caucasian Black/African American	Cis Woman Cis Man	5 months	Charlie was supporting her friend who she met at a Black Lives Matter protest. Her friend was experiencing challenges related to financial strain and custody of his child.
Leah Friend	27 34	White/Caucasian Latinx/Hispanic	Cis Woman Cis Woman	1 year	Leah was supporting her friend who she originally met at work. Their friendship had phases of being in proximity and long distance. Her friend was experiencing

| | challenges related to mental health and childhood trauma. |

Procedures

All recruitment and data collection procedures were approved by the Institutional Review

Board at Colorado State University (IRB #3063). Convenience and snowball sampling were

utilized to gather participants that met predetermined standards aligning with research goals

(Patton, 2001). Recruitment flyers were posted across the Colorado State University campus,

local businesses in Fort Collins, to various social media pages, and distributed during in-class

announcements (see Appendix A). Recruitment materials prompted individuals to take a

preliminary screening questionnaire in Qualtrics. The preliminary screening procedure ensured

that individuals interested in participation met the minimum eligibility requirements by asking

general, close-ended questions related to the nature of their friendship, the supportive context,

and their boundary creation (see Appendix B). Individuals who met participation requirements

were then contacted to schedule a one-on-one, semi-structured interview.

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, in-depth, semi-structured interviews created

an opportunity for participants to reflect and share stories about their support boundary creation

experiences (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). Participants could choose an in-person or virtual interview

format. Prior to the start of the interview, participants were asked to fill out a consent form and

demographic survey through Qualtrics (see Appendix C). The demographic survey included

questions about the participant, their friend, and the nature of their relationship. The consent

form and demographic survey was emailed to participants prior to their scheduled interview with

an interview reminder and was available at the beginning of the designated interview time for

individuals who did not complete it prior to meeting.

During the interview, the researcher took a responsive/friendship stance, in which she

aimed to construct reciprocity, respect, reflection of her own biases, and acknowledge the

emotional impact of interviews on participants (Tracy, 2020). By utilizing this approach, the researcher attempted to create an environment where participants felt comfortable sharing their personal experiences with me throughout the interview process. The interview was structured with a narrative sensemaking framework, which provides space for entire stories to be shared (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). Some communication scholars utilize "narrative methods to understand some other communication phenomenon; in other words, narrative is a means of collecting data about something beyond the story" (Kellas, 2015, p. 257). For this project, utilizing a narrative approach allowed the researchers to gather insight about multiple attempts at boundary setting around a particular problem, rather than viewing boundary creation as a one-time event.

Narrative-based interviews have comparatively less structure, and participants have more freedom and agency to share their experiences while still acknowledging that the researcher will guide the process (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). Interview questions related to three main themes (i.e., relational history, support boundaries, reflection) were included in the protocol for this project (see Appendix D). First, questions gauged the relationship history between the participant and their friend. This provided context for their relational norms and expectations, the challenge(s) through which the participant supported their friend, and how the participant supported them. Next, the researcher asked questions related to the factors of support boundary creation. Questions investigated what boundaries meant to the participant, when they began to desire boundaries, what fears or hesitations they had with boundary creation, how they set the boundaries, and what their friend's response was to their efforts to create boundaries. In concluding the interview, questions aimed to provide a space for participant reflection. The researcher asked them what personal and relational impacts their boundary creation had and if

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they would change anything about their boundary creation strategies looking back and moving forward. All participants who completed an interview received a $10 e-gift card to their choice of Starbucks, Target, or Amazon as a thank you for their participation.

Analysis

All interviews were video recorded and professionally transcribed by the research team. They ranged from 19 to 66 minutes in length, with an average of 36 minutes. In total, 865 pages of text were coded in analysis. Thematic analysis from a phronetic iterative approach was utilized to analyze the collected data (Braun & Clark, 2006; Tracy, 2020). In qualitative research, a phronetic iterative approach provides space for researchers to consider their existing theoretical knowledge and predetermined aims while also providing space for themes to emerge organically from the dataset (Tracy, 2020). Additionally, thematic analysis allows for prominent themes within the dataset to emerge (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Furthermore, "thematic analysis involves the searching *across* a data set – be that a number of interviews or focus groups, or a range of texts – to find repeated patterns of meaning" (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 86). Given the exploratory nature of this study, thematic analysis from a phronetic iterative approach helped generate themes across the conducted interviews while connecting emergent themes to existing theoretical frameworks.

Analysis is often not a linear process, and there are six phases of thematic analysis that were specifically engaged (Braun & Clark, 2006). The researcher began by familiarizing herself with the data set and completing one round of open coding (Braun & Clark, 2006). Next, the researcher looked over the emergent themes and generated consistency (Braun & Clark, 2006). A second round of open coding was conducted with the emergent themes in mind. Themes and codes were reviewed to ensure that the data was meaningfully cohesive and distinctive before

themes were defined and named by the researcher (Braun & Clark, 2006). While developing the results, diverse and captivating examples were selected to illustrate the established themes for both research questions.

Owen's (1984) criterion for thematic analysis was utilized to ensure validity of emergent themes. These criteria consist of recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness (Owen, 1984). Recurrence exists when a specific meaning occurs multiple times in a transcription, repetition is when meaning is repeated utilizing the same words, and forcefulness exists if a participant speaks with emphasis (Owen, 1984). In establishing themes through thematic analysis, the researcher looked for recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness within individual transcriptions and across the dataset. To further obtain validity and ensure themes aligned with participants' lived experiences, the researcher completed member checks (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). During the interviews, the researcher would rephrase participant responses and ask clarifying questions to ensure her interpretation was correct. Additionally, member validation occurred after analysis was complete and themes were established. For member validation, the researcher followed up with four participants, listed the results from their interview (providing both theme names and definitions for RQ1 and RQ2), and asked the participants if anything felt inaccurate or missing. None of the member checks resulted in changes, as the participants confirmed the themes corresponding with their interview and experience more broadly.

Researcher Positionality Statement

It is vital to consider a researcher's positionality given their engagement with data collection and analysis in qualitative research (Tracy, 2020). As someone who has faced negative personal and relational outcomes in supportive contexts, both as the support provider and recipient, I desire to understand challenges that arise in social support, as well as how to manage

them. Ultimately, my own experiences shaped this research, allowed me to further connect with my research participants, and enhanced my ability to understand their lived experiences with support boundary creation.

There are other aspects of my identity that possibly shaped this research study. Like many of my participants, I am a white, cisgender woman in my mid-twenties. For some, aspects of our shared identity might have influenced their willingness to participate and ability to disclose throughout the interview process. However, I embody a significant amount of privilege that possibly inhibited individuals with various marginalized identities from participating. Some aspects of my identity likely compelled responses in ways that other identities might not have, given what is known about disclosure gaps between men and women (Petronio & Martin, 1986). Furthermore, I primarily embody interpretivist commitments to research, meaning I believe that scholars "must account for the subjective and personal meanings of individuals" (Miller, 2003, p. 47). I believe that context, personal narratives, and enriched details will contribute greatly to what we currently know about social support in different realms.

Various aspects of my identity, lived experiences, and scholarly commitments likely influenced the outcomes of this research. However, numerous steps were taken to ensure reliability and validity, as well as avoiding my own biases. For example, the narrative sensemaking framework allowed me to guide the interview process while prioritizing participants' freedom to share their experiences in ways that made the most sense to them (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). Additionally, member validation ensured that the themes determined from analysis aligned with the lived experiences of participants. Despite the potential limitations and biases, this study resulted in enriched data that furthers our understanding of support boundary creation.

CHAPTER 4 – RESULTS

Themes of Needing Support Boundaries

The first research question explored what conditions led providers to need support

boundaries with their friend (*RQ1*). Four central themes emerged from participant responses:

ineffective involvement, relational transgressions, protecting the self, and *network negotiations*.

Various subthemes arose within each of the central themes (see Table 2 below).

Ineffective Involvement

When detailing their need for boundary creation, 17 participants described feeling

generally unhelpful to their friend. *Ineffective involvement* depicts participants' questioning the

purpose of their contributions in the supportive process. Three subthemes developed: *rumination*,

feelings of futility, and *feeling unqualified*.

Rumination. Nine participants struggled to support their friends because of their

consistent involvement. *Rumination* illustrates how their friend's repetitive disclosure and

support seeking led providers to needing boundaries.

Many participants expressed how their friend's support seeking was consistently related

to the same challenge. For example, Avery stated, "But they were the same things. And I could

not continue to just give the same advice and just keep listening." Since her support provision

was constantly related to the same challenge, Avery reached a point of no longer listening or

providing support. Similarly, when Peyton described supporting her friend through a breakup,

she expressed:

> It was a continuous but…. But it's never gonna get better, but it's never gonna get better.
> And then, uh, never taking those steps to feel better. And… like, they're still saying the
> same things to me now that they did like… in the beginning.

Table 2

RQ 1: Themes of Needing Support Boundaries

Theme	Definition	Exemplars
Ineffective Involvement	In total, 17 participants questioned the purpose of their contributions in the supportive process.	
Rumination	Nine participants needed boundaries as a result of their friend's repetitive disclosure and support-seeking.	It almost felt like every day was a bad day for her.
Feelings of Futility	Seven participants felt like their supportive efforts were pointless, not having any impact on their friend or the challenges they were facing, unappreciated, or ignored.	I felt like I was just kind of speaking into the wind.
Feeling Unqualified	Ten participants doubted their qualification to provide appropriate support related to their friend's challenges.	[…] I know I spent all of my energy like supporting her when there are better people that could have supported her.
Relational Transgressions	In total, 21 participants detailed how their friend's inappropriate and/or harmful behavior within the supportive context as well as their relationship more broadly led to needing support boundaries.	
Lack of Reciprocity	Sixteen participants felt upset and burdened by providing support when they did not receive support in return.	It felt like… like she… How do I phrase this? Like she would just like toss a little bit of help and then, like, she would move on. […] It seemed like it would be less help than I was giving her.

Exploitative Expectations	Thirteen participants expressed how they felt exploited, used, and taken advantage of in their supportive circumstances with their friends.	For like just caring about her well-being and like that was… […] I felt like it was like a vortex that I was being sucked into and I needed to get out of that.
Malicious Behavior	Eight participants described how their friends overtly harmful and hurtful communication and/or behavior led to the need for support boundary creation.	[…] What led me to wanna create these boundaries is the way that she made me feel. Like toward [inaudible], like so insecure. I was so unhappy. I hated being around her. […]
Protecting the Self	In total, 17 participants needed boundaries to guard themselves from issues related to their friend's support-seeking.	
Distrusting Disclosures	Two participants explicated how they did not know what to believe of their friend's disclosure, as they, at times, received conflicting information or disclosures that were difficult to believe.	[…] I can't trust anything she says because I just don't think any of its truthful and I can't have a friend that treats me like that. And if that's the life she wants to live, that's fine, but keep me out of it.
Disapproving Decisions	Nine participants disapproved of their friends' decisions and behavior related to the challenges they were facing.	Not to be mean. But I'm like… She could easily make this situation better for herself, but she's not choosing to change the situation. She's choosing to stay in the situation and then just call me and complain about it.
Prioritizing Emotional Needs	Fifteen participants struggled with feeling overwhelmed, being exhausted, and needing to take care of themselves because of their friend's (often excessive) support-seeking.	[…] I started to feel super affected by the things that she would vent to me about. […] like… she would just vent heavily like all day, every day. And then I was left feeling drained. Um. Because I

		would just help all day long and I understood that she was going through things but. I was struggling because she…
Network Negotiations	In total, 14 participants needed support boundaries as a result of various considerations related to their broader social networks.	
Encouragement from One's Network	Six participants began to need support boundaries after they received encouragement from other people in their network.	I didn't set any boundaries right away because I was so blind to it. And it took [my other friend] coming in and really like showing me like, no this is not right. […]
Protecting One's Network	Eight participants implemented support boundaries in attempt to protect people their broader network.	I don't know about like super specific like this happened, but just like… it was clearly negatively impacting my relationship with [my husband] so.
Uncomfortable Involvement with One's Network	Four participants enacted support boundaries to minimize their involvement in their friend's challenges because the supportive situation made them feel uncomfortable in context of their broader, shared network.	Something that, like, really caused the weird dynamic is I was good friends with her husband as well. And so, I was hearing information from both sides. Which just added a lot of layers which is like what resulted me into having to put boundaries in place.

When Peyton first enacted various boundaries, around six months had passed since her friend's

break up, but their conversations had hardly varied. This led Peyton to no longer provide the

same amount of support related to that specific challenge, as her friend continued to disclose and

seek support regardless of the validation and advice Peyton had provided.

In contrast, some participants provided support across numerous challenges but the

consistency of the requests for their support still drove them to need boundaries. One participant,

Leah, explained how her friend would always switch their conversations to be about various

issues related to her past, leaving Leah feeling irritated and exhausted.

> I would text with her. I would, she would call me. I would, you know, talk to her for
> hours about issues […] And it would always… and always, always, always would turn
> dark. You know what I mean? […] And then she'll just keep repeating… It's like, like an
> endless cycle […]

Even though their conversations varied in content, the inevitable reality that their quality time

would turn into one-way supportive conversations drove Leah to boundary creation.

Furthermore, Leah felt frustration around the amount of time she dedicated to supporting her

friend. Another participant, Sadie, had similar experiences with her friend who constantly sought

various types of support.

> She was just constantly coming over, constantly calling and like sending screenshots of
> different things she was having issues with that were being posted or something. Like…
> She… Just would like show up at our apartment randomly. Like one time she showed up
> at 3:00 AM just cause her roommates decided to have a party and she wanted to come
> sleep at my place. Just constant, constant... Need of being together, I guess.

Sadie's friend expected her to be available constantly, both in mediated and in-person contexts.

Her consistent disclosure and support seeking eventually led Sadie to enact support boundaries

within their friendship.

Various participants expressed how their friend's persistent self-disclosure and support

seeking exceeded their supportive abilities and resulted in support boundary creation. While

some participants provided support around one challenge consistently, others provided support for numerous challenges. As such, for these participants, the high frequency of support seeking from their friend ultimately led to feeling a need to create support boundaries.

Feelings of Futility. The second subtheme elucidates how participants' *feelings of futility* resulted in support boundary creation. Seven participants felt like their supportive efforts were pointless, not having any impact on their friend or the challenges they were facing, unappreciated, or ignored.

Numerous participants felt as though their support was futile because they could not do anything to change their friend's circumstances. One participant, Delaney, supported her friend who was in an abusive relationship, and she expressed her limited ability to provide help.

> As a friend, I wasn't doing like anything to keep her safe. Nothing that I was doing was keeping her safe. So, like… she had to realize that on her own and that's something that I'm coming to terms with is like… I just can't fix other people's problems. The only person I can, you know, worry about is myself. […]

Although Delaney wanted to help her friend, she recognized the limits for what she could realistically do to change her friend's situation. Another participant, Jasmine, also struggled to help a friend in an abusive relationship, stating, "[…] And so, trying to support my friend who is clearly being abused, but is not like taking any help, was really challenging." When participants wanted to help but ultimately recognized they were unable to provide support that would result in real positive changes, they began to desire support boundaries.

Participants also experienced feelings of futility because of their friend's lack of acknowledgement or appreciation for their support provision. One participant, Jodie, conveyed how her friend's behavior made her support attempts feel disregarded.

> I kind of got a little tired of giving her the same advice and her not following it, so I feel like I haven't been reaching out to her as much and […] so it's kind of gotten to the point where it's just like my support feels like it might be a little bit ignored, so.

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Since Jodie felt like her friend ignored the support she offered, Jodie no longer wanted to provide

support. Comparably, Madeline felt like her support was not only ignored but openly

unappreciated by her friend:

> Mentally I was starting to get degraded. OK, I was trying to do my best and helping, and I wasn't able to help. It was getting to a point where they were getting mad at me for not giving the help that they wanted. And I've had experience with this in the past that went really downhill for me, and I was like, I don't want to go back down that road. I don't like that feeling anymore. So, I just decided I'm just gonna… I'm just gonna stop helping if… if my help is not helping you.

Her friend's blatantly negative responses provoked Madeline to feel like her support was

pointless and ultimately led to her enacting support boundaries. In this way, participants

experienced futility for various reasons, including limitations around their ability to support, lack

of acknowledgement, and lack of appreciation. Regardless of the cause, when participants did

not believe in their ability to provide helpful support, they enacted support boundaries.

Feeling Unqualified. In various contexts, 10 participants questioned their qualification to

provide appropriate support related to their friend's challenges. *Feeling unqualified* prompted

participants to create support boundaries in efforts to avoid ineffective support provision.

Some participants felt unqualified to offer support because of the challenging context

their friend's situation. For some, they had never experienced a similar challenge, leaving them

without personal experience to draw upon in their support provision. One participant, Pat,

supported her friend while she experienced marital problems before deciding to create support

boundaries because of Pat's own lack of experience when it came to marriage:

> And we always like laugh cause she was like, "Pat, I can't give you dating advice. I've been dating the same guy since I was in middle school." And I was like, it's like it's the same thing. Like, I don't think I should be the one giving you marriage advice because, like, what am I going to tell you?

Since Pat had never been married and was currently single, she felt unqualified to help her friend process her martial challenges. Other participants, including Maya, felt unqualified because of their personal feelings related to their friends' challenges. For example, although Maya wanted to be supportive during her friend's break-up, her lack of support for the relationship as a whole made it difficult for her to sympathize with her friend:

> But I don't know that I could have like… Been a supportive friend through that because I don't... I don't know that I could have been like… Like I'm sure I could have been sympathetic when she was, like, crying or breaking up with him, but I don't know that I would have been that good at it.

Since Maya did not support her friend's relationship in the first place, she felt unqualified to support her in challenges related to her partner.

Additionally, many participants felt unqualified because their friends asked for support beyond what they—or most friends—could provide. For example, Harper explained how her friend's support seeking increased throughout her unplanned pregnancy, leading to intense demands that Harper could not accommodate:

> Like obviously, [her unplanned pregnancy] comes with a lot of like stress and anxiety, and so I would be kind of her like contact person. For like talking about it, talking about how she's feeling. I very much felt like maybe it was like a therapist role a little bit […] I mean, I'm not qualified to do that. Right? So, and I've never been pregnant. So, like, I didn't know really what to do? But I was again trying to like… we've been really close. I'm doing my best that I can, you know? Yeah.

Even though Harper wanted to provide support to her friend and felt very close to her, Harper felt like the increased support expectations of her friend aligned more with a therapist-patient relationship and far exceeded what Harper could provide as a friend. Peyton expressed similar concerns when supporting her friend:

> […] Like are you OK? Like? Is there something else that's deeper? And so, one of my biggest concerns was that she never like… figure out if there might be something deeper that's like really affecting her […] I think this was a situation where she might need someone who like… was fit to support in this situation, whereas like I'm not […]

Since Peyton was concerned there might be underlying reasons that her friend was so impacted by her breakup, she believed that a professional support provider, like a therapist or counselor, would be better suited to supporting her friend. Many participants struggled with feeling unqualified to help their friends, either because of the context or their friends' challenges or because their friends' support seeking surpassed informal support contexts and merited professional attention.

Relational Transgressions

When detailing their need for support boundaries, 19 participants described experiences of *relational transgressions*, which occur when expectations or attitudes toward a relationship are violated (Pederson & Faw, 2019). Participant responses illustrated their friend's inappropriate and/or harmful behavior within the supportive context as well as their relationship more broadly. Four subthemes emerged: *lack of reciprocity*, *exploitative expectations*, *self-exploitation*, and *malicious behavior*.

Lack of Reciprocity. Their friend's *lack of reciprocity* resulted in 16 participants feeling upset and burdened by providing support when they did not receive support in return. These negative feelings related to their friend's lack of support and investment ultimately resulted in support boundary creation.

For some participants, the support their friend gave them did not match the quality or quantity of what the participant was giving. For example, in reflecting about her attempts to create support boundaries, Beth described how her friendship changed by stating, "[…] I didn't feel like it was just like, yeah, me kind of providing support to him and not really like receiving as much in return." After enacting various boundaries, Beth felt relief that she was no longer providing more support than she was receiving, which was one of her primary frustrations while

her friend. Similarly, Amelia expressed feeling a lack of reciprocation in supportive situations

with her friend:

> It felt like… like she… How do I phrase this? Like she would just like toss a little bit of help and then, like, she would move on. But I don't know if that was like her way of trying to help me with, like, taking my mind off of it...? It seemed like it would be less help than I was giving her.

Although Amelia's friend provided some support, Amelia felt as though her friend brushed off

Amelia's needs and switched to another topic more quickly than Amelia desired.

Additionally, various participants expressed that they received a complete lack of support

and investment from their friend. Bailey expressed how the lack of reciprocity impacted her

friendship across time:

> It's also a very stressful situation to be in a relationship… like a friendship relationship over time when you're not being heard and you're not being like… validated, supported.

For Bailey, there was a complete lack of support throughout their friendship, which ultimately

led to her creating boundaries around the support she offered. Jasmine expressed similar

frustrations in her relationship:

> And when I had surgery. I had a big surgery, and she was like gonna come over and hang out. And, like, be there afterwards. And she decided that she was too busy because she was hanging out with her new boyfriend. And this was like, the very first time where I was like, well, this is BS. […] And like I… here I was going through a… really the hardest time of my entire life. And she never gave me any support. […]

Although there had been a lack of reciprocity throughout the more recent years of their

friendship, Jasmine reached a breaking point when her friend failed to provide any support after

a severe, difficult life event, and this guided Jasmine's decision-making around support boundary

creation. In general, participants throughout the study faced various extremes in their experiences

with lack of reciprocity, but, ultimately, the lack of investment from their friends drove them to

creating boundaries so they were investing less, too, in the relationship.

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Exploitative Expectations. Sixteen participants expressed in interviews that they felt exploited, used, and taken advantage of in their relationship with their friends. For many, the urge to create support boundaries derived from their own or their friend's *exploitative expectations* (i.e., having support expectations that take advantage of, use, or force the provider to listen and/or offer support).

Some participants expressed discomfort with how their friends explicitly relied on them for mental and physical well-being and safety. For example, Avery detailed how her friend explicitly said she would harm herself without Avery's support:

> Honestly, at one point, one of the nights she called me, and we talked for a while. And then the next morning she called and did the 'If it weren't for you, I probably would have self-harmed' and it's like… I can't be that person. Cause now I'm terrified every single time if I don't pick up or if I don't respond soon enough.

For Avery, continuing to support her friend became inextricably tied to feelings of discomfort, stress, and fear, with these emotions arising from how intensely her friend relied on her for support as well as the potential risks associated with being her friend's primary supporter. Leah experienced similar challenges, with her friend threatening to take her own life while talking with Leah over the phone:

> And, but what like kind of sucks about… sucked about it. It's just… I feel like it just kind of created this dynamic where she would just like, expected me to just be there for her and like one time she called me. I think I was kind of like, you know, under the influence of alcohol at this point. And it was late at night. She was in Long Beach. I was in LA. There was nothing like, I couldn't have driven to her or anything. And she was like saying she was gonna kill herself. And like, I like. I was drunk. I didn't know what to do. And she was like saying, I'm gonna do it and like, it got to a point where I said I was, like, gonna call the cops, which was obviously [a] terrible way to handle it. But like, I didn't know what else to do. Like, I didn't want her to kill herself, you know?

Throughout her interview, Leah explicated the severity of her friend's problems and detailed the discomfort she felt offering her friend support in these spaces. Leah explicitly acknowledged that

her friend's threats of self-harm made Leah feel forced to offer her support and put Leah in a tough position.

While some participants felt their friends over-relied on their support in ways that were unhealthy, other participants felt used and taken advantage of by their friends. For example, Penelope described how her friend would intentionally engage in behavior that she knew would result in more empathy and support from Penelope. Penelope detailed this by stating, "And she knew the type of person that I was, so she took advantage of that." Specifically, her friend would cry in front of Penelope when Penelope was not fully engaged in the conversation or providing sufficient support, because (according to Penelope) her friend knew that this would make Penelope feel guilty and give her friend what she wanted. Evelyn described similar feelings in her relationship with her friend, who consistently sought emotional support and togetherness beyond Evelyn's abilities, "And I don't know if like I just like felt I was being taken advantage of […] just like almost like disrespected." Additionally, Pat detailed how her friendship became all about support-seeking by her friend, which made Pat feel used:

> I mean, there was just a situation that had come up where I just felt at that point, like I was not a friend to her, but I was more a source of information. […]

Her friend's consistent support-seeking and continued rumination negatively impacted their relationship. Rather than feeling like a friend, Pat felt like she was being used as a source of information so that her friend could find out about her husband's (Pat's other friend) behavior. Furthermore, it became evident in Pat's interview that her support-seeking friend would continue to ask until Pat disclosed what she knew, taking advantage of Pat and minimizing her agency to withhold information. In these situations, when participants felt like their friends were taking advantage of them and exploiting their support, the participants no longer wanted or were able to provide the support their friends sought.

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Contrary to experiencing pressure and being taken advantage of by their friends, some participants explicated their self-exploitation, in which they pressured themselves to provide support beyond their limits. Self-exploitation often derived from participants feeling obligated to offer help to their friends, but their sense of responsibility to provide support derived from themselves rather than their friend. For example, Avery's friend frequently reached out for support in the early morning hours, and when her friend had not done that in a while, Avery detailed, "There [were] definitely times that I felt obligated to reach out and be like, 'Hey. We haven't talked at 2:00 AM. Are you OK?'" Even though Avery's friend was not explicitly seeking support, Avery felt obligated to check in and make sure her friend was okay. Similarly, Jodie expressed how she felt like she had to provide support to her friend, even when it was beyond her abilities:

> It was a lot like just if she needed me, I would drop anything or if I needed her, she'd drop anything even like. My mental health wasn't the greatest last year and I still felt like I needed to like drop everything, even if I wasn't in a good headspace to try to help her. And it kind of wasn't a super healthy thing. Cause I'd be struggling with my own stuff but trying to also support someone so it's kind of like you're carrying all this extra weight.

Throughout her interview, Jodie described how she struggled to maintain a healthy supportive relationship with her friend because she was disregarding her own needs. Although her friend sought support, Jodie described the pressure she put on herself and how she ignored her own limits to help her friend. Even when participants' friends did not have exploitative expectations or pressure them to provide support beyond their ability, many described their self-inflicted pressure to ignore their needs and prioritize supporting their friend.

Malicious Behavior. In addition to lack of reciprocity and exploitative expectations, eight participants elucidated how *malicious behavior* led to the need for support boundaries. The previous subthemes depicted relational transgressions that happened specifically in interactions

related to their friend's support-seeking conversations and contexts; malicious behavior, on the other hand, occurred when the friend enacted harmful or hurtful behavior in other aspects of the friendship (including when they sought support from their friend). In this way, participants detailed how their friends' disrespectful and harmful behaviors in various aspects of their relationship ultimately led to support boundary creation.

For example, multiple participants expressed the harm deriving from their friend's behavior outside of the supportive context. Penelope described how her friend actively tore her down and said, "[…] Like, I just felt so low around her." Additionally, Penelope acknowledged that her friend also harmed others:

> Nothing she said was to better anybody else. It was to make her feel better and to make, like, her have control over all these relationships. Like she loved knowing the drama. She loved knowing everything that was going on in anybody's life. And I notice[d], like I was being a mean girl. Like when I was friends with her because she was rubbing off on me. And I look back on that now and I'm like, 'Ew.' You know, so like, it's just like I realized that literally nothing she said had any value. And she wasn't a person that I should feel attacked by because she's… Sorry, I thought she... I think she's a loser. And like, that's just my perspective on her.

In Penelope's case, not only did she recognize that her friend's behavior was unacceptable, but Penelope also did not like who she became around her friend. In her interview, Penelope explained that she did not fully realize or process the severity and frequency of her friend's harm, but after that realization, Penelope created strict support boundaries and ended their friendship. Bailey faced a similar realization in her relationship when the person she supported offended and hurt one of Bailey's other friends:

> […] And then by the end of the night, she had offended my friend and offended me on a lot of levels that like I kind of was like. One, I don't think you even know me. Like it was one of those things that like, she had said a few things and maybe put me in a position that I like… I don't like to be put in. And if she knew like anything about me, she would know that that is not like me. So, like, I was just like… 'I've done all these things for you and supported you and like you come over and do this? And then you also just proved to

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me that you really don't know me at all.'

In her interview, Bailey depicted this instance as a turning point in her friendship. Bailey

disagreed with what her friend had done, realized that her friend did not know Bailey very well,

and thus Bailey began to desire support boundaries.

Other participants described malicious behavior in how their friends would act

competitively and compare their lived experiences with others in hurtful ways. For example,

Beth supported her friend with school-related issues and anxieties, but Beth also acknowledged

that her support often led to negative personal consequences:

> [I] definitely [noticed] the increased competitiveness when I was talking to him. […] And
> also, just like… more worried that like… I don't know that he… Uh, I guess it was like
> kind of… not infringing, but I. I guess kind of like infringing on the opportunities I was
> interested in.

Since most the support Beth was providing to her friend related to school, her friend's

competitiveness with Beth and pursuit of opportunities that Beth, herself, was interested in

resulted in her desire for support boundaries. Similarly, Zoe often provided support related to her

friend's romantic relationships. As a result, Zoe felt like her friend minimized Zoe's own

relationship out of feelings of competitiveness and a desire to one-up Zoe:

> And so, she was dating this guy in high school, umn, that they started dating. I wanna say
> her senior year of high school, and then they were dating all through college. And like, I
> didn't have a serious relationship through college or anything like that. And then she
> would always make comments like, 'Oh, you'll see when you have a boyfriend. Oh, you'll
> see XYZ.' And I was like, 'OK.' And… And [my boyfriend] and I met and we started
> dating, and it became this, like comparison game. Or she would be like, 'oh yeah, the
> reason that's so special [is] you're in the honeymoon phase.' It's like, 'Shut up.'
> Like? You know, why does it have to be downplayed? Like our relationship progressed
> quickly, like we moved in together and then got engaged before she did. Like she had
> been with her boyfriend for six years or seven years at the point that [my boyfriend] and I
> got engaged and I could tell it became this like… Competition almost in her mind.

The minimization of her relationship as well as the competitive nature of her friend's behavior

ultimately fueled Zoe's need to create boundaries in their relationship.

Some participants also disclosed how their friend's overtly mean and disrespectful behavior within supportive contexts drove them to needing support boundaries. For example, Leah expressed how her friend hurt her feelings by escalating a challenge that Leah was facing.

> [...] I remember being really upset about gaining weight during the pandemic. And I remember this really rubbed me the wrong way. Like I said, you know, I'm having like… I'm getting stretch marks. And I was really upset about it and, now in the grand scheme of things, stretch marks aren't a big deal. Everyone has them. But she was like, she was like, 'Oh no… stretch marks? Oh no.' Like, acting like it's like a big deal and just make… She just made me feel so much worse about it.

In this context, Leah sought support from her friend, and their interaction ultimately made Leah feel worse. Furthermore, Leah described the negative impact of her friend's response. Similarly, Amelia expressed frustrations related to her friend's harmful behavior in supportive contexts. Often, Amelia's friend brought up topics that Amelia explicitly asked to avoid because they were triggering to her, which made Amelia feel disrespected:

> Okay, so she would talk about suicide a lot. And like, would talk about it in her vents and it would just be like a passing phrase. Or she would talk about, like, eating disorders, like just freely while she was venting and it would get to me and like… she would not care. So. Because she was just going on a rampage and wouldn't care. And that was kind of the… the turning point. When she no longer kind of respected the words that I just didn't wanna hear.

Amelia's friend actively disregarded her needs which led Amelia to limit the support she offered, as well as create parameters around the way she provided support. Across multiple interviews, participants reported that their friends' malicious behavior resulted in negative personal and relational consequences. Many participants expressed hurt and frustration from these situations as well as how this type of behavior acted as a turning point or moment of realization that prompted their boundary creation.

Protecting the Self

Participants utilized support boundaries as a means of self-preservation. *Protecting the self* illustrates how 17 participants needed boundaries to guard themselves from issues related to their friend's support seeking. Three subthemes emerged: *distrusting disclosures*, *disapproving decisions*, and *prioritizing emotional needs*.

Distrusting Disclosures. Participants sometimes questioned the truth and severity of their friend's disclosure and support seeking. Two participants explicated how they did not know what to believe of their friend's disclosure, as they, at times, received conflicting information or disclosures that were difficult to believe. To avoid exerting significant energy into a potentially disingenuous situation, these participants used support boundaries to limit the support they were providing. For example, one participant, Jessie, explained their confusion and hesitation in supportive situations with their friend, "[…] So I think it came down to like exaggerative lies. Like I never knew if he was telling the truth. I never knew what was going on. I mean for years and it wasn't just me […]" Not only was Jessie unsure if their friend was telling the truth, but Jessie recognized that others also questioned the reality of their friend's situation:

> […] I mean, like, every other day, it was some emergency. It was something chaotic. It was… And it wasn't just like a little like inconvenience emergency, it wasn't like, 'Oh, I gotta, I ran out of gas on the way here. I'm going to be late.' It was like, 'Oh my God, I got… someone on a bike hit my car and then my…' Like, it was always a very exaggerative [situation].

The emotional labor of their friend's supportive needs in combination with Jessie's skepticism regarding their friend's experiences created a complicated relationship. Throughout the interview, Jessie detailed their speculation toward their friend's support seeking but did not ever explicitly acknowledge catching their friend in a lie.

Delaney, on the other hand, expressed skepticism of her friend before eventually catching them in a lie. As she explained, Delaney struggled to know what was real or not in her

relationship with that friend. During that phase of their friendship, Delaney detailed, "Yeah, so I could tell that I was getting close to putting a boundary up when I was getting multiple phone calls a day that were just like… I couldn't tell if like what I was hearing was true or not." Toward the end of their friendship, Delaney supported her friend through an abusive relationship, eventually discovering that her friend had lied about certain aspects of her situation:

> Then another thing on top of this, just like another layer was. I noticed she was lying to me, and which was like really surprising because I have… I'm a very honest and open person, and I guess I just assumed that other people are going to be that way with me as well. And when I realized that she was lying to me, she said that she was hospitalized, which may or may not be true. I don't know, but she definitely had like bruises that were visible. And she told me that he ended up going to jail and she filed a police report. Well. Well, if you… like when people are in jail, you can call the jail and just ask them who's in jail. And so, I did that, and they were like, 'Nope, we don't have any record of him.' And so, I reach out to her, and I was like, 'I just don't understand why you're lying to me or why you're with somebody treating you like this.'

Once Delaney realized that her friend had lied to her, it caused Delaney to doubt other aspects of her relationship with her friend. Ultimately, this distrust caused Delaney to enact support boundaries so she would not continue providing support and exerting energy for challenges that she could not fully understand or believe.

Through these two participants' experiences of distrusting their friend's disclosures, it became clear that a lack of trust was a central force in their support boundary creation. As such, when individuals do not trust their friends or question the reality of their circumstances as presented to them by their friends, support providers needed boundaries to protect themselves.

Disapproving Decisions. Nine participants *disapproved of their friends' decisions* and behavior related to their challenges. In discussing disapproval as a reason for boundary creation, many described how their friends were wholly or partially responsible for their challenge circumstances. For example, Jasmine expressed relief after implementing various boundaries and stated, "[…] the freedom of not having this like weight on my shoulders all the time of trying to

support my friend through situations that she keeps putting herself in. That sounds bad to say…"

Jasmine struggled supporting her friend within in two different relationships and across

numerous years because she felt her friend could change her circumstances, especially with the

support her friend was receiving. Throughout the more recent years of their friendship, Jasmine

felt as though her friend's challenges were avoidable (to a degree), which ultimately contributed

to her decision to enact various support boundaries.

Other participants discussed how they disagreed with the decisions their friends made

related to managing their own challenges. In other words, participants expressed frustration for

how their friends could change their circumstances but had chosen not to. As one participant,

Zoe, explained:

> Not to be mean. But I'm like… She could easily make this situation better for herself, but
> she's not choosing to change the situation. She's choosing to stay in the situation and
> then just call me and complain about it.

In Zoe's perspective, her friend chose to remain in a challenging situation when she had the

agency to improve her life. As such, Zoe disapproved of her friend's decisions related to

addressing her challenges. Another participant, Leah, voiced similar frustrations:

> And I would tell her to seek help or like see a counselor or anything or get on medication
> or… or something. But that's what was frustrating, too. Cause she never would seek help.
> But you know, I… like at the same time… like I can understand. You know, it's a mental
> illness. Like, it's not like it's a simple… you know? This was just my thought process at
> the time. I'm not saying it was right to think that way.

Leah's complicated feelings about her friend's decisions demonstrate how participants often

wrestled with the idea of creating boundaries. In one regard, Leah believed that her friend would

benefit from professional help, which her friend refused. At the same time, Leah acknowledged

that this might not be as simple as Leah wished. Regardless, Leah depicted frustration with her

friend's choices, as she continued to struggle and seek support that she could be receiving from other avenues.

Contrasting to Leah and Zoe's situations, another participant, Maya, did not believe her friend created her challenges, nor did she feel frustration with her friend's lack action to change her circumstances. Instead, Maya shared her desire to enact support boundaries because Maya morally disagreed with her friend's behavior. Amid their already-established relationship, Maya discovered that her friend's boyfriend was married. Since her friend was unaware of his marital status, Maya initially did not blame her friend for her involvement. However, once Maya shared this information with her friend, Maya morally disagreed with her friend's decision to remain in a relationship with this man. As such, this situation led Maya establish boundaries in their relationship around this particular context:

> It's hard to support. It was hard to support [her] in a good way, because again, I also didn't love what she was doing. Also, [she] was having, like, terrible anxiety around the whole thing, so like. I want to support you, but also not support what you're doing […] I was like this is like… It's not like a great thing that you're doing. It's not like a morally grey thing. It's obvious that his wife is still kind of at least semi in the picture and he's lied to you about it… I don't love this at all [...] It's a fairly bad thing and I don't want to hear happy stories about your relationship when I know that it's also negatively affecting someone else, cause that will feel gross inside.

To protect their friendship, Maya chose to limit her support for her friend's relationship while continuing to support her in other contexts.

Various participants cited disagreeing with their friends' decisions or behaviors as justification to minimize or eliminate their support provision. Some participants blamed their friend for the problem itself; others disagreed with their friend's lack of action to change their circumstances; and one participant morally disagreed with the entire situation. In all these cases, disagreement served as a root cause for decision-making around support boundaries.

Prioritizing Emotional Needs. From the interviews, it was evident that 15 participants struggled with feeling overwhelmed, being exhausted, and needing to take care of themselves. Ultimately, their friend's (often excessive) support seeking forced them to begin *prioritizing their own emotional needs* by implementing various support boundaries.

Numerous participants conveyed immense exhaustion from their friend's support seeking and disclosure. For example, Maeve stated:

> […] I felt mentally drained a lot of the time in our friendship… Or like emotionally drained. And I just wanted to be able to have a conversation with her where I wasn't drained afterwards.

Prior to boundary creation, Maeve felt exhausted after every conversation she had with her friend. Amelia described a similar experience:

> So a boundary was set after… I started to feel super affected by the things that she would vent to me about. I wanna say like in October, November it's started to get really like… she would just vent heavily all day, every day. And then I was left feeling drained. Because I would just help all day long and I understood that she was going through things but… I was struggling […]

For Amelia, her friend's increased support seeking resulted in feelings of exhaustion and caused Amelia to personally struggle. Another participant, Jessie, explained their complicated feelings of exhaustion when serving as a support provider to their friend:

> […] and this person is really sucking the life out of us like I... I just remember being exhausted and like a friendship shouldn't exhaust you period. I should be able to see my friends and then leave and go do my next thing and have the energy for it. Now I can check like intersectionality. Like what is on your plate? What is not on my plate? What am I actually bringing to the table? Do I have mental illness? Do I have physical illness that would affect that? Right? So, I am speaking like maybe enabled perspective there […] but for the most part you, shouldn't feel exhausted mentally and emotionally after being with a friend unless it was a heavy topic. And I think every single time I was with him is either a small topic that became a heavy topic or I was only listening […] He just monopolized everything. Like it was just exhausting […]

In processing their experience with their friend, Jessie acknowledged that friendships are not sustainable if they result in continuous emotional and mental exhaustion. For Jessie, their exhaustion reached a point that pushed them to enact support boundaries.

Multiple participants acknowledged that the added exhaustion of supporting their friend alongside other circumstances they were facing contributed to their need for support boundary creation. For example, Charlie detailed:

> I just had a lot of personal… Not like conflicts, but like well, maybe conflicts, I don't know. There was just a lot of things going on, and I realized I needed to put myself first so. […] Yeah, like every day was just like a shitshow. Like, I was trying to do my job and take care of [my friend's daughter] and take care of [my friend] and take care of [my husband] and take care of myself and take care of the dog like…

With various people relying on her, Charlie became overwhelmed with her friend's supportive expectations and ultimately enacted support boundaries. Another participant, Jodie, found herself in a similar situation when she was processing a recent breakup:

> When I was kind of in that breakup space I just really couldn't keep taking on as much as I like… Would have liked to. Or, you know, myself… I don't like to tell people no. So, it kind of got to the point where I was like I need to say no. So, she was calling me about something that we had talked about multiple times, and I was like 'Hey. I really hate to do this, and like I don't really ever do this, but I just am not in the head space to take this on today.' I was like, 'I'm here. I love you, but…'

When experiencing her own challenges, Jodie had to limit the support she offered her friend in order to prioritize her emotional well-being.

Additionally, numerous participants detailed their need to prioritize themselves and their well-being over supporting their friends. Leah argued, "[…] It doesn't mean that you're a bad friend if you can't be there for them at all times. […] Like, you gotta remember, people have to… You also have to worry about yourself." Another participant, Peyton, expressed similar sentiments:

I really think it goes back to the concept of, like… You're human. Give yourself some grace. […] And yes, you should be there to support your friends. But also, don't let it become… Don't let it get to a point where it weighs you down so bad [that] you begin to not feel yourself because you're helping your friends […]

Although Peyton acknowledged the importance of supporting friends, she also argued for the importance of prioritize the self. One participant, Jasmine, shared her struggle of wanting to support her friend but also realizing her support had to be limited when her support provision began to affect her own well-being.

Yeah, I think it's just been hard because when you…have a friend who's in a… like a domestically abusive relationship. They're hurt and being manipulated by their partner. And so, that makes it that much harder to act on putting support boundaries, because they are already being hurt in one of their friendships. And not that boundaries are hurtful, um, by nature. But I think some people can take them personally. And so, it's just been hard, because I've been treading this water of… My friend, I… I want to help my friend who's being abused, but I can't keep… like how… how long do I keep doing that without it having [an] effect on myself?

As seen with Jasmine's response and the other participants documented in this subtheme, implementing support boundaries because of one's personal needs and well-being concerns can become complicated due to feelings of guilt, potentially complicated the support boundary process. A multitude of participants expressed feelings of exhaustion, being overwhelmed, and needing to prioritize their own well-being as key reasons for creating support boundaries.

Network Negotiations

The final theme emergent from participant interviews is *network negotiations*, which represents how 14 participants needed support boundaries as derived because of various considerations related to their broader social networks. Three subthemes developed: *encouragement from one's network*, *protecting one's network*, and *uncomfortable involvement with one's network*.

Encouragement from One's Network. For six participants, boundary creation only felt possible because *their network encouraged them* to do it. Some participants did not fully recognize that they needed boundaries until other friends expressed clear disapproval of the supportive expectations the participant experienced or they validated the participant's desire for support boundaries. For example, Penelope did not realize that she needed boundaries until another friend helped her understand why her relationship with the support seeking friend was unhealthy:

> I didn't set any boundaries right away because I was so blind to it. And it took [my friend] coming in and really showing me like, 'No, this is not right. Here's what she's been saying about you. Here's what, like… you've been saying about her. Here's what I've been saying about you.'

Without someone in her network explicitly acknowledging how the supportive situation was harmful, Penelope would have taken longer to realize that she needed support boundaries. Similarly, Maeve sought insight and advice from people in her network on her relationship with her friend before she felt comfortable creating support boundaries:

> I think it was a lot of other people giving me input. I didn't do it by myself. It was my boyfriend saying 'Hey, I don't, I don't like that she's dictating our relationship.' And then afterwards, when we had our friendship breakup, I… I relied on the support of other friends and explain[ed] how everything sucked. And they were like, 'Yeah, I think that she took advantage of you a lot.' And so. And then I also was seeing a counselor for several reasons at the time and could bring up those situations. So, I needed input from other people. Not like I needed permission from other people, but almost that I did.

Maeve sought insight from her romantic partner, mutual friends, and a professional when making sense of her relationship and her boundaries with her friend. Furthermore, she expressed not only needing validation for her feelings related to this situation but also that she almost wanted their permission to create the boundaries she desired. When first considering enacting support boundaries, Jasmine also sought advice from peers:

Yeah, I would say when I first started to… Think about setting boundaries… I was talking to some of my solid support friendships and… and seeking out for advice of… of what I should do. And this eventually turned into me trying to take action which didn't take for, you know, didn't take a long… Or it did take a long time for me to go from thinking about it to actually doing it. [...]

After receiving advice and encouragement to create support boundaries, Jasmine still hesitated to take action. Communicating with various people in her network allowed her to contemplate how she wanted to create boundaries once she was ready to. When it came to support boundaries, participants sought advice, validation, and even permission from people in their social networks prior to boundary creation.

Protecting One's Network. Eight participants implemented support boundaries as a form of *protecting one's network*. Participants strived to protect other individuals' safety and well-being as well as the relationships they had with others connected to the supportive situation. One participant, Jessie, implemented boundaries after another friend disclosed that she felt unsafe around the support seeker:

[…] I would say though, friendships in my core group kind of set boundaries for me. […] [My other friend was] like, "Yeah, I… I love you, Jessie, but [the support seeker is] not invited. Like you can come, but if he shows up I… I don't want him here. Like I, you know…" She was the first friend to really voice, "I just can't do it. I don't like how he treats you. I know that you guys are just friends. I don't like how he talks about things." And then what she said… And this is something that I… I. This was the comment that, like made me really start thinking about… She was like "I don't feel safe with him here." And I think that for me… because I have always framed boundaries as safety—emotional, physical, mental, psychological, safety. When my closest friend said I don't feel safe with him here, I really got upset […]

For Jessie, boundaries are tantamount to safety, and hearing that their friends no longer felt safe around the support seeking motivated them to enact support boundaries as a means of ensuring their friends felt safe.

Other participants, like Charlie, created boundaries to preserve other relationships. When describing her need for boundary creation, Charlie stated, "[…] It was clearly negatively

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impacting my relationship with [my husband] so…" Since her support provision was harming a

separate relationship, she created boundaries in order to prioritize the health of her relationship

with her husband. Avery expressed similar concerns, her support-seeking friend was one whose

primary concerns involved a group member of Avery's mutual friends from a hobby group (all

individuals played the game Dungeons and Dragons [DND] together):

> And it started… Honestly, it started impacting like how I view the DND game and how I view [her sister during the game]. Cause it was just tainting that? It's like I don't feel like I'm making judgments [of] these people how they deserve it, yeah. And I just I didn't think that was fair to them. I didn't think it was fair to me, yeah? So, I think it was just… Like, "OK, we've been doing this long enough. It's clearly not working. And I can't continue."

To stem the negative feelings Avery felt towards other members of their group, particularly

members that she did not know as well, Avery enacted support boundaries. Ultimately, in these

situations, participants' desire to minimize risk of harming other individuals and relationships

outweighed their ability to support their friends, resulting in the exploration of support

boundaries.

Uncomfortable Involvement with One's Network. Four participants enacted support

boundaries to minimize their *involvement* in their friend's challenges because the supportive

situation made them feel uncomfortable in context of their broader, shared network. This

discomfort existed for participants who had close relationships with numerous involved parties in

their support-seeking friend's challenge, as well as participants who were less connected, but

were occasionally required connect with involved parties.

One participant, Pat, expressed discomfort while supporting her friend through marriage

struggles because it made her feel caught between her friend and her friend's spouse. She

acknowledged that, "Something that really caused the weird dynamic is I was good friends with

her husband as well. And so, I was hearing information from both sides." While Pat was

primarily supporting her friend, she felt uncomfortable that her friend's husband (another friend

of Pat's) was not aware of how much Pat knew about their problems. As Pat explained:

> I just always felt a little weird about knowing, like… intimate is probably not the right
> word… But inside details into someone's relationship that the other person doesn't know
> that I know […] Things would happen, and then we'd all hang out. And I'm like, I just,
> I'm housing this information about one of my friends. I can't tell him that I know these
> things. And so, I just like, put on a filter a few times of just like, "OK, what can I say in
> this moment? What can I not say?" But I never thought like, "Well then, I should just not
> know this information." I was always like, "Oh well, I just have to adjust how I'm being."
> And that's not necessarily true. [laughter]

Since she was friends with both individuals, Pat needed support boundaries in order to separate

herself from their marital problems and maintain her relationship with both of them. Another

participant, Sadie, also expressed discomfort with the information her friend disclosed:

> Sometimes, like she would talk about certain things with their family, I would be like, "I
> feel like that's not really my… I don't really feel like I should know this stuff type of
> thing." My issues with her brother and his wife's relationship type of like, just like, very
> out there stuff that I would be like, "I don't really feel like this is necessary for me to
> know" [...] Yeah, I was just, like, uncomfortable. Like, when I would see her family. I
> would be like, "I shouldn't know [this stuff]."

Unlike in Pat's situation, Sadie was not close with her friend's family. Still, she felt

uncomfortable knowing private details about their lives. Pat and Sadie's situations reflect how

participants felt discomfort knowing intimate details about the lives of other network members

associated with their friend's challenge. As such, they enacted support boundaries to limit their

involvement and avoid these awkward, uncomfortable feelings.

Themes of Enacting Support Boundaries

The second research question examined what strategies support providers utilized to

create and enact boundaries with their friend (RQ2). Three central themes emerged from

participant responses: *direct communication*, *indirect communication*, and *collaborative*

communication. Various subthemes arose within each of the central themes (see Table 3).

Table 3

RQ2: Themes of Enacting Support Boundaries

Theme	Definition	Exemplars
Direct Communication	In total, 14 participants utilized direct communication to create parameters around the support they were willing to provide	
Explicit Expectations	Thirteen participants set explicit expectations by directly stating what support conditions they were willing and unwilling to accept, as well as what support they were willing and unwilling to provide.	When she started to have that break off with her best friend at the time and it was leaning on me a lot, I had to say what I said earlier. Like, I cannot be your best friend. I would love to, but you need a lot from your friends, and I just… let me tell you that I can't do that for you.
Explicit Disapproval	Four participants communicated explicit disapproval to their friend to minimize or eliminate support-seeking and provision.	[…] It was like, "Oh, great. I'm glad you guys are talking again and like, it seems like it's going better." And now, at this point, it's like, "Hey, I don't like this guy at all. And I think that he's unhealthy for you." And so, yeah, just being a lot more direct and honest.
Indirect Communication	All participants detailed various implicit communication and behavior strategies they implemented to minimize support-seeking and provision	
Creating Distance	Twenty-one participants created distance to disconnect themselves from their friend and ultimately limit their support.	[…] I started just like dis… distanced myself. And like physical space and on my phone. And not completely. I didn't like shut her out all the

		way, but just certain times when I knew I needed it, I would just distance myself.
Physical Separation	Eighteen participants created physical distance from their friend to minimize support-seeking and provision.	When she would be upstairs with me and just like, keep complaining about things. I would just sort of like. Lessen my time around… that sounds bad, but I just tried to like lessen my time around the negativity that she would talk about almost.
Mediated Separation	Nineteen participants initiated mediated separation; they would ignore calls or messages, take more time to respond, or be less engaged within mediated conversations with their friend to create limits around their support provision.	It's not responding to texts or emails or calls immediately. If I'm not able to and not feeling guilty or like I'm being a bad friend by doing so […]
Natural Separation	Four participants embraced a natural separation, or separation that happened through life circumstances rather than through participants' actions.	[…] IAnd then stuff got busy, so it made sense to like slowly part and then I moved away so it was kind of like. It naturally separated […]
Providing Excuses	Six participant interviews illustrated making excuses to justify their minimized or eliminated support provision.	[…] I didn't see her quite as often. Like I would make excuses it, but like I wouldn't say 'No. Like you offended me and you need to fix what you did if you want to see me again'. I just went like 'oh sorry, I can't do that today.'
Topic Avoidance	Eight participants established boundaries through topic avoidance, which allowed them to be supportive more generally while also separating themselves from specific, difficult topics.	[…] And I… when we do talk, I will not ask her about [her partner] or her romantic life at all. If she wants to bring it up, you know, I'll listen for a little while and then change the subject. […]

Collaborative Communication	In total, four participants detailed how they collaborated with their friend, communicating openly and honestly with one another, in order to establish mutually agreed upon support boundaries.	[…] And I think it's just we've become better at like kind of checking in with the other person before needing support. […] Like… She's much more intentional about, asking how I am and how my workload is and just kind of like checking in before dumping. […]

Direct Communication

When communicating their support boundaries, 14 participants utilized *direct communication.* In their interviews, they explained their explicit communication strategies to create parameters around the support they were willing to provide. Two subthemes emerged: *explicit expectations* and *explicit disapproval*.

Explicit Expectations. In utilizing direct communication, 13 participants were able to set *explicit expectations*. This allowed participants to directly state what support conditions they were willing and unwilling to accept, as well as what support they were willing and unwilling to provide. Many participants set explicit expectations around their friend's support seeking. For example, Avery detailed how she continued to offer her friend support, but she set clear limits on when she was willing to help her friend:

> It mostly occurred in one giant block text […] Just being like, "Hey this is gonna suck and I'm sorry. But It's been really hard to be this supportive person for you, and I can still be a supportive person for you. But I can't do the 2:00 AM phone calls anymore. Yeah, and I can't continue to give advice if it's not gonna lead to anything, yeah. And it's the same like if it's a crisis, I will be here. But the frequency needs to be turned down. I need space."

Avery openly communicated that her friend could no longer contact her in the middle of the night and that her friend needed to reduce the frequency of her support seeking. In Kathleen's situation, she set limits on who could communicate with her for support:

> […] when his girlfriend would come to me and be like, "Hey, like he really wants to hang out with you." And I told her, "Then he needs to say that to me directly […]"

In Kathleen's situation, her friend asked other people to seek support and connection with her on his behalf, and Kathleen clearly set a boundary labeling this behavior as off-limits; she would only accept support seeking directly from him.

Additionally, numerous participants clearly explicated the amount or frequency of support they were willing or able to provide. For example, Maeve felt as though her friend required a lot from her close friendships, so Maeve candidly stated that she could not provide all that was expected:

> […] And I had to say a few times, like, "Hey, I love you. I'm so happy being friends with you. But like, [my partner] is my priority here. And like, I think that if you… you need a lot in a best friend, and I can't always be that for you. And I don't want to disappoint you. So, you… like, I cannot be your best friend, but I want to be your friend."

Although Maeve was still willing to be friends, she could not meet her friend's high expectations, which ultimately led to her decline assuming the role of "best friend'. Comparably, Maya set explicit expectations around which challenges she was willing to offer support to her friend:

> Like I told her very specifically, like, "I'm OK with talking about [your friend]." And I also told I was like, "If you ever need me, I'm here. Like, if anything goes wrong. If you ever need to talk about it, I am here. But also, I don't want to hear about the happy things. I don't wanna hear about the day-to-day aspects of your relationship."

In her situation, Maya was willing to provide support around various challenges, but directly told her friend to not seek support related to her romantic relationship. Jasmine also created explicit parameters around the support she would provide to her friend:

> [...]And then the first time that I ever verbalized it was probably like two, two-and-a-half years, three years into the process when she asked me to come home and help her move. It was the first time where I ever was like, "Hey. I'm happy to help, but this is it. Uh, I can't like, give you this support anymore." And so yeah, definitely was a transition or like a… a very slow and gradual process of me trying to set boundaries but also still be a friend.

After numerous years of support provision and attempting to enact boundaries using other, less direct strategies, Jasmine chose to overtly express her support limits to her friend.

Many participants also acknowledged that direct communication helped their friend recognize that boundary creation was happening after participants' other, more implicit attempts

to create boundaries had failed. For example, Sadie explained, "[…] I would like try to say like, 'Oh, like I can't do this right now.' And then she would just like… keep going. So, it took me a few weeks to realize, like I had to be like, 'Stop.'" When Sadie first attempted to create support boundaries, she would make excuses. Ultimately, though, Sadie had to alter her strategies when these indirect attempts were not clear. Zoe detailed a similar experience: "If it's not explicit, she just obviously she doesn't know that I'm trying to create a boundary, so she just kind of keeps doing what she's doing. […]" Without explicitly setting support boundaries, her friend did not fully process Zoe's actions.

In an effort to enact support boundaries, participants explicitly communicated the conditions they were willing to accept and the support they were able to give. Additionally, numerous participants acknowledged how their direct communication about their expectations followed other failed boundary attempts that were subtler and indirect.

Explicit Disapproval. Many participants needed support boundaries because they did not approve of their friend's behavior. In response to these situations, four participants explicated how they communicated *explicit disapproval* to their friend to minimize or eliminate support-seeking and provision. One participant, Jessie, described creating a firm boundary after discovering their friend was doing cocaine while they were at work together:

> I had to set a really firm boundary about coke when we were in that incident, and he was taking a bump in the bathroom. That boundary looked like… "Listen I... I'm not going to report you to the space I work at. I… I'm not going to do that, but I am gonna say is like I can't trust you anymore. And I don't feel safe with you anymore. And I need you to show me how you're gonna rebuild that trust and like we need to figure that out. Like if that means not doing coke at work. If that means taking a leave of absence, if that's what you like… If you need that to survive your day, like you need bumps of coke. Is it finding you a different job, because the one that you can use coke that you're at? Like if that's what you need to get through the day. OK, I don't feel safe with you as my crisis by partner anymore like I just don't […]"

Given the nature of their work, Jessie did not approve of their friend doing drugs at work, expressing that it made them feel unsafe. After discovering this was happening, Jessie set an explicit boundary by communicating their disapproval of drug-use in their work environment, acknowledging the broken trust, and aiming to find a solution to ensure they would not find themselves in this circumstance again.

Another participant, Delaney, described how her willingness to provide support shifted after disagreeing with her friend's decision to start a new relationship:

> So, and then I guess kind of where the relationship went south was maybe like a year ago, maybe a year and a half ago, when this friend came and visited me and moved also to Wyoming where I was living at the time. And they got into a relationship that I was very… I told her that like it was very toxic and I did not support it, whereas like up until that point, even though I didn't agree with the choices that they made, I was still very supportive and like try to keep like my biases out of it […]

Even though Delaney disagreed with a lot of her friend's decisions throughout their friendship, she continued to provide her with support. However, once her friend entered an unhealthy relationship, Delaney enacted boundaries by explicitly telling her friend that she did not support their relationship, essentially cutting off her support for her friend and her romantic life. Maeve faced similar challenges with her friend, who started talking to a previous relational partner who had caused her friend harm:

> […] It was like, "Oh, great. I'm glad you guys are talking again and like, it seems like it's going better." And now, at this point, it's like, "Hey, I don't like this guy at all. And I think that he's unhealthy for you." And so, yeah, just being a lot more direct and honest.

Earlier in their relationship, Maeve had attempted to support her friend's romantic connection. Eventually, Maeve reached a point where she directly and honestly expressed her disapproval of her friend's romantic partner, limiting the support she would provide her friend. Across diverse contexts, numerous participants communicated their explicitly disapproval of their friends'

decisions. In doing so, they created a boundary and minimized their support provision in these situations.

Indirect Communication

When creating support boundaries, all participants utilized *indirect communication*. In their interviews, participants detailed the various implicit strategies they implemented to minimize support seeking and provision. Four subthemes arose: *creating distance*, *natural separation*, *providing excuses*, and *topic avoidance*.

Creating Distance. *Creating distance* represents the various strategies 21 participants utilized in order to disconnect themselves from their friend and ultimately limit their support. Participants explained how they created distance by instigating *physical separation* and *mediated separation*.

Physical Separation. Instead of explicitly creating boundaries, 18 participants implemented *physical separation*. By creating physical distance from their friend, participants were able to minimize their support-seeking and provision. Many of the participants who instigated physical separation originally lived or worked with their friend. For example, in Evelyn's interview, she described how a vacation with her friend cemented her need for boundary creation. After their trip ended, Evelyn detailed:

> And then upon returning from that trip, just a lot of, like, not spending time as much time in the common areas, and if she asked me to do something, like really deciding, "Is this something I want to do or not?" And if I didn't, just saying, "No thanks. I have other things going on tonight." And then, ultimately, probably the biggest boundary was moving out, which wasn't necessarily a formal boundary I had set, but a physical boundary.

To avoid providing support to her friend, Evelyn physically removed herself from the common areas of their shared apartment and eventually found a different place to live, creating physical

separation between the two that facilitated less support seeking. Sadie, who also lived her friend, described similar experiences:

> When she would be upstairs with me and just like, keep complaining about things, I would just sort of like… lessen my time around. That sounds bad, but like I just tried to like lessen my time around the negativity that she would talk about almost.

In order to avoid listening to her friend's unwanted disclosures, Sadie minimized the time she spent in common areas. Another participant, Jessie, worked with their friend and began to avoid certain shared office spaces to limit conversations with their friend:

> When we work together, I definitely found myself not sharing the office with him, and I think I wrote that off of like, "Oh, when I sit in the office with him, I never get my paperwork done." When you work at a residential home, you have to have your paperwork done and like, it's so easy for it to get stacked up, and like having it stacked up is just a nightmare of an agency problem, right? And so I… I, I would just go to different offices. But I also think like, I didn't like being in the office with him anymore. […]

Since their shared workplace minimized their opportunity for complete separation, Jessie created physical distance by avoiding their office when possible.

Other participants described initiating physical distance more sporadically. In one interview, Pat described leaving the room when her friend began to discuss support topics that Pat no longer wished to talk about:

> So my other friend, they've been best friends since they were in elementary school, and they're both married to two guys who are friends. And so, they all have just always been very open. And so, if the two girls are like talking about issues, like I will just get up and leave. Like, I'll go into the bathroom, I'll go into the kitchen. Like I just start to remove myself from conversations that I don't feel comfortable being a part of.

Rather than be present and disengaged for specific conversations, Pat physically distanced herself to avoid any involvement. Penelope disclosed a similar situation:

> I remember that… I don't even know if this is a boundary, but there were times where like she would… Cause [my boyfriend] with lived with like a couple other guys like… [My friend] like stopped over to [my boyfriend's] house and me, [my boyfriend] and this other friend left cause we didn't want to see her. And that's just how the… how it was up to that point.

When Penelope was at her boyfriend's house and her friend would show up, they would occasionally leave to avoid spending time with her. In these boundary creation attempts, participants regularly and sporadically created physical distance to minimize support seeking and provision.

Mediated Separation. To minimize connection, 19 participants also initiated *mediated separation*; they would ignore calls or messages, take more time to respond, or be less engaged within mediated conversations with their friend to create limits around their support provision. For example, numerous participants implemented mediated separation by increasing time between communication, as Kathleen described:

> It's not responding to texts or emails or calls immediately. If I'm not able to and not feeling guilty or like I'm being a bad friend by doing so, and I think overall by recognizing, "OK, we're in a different place, so that's how much I care and how much effort and energy put into this is different and that's appropriate given this situation."

Kathleen created space by allocating more time prior to responding to her friend's messages while at the same time working to minimize her own guilt for doing so. Similarly, Amelia took more time to process prior to responding to her friend:

> I'd say that there were definitely times when… I do have read receipts on. That there were times where I would glance at the message, and if it looked like something that was very heavy and not as light, I would not respond right away. I would definitely let it sit for a little bit.

For Amelia, she created a gap between receiving a message and responding in particularly heavy or challenging contexts. As such, she used mediated separation to create a boundary in specific supportive contexts with her friend.

Other participants enacted mediated separation by minimizing the amount of time they spent in contact with their friend. For example, Zoe explained how she used mediated separation because she did not have the energy to engage in an explicit conversation about her need:

That's just like, so emotionally fatiguing that, like, I don't think I have the capacity to try and set a boundary in another relationship right now. So I'm just like, do it very like, without explicitly saying. Like, implicitly be like, yeah, I won't answer her phone call. Or, okay, I can't talk for as long. But just because this setting a boundary in another relationship like took it all out of me.

Similar to Kathleen and Amelia, Zoe explained that she would occasionally not answer her friend's calls. When Zoe did answer, she minimized the amount of time she would talk to her friend. Similarly, Beth limited the length of her phone calls with her friend:

I like... I was feeling that like [my friend] was kind of like… like using me a little bit to maybe work out his stresses more often. So, I would limit the duration. Like, the phone calls that I would have with them, like to an hour at most. And so that actually really helped with my own stress level cause I'm like, OK, you know what? I yeah, I don't need to spend more time and feel more stressed out. Like uh… with this situation.

In limiting the amount of time she spoke with her friend, Beth was able to minimize his disclosures related to his stressors and establish her own boundary.

In a more extreme circumstance, one participant, Delaney, enacted strict boundaries by blocking her friend on social media. Once Delaney reached her breaking point in her friendship, she eliminated mediated contact with her friend entirely:

So then the boundaries that I had set up were, since we didn't live in the same city and it wasn't like she could come visit me, I ended up blocking her on… like, so she couldn't text me. She couldn't find me on any social medias, and I thought that I did a really good job at blocking her. And at the time the feelings were mutual. She also did not want to talk to me, which was fine and I told myself, like you know, if she did want to reach out to me, we have so many mutual friends that it would not be hard. She has my partner's phone number. Like, I'm still available, I just needed to distance myself. And so I realized that I hadn't blocked her on Snapchat, and so we had communicated through there a few times, and now we are on speaking terms but I just don't… every promise that I'm told or every story that I'm told I just take it with a grain of salt now. And like she has asked me to unblock her so she could call me and stuff, and I just say, "You know you can call me through Snapchat." And that is just kind of my vessel that I've kept open, but like that boundary is still there. She can't see any of my social medias except for Snapchat. […]

Although Delaney intended to block her friend on everything, contact remained possible because of their intertwined networks. Interestingly, even though Delaney and her friend are on speaking

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terms, Delaney's chose to leave her strict boundaries remain intact, and her friend can only

contact her through Snapchat message.

Natural Separation. Although many participants actively created distance from their

friends, four embraced a *natural separation*, or separation that happened through life

circumstances rather than through participants' actions. For example, some participants

described how COVID-19 pandemic restrictions provided a natural progression to separation

within their friendship. As Jessie acknowledged, "[…] and then COVID happens and now it's

like we naturally just don't talk at all anymore. […]" Similarly, Bailey shared how the pandemic

normalized her hesitation to see her friend face-to-face:

> I do think that, like COVID was pretty convenient in that regards, because nobody really
> was going to see people at that point. So that kind of became the norm, where she didn't
> really expect me to see her as much as she had before. So, I think that that kind of came
> at like the same time, like maybe followed a similar trajectory.

As a result of social distancing public health measures and the risk associated with seeing people

in-person during the COVID-19 pandemic, Bailey's friend did not question her decision to limit

their contact, creating an opportunity for natural separation and boundary creation.

Furthermore, participants noted how moving could escalate the physical separation

within their relationships, which furthered their ability to minimize support seeking. Leah

described how her friend moved from Los Angeles to Long Beach, California (a town about an

hour and a half away with traffic), which prompted a natural separation within their friendship:

> I mean, when she moved to Long Beach, it was kind of like a perfect excuse for me to set
> these boundaries. You know what I mean? So it was almost kinda… Um, we like lost…
> We've like kind of distanced because of the… it almost seems like an excuse because
> she's moved to Long Beach, you know?

Although Leah and her friend could still maintain the closeness in their relationship regardless of

the physical distance that separates them, Leah chose to embrace this physical distance as a

natural means of boundary creation. Comparably, Bailey detailed how natural separation throughout the course of her relationship with her friend was solidified by a move:

> […] And then it kind of kept like… And then stuff got busy, so it made sense to slowly part, and then I moved away so it was kind of like, it naturally separated, but that was definitely a point for me when I realized, I don't want to be this person's close friend anymore.

After consistent and slow separation as a result of the pandemic and work-load factors, Bailey's move to another state solidified the boundaries she had been attempting to create.

Participants utilized environmental conditions to solidify the support boundaries they had been attempting to create with their friend but faced minimal challenges toward these boundaries because they were perceived as naturally occurring.

Providing Excuses. Instead of explicitly stating their inability to meet the support expectations of their friends, six participant interviews illustrated *providing excuses*, or making excuses to justify their minimized or eliminated support provision. For example, multiple participants made excuses to avoid spending time with their friend. As Bailey described:

> […] I didn't see her quite as often. Like, I would make excuses, but like I wouldn't say like, "No, you offended me and you need to fix what you did if you want to see me again." I just went like, "Oh sorry, I can't do that today." […] Like I still, if she like said something or like needed support and that I could do without going to see her, I feel like I was more OK with that. Like, keeping the illusion virtually that I'm there for you but then making excuses not to come see you.

Although she still provided some support virtually to her friend, Bailey made excuses to not see her friend in person as frequently to avoid taxing conversations. Another participant, Harper, described utilizing similar strategies to minimize her support provision with her friend:

> This sounds terrible. Not… it's not ghosting by any means, but it was very much like, if she wanted and needed, wanted to go out, I would set the boundary of like, I can't. I can't go out this time or I… I, you know, have to do something else. Or if she like texts like, "Can we talk right now?" I would more so be like, "No… like, I can't." I wanna say having excuses, but they were legitimate and before I would just I would kind of brush over them.

When Harper began implementing support boundaries, she utilized valid excuses for why she could not talk to or spend time with her friend; previously, she would have changed her plans or pushed aside her needs in order to support her friend.

A couple participants provided excuses and directly related them to prioritizing their own needs. For example, when Peyton enacted boundaries with her friend, she used work to explain why she could not help as much as she was being asked to.

> […] I'm just like, "Hey, you know, I'm kind of busy right now. I'm sorry if I don't answer or I don't respond right away. You know my jobs done a lot and is very heavy on me and so right now I just kind of need more time for myself." But I never explicitly said like, "I personally do not have the ability to continue to help you in this space […]"

Rather than explicitly acknowledging her inability to provide the support her friend sought, Peyton reminded her friend how taxing her job is and expressed needing time for herself. Sadie also expressed her desire for time to herself:

> She would constantly want me to go run errands with her if she saw I wasn't doing anything… That type of thing. And that's a lot of the times when she would, like, bring up the issues and so I would be like, "Oh no. I just like need time to myself." Like, I started saying like, "I need me time." And so, I think that's one of the things that really helped click in her head was, like, I need time for me. Even if I'm not doing anything in your eyes, I'm doing something for me so.

By reframing her relaxation as prioritizing her needs and alone time, Sadie implicitly created a support boundary. In this way, various participants provided excuses in order to avoid supporting their friend in the ways they were seeking. For many, they reframed their needs as a priority rather than something that can be pushed off or ignored. As such, their friends often understood these excuses and participants were able to avoid explicitly communicating why they were more unavailable.

Topic Avoidance. Eight participants wanted to provide support for their friends but were uncomfortable or unwilling engaging with specific topics. As such, participants established a

boundary through *topic avoidance*. This allowed participants to be supportive friends more generally while also separating themselves from specific, difficult topics.

For Jasmine, her friend's toxic relationships were a point of tension in their supportive relationship. As such, she chose to engage in topic avoidance:

> […] And I… when we do talk, I will not ask her about [a toxic person] or her romantic life at all. If she wants to bring it up, you know, I'll listen for a little while and then change the subject. […]

In attempt to avoid talking about her friend's relationship, Jasmine does not ask about it and actively changes the topic after discussing it briefly if her friend broaches the topic. Similarly, Madeline utilized topic avoidance with her friend: "But I guess just for right now, I'm like, I can pick my conversations. I can pick what I would like to answer and not have to feel worried anymore." By selecting which conversations and supportive context to participate in, Madeline was to reduce her fears and concerns around providing support.

Another participant, Beth reported actively avoiding specific conversations when talking to her friend, whom she primarily supported in academic settings. Beth discussed how "[…] Just being cognizant of the conversation topics we were bringing up," and minimizing her disclosure related to professional interests were strategies she used to enact boundaries. Beth still allowed her friend to disclose these topics, but she used topic avoidance to limit their problematic conversations. For Kathleen, topic avoidance likewise involved avoiding her own disclosures, "For me, it's putting a limit on how much information that I share based on questions that are asked or even answering questions pertaining to certain subjects. […]" As such, topic avoidance provided participants more agency to decide what topics and circumstances they were willing to accept disclosure and provide support. Furthermore, some participants avoided disclosing their

own information related to certain subjects in order to create a boundary around their supportive interactions.

Collaborative Communication

When creating support boundaries, four participants utilized *collaborative communication*. In their interviews, participants detailed how they collaborated with their friends, communicating openly and honestly with one another, in order to establish mutually agreed upon support boundaries. For example, some participants started the boundary conversation and created a space where both individuals could discuss their needs and desires related to the supportive context, as Jodie explained:

> […] I think that was a very like pivotal moment for our friendship […] We just kind of like over the phone talked about, "Listen, like, we both are each other's really good support systems, but we never need to feel bad about taking a moment. We're not machines, we're humans. Some days you just can't do that." And so, we just kind of not felt… like wrote rules. But we're like… we're gonna start asking each other up front when we do our phone calls like, "Do you have the space to take this on or? Are you just not in a good headspace?"

During their conversation, Jodie and her friend acknowledged their humanness and inability to constantly attend to each other's emotional needs. Additionally, they co-created norms for their communication moving forward, reaffirming their commitment to one another during their boundary creation. Particularly, Jodie and her friend implemented check-ins before disclosure or support seeking in their interactions so that everyone had the agency to decline a supportive conversation. Additionally, Jodie described how prior to this interaction, her friend had been wanting to create boundaries, too:

> I think she was very supportive of it, and I think… I could almost tell that she had been wanting to talk about it for a while too. Cause she even said, she's like, "I'm really glad you [brought] this up." She's like, "I never want to hurt anyone's feelings, but I feel like we really need to create this boundary of just like being able to set in stone. Are we OK with talking about this today?"

Since both individuals needed boundaries, they were able to co-construct the support boundaries in their friendship. As her interview progressed, Jodie detailed how the boundary construction has been an ongoing conversation in their relationship since the initial co-creation occurred, highlighting the dynamic and ongoing nature of boundary creation in their relationship.

Amelia's boundary co-creation also occurred over the phone with her long-distance friend. Although Amelia initiated the discussion and had more thoughts on what she needed from the relationship, her friend engaged in the conversation and expressed a few of her own supportive expectations for their relationship. After their conversation, Amelia felt two major shifts:

> Yeah. So, definitely seeking support is different, because we're doing a check in thing to make sure that we're in a good headspace. And neither of us no longer call each other when it's a bad thing. We only call each other if it's just a good lighthearted phone call. That way there's no impending doom, I guess, when the call, the phone rings.

Like Jodie and her friend, Amelia and her friend decided to implement check-ins before disclosing information or seeking support. Additionally, they decided that they would no longer call each other without warning one another if something was wrong. Interestingly, Amelia noted that, "Yeah, the boundaries have kinda remained the same. We had a long conversation about them." After their initial conversation about needed changes, their boundaries have stayed intact.

Another participant, Pat, described how boundary creation with her friend shifted over time as they continued to figure out what works best within their friendship.

> But I think in other facets, it's like it's still very the same, and if things are wrong or if I have something wrong, she's still there to support me very quickly. We've just kind of figured out what works for us to support each other and what doesn't.

Within their relationship, support boundaries were developed around specific circumstances, and, as they managed shifting contexts, they continued working together to determine what worked and what did not in their relationship. Additionally, Pat stated, "Yeah. And I think it's

just we've become better at like… kind of checking in with the other person before needing support." Similar to both Jodie and Amelia, the implementation of check-ins became a new norm for Pat and her friend.

One participant, Maya, described how her friend created the space for her to communicate support boundaries:

> […] I think she was like, "I understand…" Like she said something along lines like, "I understand like… That this fight with [my friend]… like what I'm doing is not okay." And she's like, "I understand if you don't want to talk about it." So, she also gave me space to create the boundary.

Maya's friend was aware that Maya did not approve of her friend's relationship, and she openly acknowledged understanding if that topic needed to be off limits. After her friend acknowledged that, Maya felt supported and able to enact boundaries related to that situation.

Four participants collaborated with their friends to co-create support boundaries that felt reasonable and mutually satisfying. By having open conversations with their friends, they were able to establish a new normal. Three of the participants initiated their support boundaries conversation, and one participant had their friend create space for their boundary enactment.

CHAPTER 5 – DISCUSSION

Substantial research has assessed the positive outcomes of social support, but less is known about when supportive communication has detrimental impacts. Support is an essential aspect of relationships and can enhance the sense of relational closeness for both recipients and providers (Brown et al., 2013; Feeney & Collins, 2015). Research also depicts how supportive failures can be detrimental (Wortman & Lehman, 1985). However, minimal work considers how support failures can negatively impact multiple interactants (i.e., the recipient *and* the provider). The central objective of this study was to expand the current understanding of potential challenges that arise in supportive communication, with particular interest in support provider experiences. More specifically, this study aimed to understand what conditions lead providers to need support boundaries (i.e., effort to decrease or eliminate another person's unwanted disclosures and/or support-seeking) and what communicative strategies providers utilized to enact them.

The results from this study reveal how support challenges are experienced by multiple interactants, with meaningful insight for how providers experience these struggles. Four central themes (and corresponding sub-themes) explicating why providers need support boundaries emerged from participant interviews: *ineffective involvement* (*rumination*, *feelings of futility*, *feeling unqualified*); *relational transgressions* (*lack of reciprocity*, *exploitative expectations*, *self-exploitation*, *malicious behavior*); *protecting the self* (*distrusting disclosures*, *disapproving decisions*, *prioritizing emotional needs*); and *network negotiations* (*encouragement from one's network*, *protecting one's network*, *uncomfortable involvement*). Additionally, three central themes (and corresponding sub-themes) illustrating how providers created support boundaries

with their friends emerged from the dataset: *direct communication* (*explicit expectations*, *explicit disapproval*); *indirect communication* (*creating distance – physical separation* and *mediated separation*, *natural separation*, *providing excuses*, *topic avoidance*); and *collaborative communication*. These findings provide important insight regarding current conceptualizations of social support and supportive communication.

The Need for Boundary Creation

Demonstrated in the RQ1 themes, providers have several personal and relational conditions that prompt their need for support boundaries. Furthermore, most participants described numerous conditions that ultimately led to their need for boundary creation. Interestingly, various sub-themes appear to be connected to specific support forms. For example, many participants described *feeling unqualified* to provide support to their friend. The context of their friend's challenge often led participants to feel unqualified and question their ability to offer appropriate support and/or advice related to their friend's stressor. In these circumstances, the support-seekers were often pursuing action-facilitating support (i.e., engaged problem-solving) for a particular stressor (Rains et al., 2015). More specifically, participants' friends were often seeking informational support (e.g., providing information or advice related to their problem) (Langford et al., 1997). Participants felt unequipped to give advice to their friend if they had never experienced a similar challenge. Advice literature has established that support recipients are less receptive to advice when the support provider lacks expertise (Feng & MacGeorge, 2006). Furthermore, providing advice can cause negative outcomes (e.g., stress, relational damage), especially when providers do not feel qualified to give assistance or suggestions (MacGeorge et al., 2008). In this dataset, feeling unqualified often derived from excessive informational support-seeking, particularly when the support provider did not have similar

experiences or beneficial insight to provide. Given what is known about advice effectiveness, providers and recipients might benefit from minimizing support seeking and provision when the provider has minimal expertise.

Another sub-theme connected to a specific form of social support is seen with *prioritizing emotional needs*. When participants described the need to prioritize their own emotional health, they often found themselves in situations where they provided substantial nurturant support to their friend, which generally served the emotional needs of their friend (Cutrona & Russell, 1990). Nurturant support requires a significant amount of emotional investment (Chuang & Yang, 2012), and participants detailed how their friends' continual need for validation and reassurance led to exhaustion and the need to prioritize their own well-being (Nunn & Isaacs, 2019). Participants also described notable shifts in their relationships, which ultimately created a need for support boundaries.

Relational Turning Points

Relationships exist as ongoing, dynamic processes and occasionally experience turning points (Kellas et al., 2008). As defined by Kellas and colleagues (2008), "turning points are major relational events that capture a critical moment, event, or incident" (p. 28). Furthermore, turning points can change relationship dynamics and how individuals view their relationships (Kellas et al., 2008). During interviews, some participants detailed the accumulation of support-seeking and communication behavior discrepancies in their friendships as the main cause for their boundary needs. Contrarily, several participants disclosed specific events or 'breaking point' moments that helped them process their need for support boundaries. As such, it appears that numerous participants experienced relational turning points that shifted their understanding of their supportive contexts and prompted boundary creation (Kellas et al.,

2008). For some, their turning points resulted in their *desire for* boundaries to their *need for* boundaries. For others, they thought their relationship was fine and that they could persist beyond their challenges to suddenly realizing things were not fine and they could not continue.

Participants who experienced relational transgressions with their friend described notable turning points. These violations prompted quick, negative shifts in attitude and behavior toward their friend and the supportive situation, which aligns with literature that illustrates transgressions as detrimental (and even potentially fatal) to relationships (Jones et al., 2011; Neihuis et al., 2019). When their friends were being malicious or not investing equally in their shared relationship, participants were more likely to need boundaries and less likely to desire preserving the friendship. Moreover, these participants expressed creating strict boundaries after recognizing the transgressions they were experiencing.

While some participants experienced these turning points on their own, some cases depicted how network members precipitated the participant's relational turning point with their support-seeking friend. For example, one participant named Jessie detailed how one of their closest friends expressed feeling unsafe near their support-seeking friend. This was a significant 'breaking point' for Jessie, as they define boundaries as an attempt to maintain various forms of safety. Their friend's disclosure about their discomfort ultimately shifted Jessie's relationship with their support-seeking friend. Other participants described how network members, including other friends, romantic partners, and family members, drew attention to negative aspects of their support-seeking friend's behavior. These explicit conversations led participants to processing their relationships and accepting the need for boundary creation. As such, network engagement in relational turning point conceptualization might be an enriched area for future scholarship. Three central boundary creation strategies emerged from the dataset, with participants detailing

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their various attempts to minimize or eliminate their friend's undesired disclosure and support-seeking.

Communicating Support Boundaries

Participants utilized *direct communication*, *indirect communication*, and *collaborative communication* to enact support boundaries with their friends. These findings align with support marshaling, which happens in direct and indirect ways (Crowley & Faw, 2014). While support marshaling primarily focuses on support recipients, it appears these elements of communication transcend into provider experiences as well. Face concerns, or one's attempt to maintain a positive self-image and retain personal autonomy (Brown & Levinson, 1987), likely influenced how participants created boundaries around their offered support. In every interview, participants detailed implicit communication behaviors they utilized in attempt to create boundaries. Although indirect communication saves face (Faw, 2014), for both the support provider and support seeker, these attempts might be less effective than more direct communication. Multiple participants explicated how their indirect strategies often went unnoticed or disregarded by their friend, and this aligns with previous scholarship related to support marshaling (Faw, 2014) and communication competence (Lakey & Canary, 2010). As such, utilizing more direct approaches might be more effective in accomplishing certain goals (e.g., minimizing disclosure), but face concerns and risks are enhanced with more direct communication.

While some participants continued to implement indirect behavior to minimize their friend's support-seeking, others attempted to create more direct expectations when their implicit strategies were not acknowledged. For most participants, their strategies shifted from indirect to direct. This might be related to participants experiencing turning points in their relationship, driving them from wanting to needing boundaries. Interestingly, one participant (Zoe) tried to

create boundaries with more explicit efforts and detailed the backlash she experienced. After her friend's negative reaction to her direct boundary enactment, this participant retracted and began to utilize more indirect strategies to create support boundaries. Unfortunately, the participant described how her indirect strategies often went unnoticed, but she remained hesitant to engage in an explicit conversation, as it went so poorly last time. In considering face, Zoe's indirect strategies to allow her to avoid threatening the positive face of her support-seeking friend, as well as her own negative face. Contrarily, some participants engaged in direct communication with their friend to co-create boundaries.

Four participants utilized a collaborative approach when creating support boundaries with their friend. The collaborative conversations represented direct approaches to boundary creation that also were highly attuned to the relational context and the face needs present in the interaction. Two of the participants (Amelia and Jodie) were in long-distance friendships when they used collaborative conversations, whereas the other two (Pat and Maya) lived in close proximity to their friend. Given the nature of long-distance friendships, it is possible that those relationships had smaller support expectations for each other. Some research on long distance relationships (LDR) has found that physical distance enhances individual autonomy (Sahlstein, 2004) and results in higher levels of relationship satisfaction and commitment (Kelmer et al., 2012). Physical distance minimizes face concerns, especially negative face, that exist in close-proximity relationships (Sahlstein, 2004). Regardless of physical distance or proximity, all four participants explicated positive outcomes deriving from their collaborative boundary creation.

All four participants mentioned that their relationships felt stronger and healthier after engaging in open, honest conversations about their needs within the friendship. Research generally supports that open, effective conflict management often results in stronger

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relationships (Cramer, 2002). Furthermore, all four participants who engaged in boundary co-creation with their friend cited their creation of a new check-in system as part of their collaborative efforts. To ensure the other individual was able and willing to provide support, participants and their friends began gauging how each person was doing (i.e., checking in) prior to support-seeking. By employing check-ins, all interactants were given agency to make support-related decisions, and this simple act helped preserved their negative face by giving them the freedom to decline support requests without judgment from or injury to the other person. By co-creating support boundaries, participants and their friends were able to enhance agency, engage in open and honest communication, and avoid miscommunication, which establishes the need for future research to further understand competent and incompetent collaboration during boundary creation.

Factors Influencing Strategies

Personal and relational factors influenced participants' communicative strategies participants, and some connections between conditions (RQ1) and strategic efforts (RQ2) emerged from the dataset. For example, when participants disapproved of their friend's decisions related to their challenges, participants often used direct communication to create boundaries. Participants would explicitly acknowledge their disapproval and create parameters around the problems they were willing to support their friend through. In some circumstances, participants described how their friend would even acknowledge or validate their disapproval. Most participants utilized separation strategies to protect themselves in the context of their friendship. Rather than putting their positive face (i.e., one's likeability) or negative face (i.e., one's autonomy) at risk, participants separated themselves from their friend and the challenges their friend was facing. For example, if a support provider acknowledged their need for support

boundaries, they could be viewed as inconsiderate or unhelpful by their friend. Contrarily, creating more distance is a more implicit method for boundary creation, that allows both recipients and providers to maintain different aspects of face. Most frequently, participants would enact mediated separation, with delayed responses and shortened phone calls. Separation allowed participants to prioritize their own needs without having a potentially difficult conversation with their friend, illustrating an association between protecting the self and creating distance. However, creating distance may temporarily preserve the relationship, as the support-seeker's face is also protected with indirect communication strategies.

It is important to note that the COVID-19 pandemic likely influenced some participants' experiences with support boundaries that they shared during this research study. The pandemic negatively impacted mental health and significantly heightened stress for many people (Salari et al., 2020), so it is possible that individuals were unable to manage their relational stresses in addition to pandemic-related challenges, forcing boundary creation in specific ways. Social distancing and lockdowns minimized access to in person connection (Venkatesh & Edirappuli, 2020), and these regulations possibly shifted participants' experiences as well, as they likely had minimized access to direct, in-person communication and increased ability to enact indirect strategies. Considering how numerous participants disclosed contexts related to COVID-19, some of the themes for RQ1 and RQ2 could be uniquely tied to this period, and additional themes might arise when participants report about their boundary creation outside when they are not living through a pandemic.

Theoretical Implications

Numerous theoretical implications arise from this study's findings. In particular, the results contribute to our current understanding of the Theory of Resilience and Relational Load

(TRRL), with various conditions and boundary creation strategies aligning with different core concepts of the theory (see Figure 2 below).

Communal Orientation and Discrepancies

In close relationships, TRRL argues that individuals' communal orientation or communal discrepancies influence relational investments (Afifi et al., 2016). Afifi and colleagues (2016) define communal orientation as "the ability to think of one's relationship(s) as a cohesive unit when managing stress and approaching life" (p. 669). In other words, if both individuals view life stressors as a 'we' problem, they share a communal orientation. Contrarily, if one person views their stress as an individual problem and their relational partner views it as a shared problem, they may experience communal discrepancies. Although this project primarily focused on understanding other aspects of TRRL (e.g., communication maintenance behaviors and discrepancies, relational preservation, and self-preservation), it is important to acknowledge that communal orientation ultimately influences the stability of a relationship.

Regardless, this data captures insight for when people transition out of having a communal orientation. Prior to boundary creation, my participants felt a certain degree of closeness with their friends, and then detailed their relational strains and efforts toward self-preservation once boundaries were needed. These shifts illustrate that communal orientations are not permanent, and when they change, they can shift other core elements of relationships (e.g., investments, disclosures, etc.), too. As such, future scholarship should evaluate how communal orientation or communal discrepancies might alter one's need for support boundaries and vice versa, as well as their creation strategies.
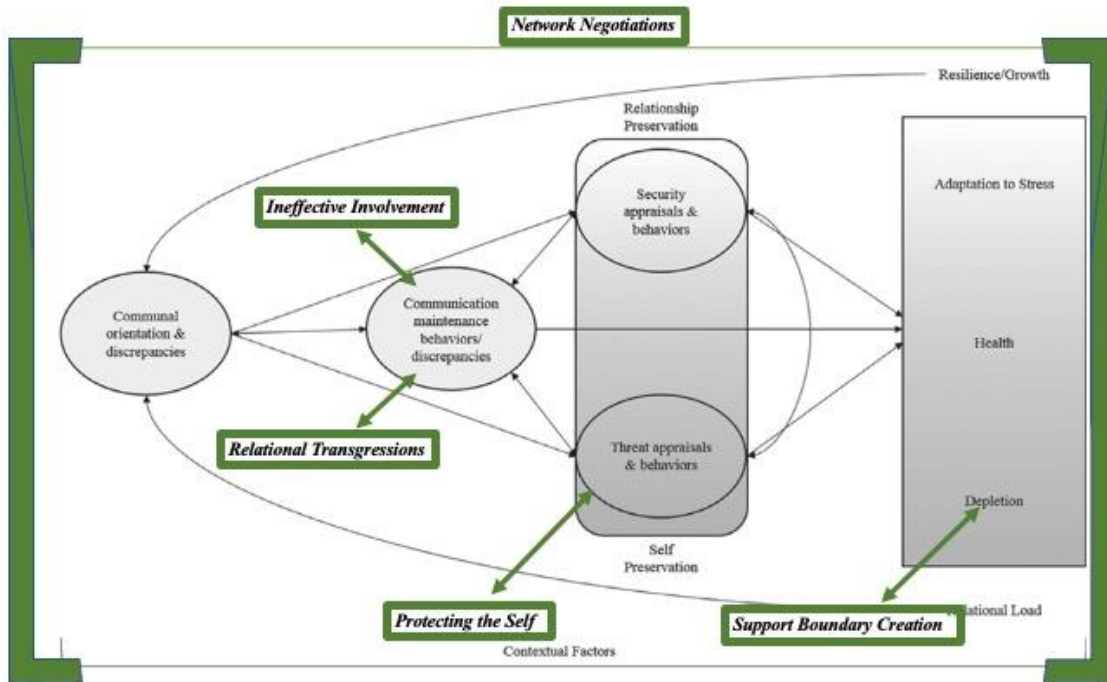
Communication Maintenance Behaviors

Figure 2
Representation of this study's findings in correspondence with the theory of resilience and relational load (Afifi et al., 2016).

When individuals engage in communication maintenance behaviors (i.e., invest in their

relationship; Canary et al., 1993), they build emotional reserves (i.e., accumulated investments)

to draw upon during times of stress or discrepancies (Afifi et al., 2016). Investment type varies,

but TRRL is primarily interested with the standard, everyday investments people make in their

relationships (Afifi et al., 2016). Interestingly, *ineffective investments* were one reason that

participants began to desire and need support boundaries. In these circumstances, participants felt

their supportive investments were unhelpful and pointless. Afifi and colleagues (2016) argue that

"receiving investments from others, however, likely produces stronger effects than only

investing in one's relationship" (p. 668). As such, participants' friends likely experienced

positive outcomes from participants' continual investments, but interview responses illustrate

how continual investments might lead to strong negative outcomes for providers.

Consistent negativity and rumination can cause a support provider to struggle spending time with their friend (Afifi et al., 2013). For example, when participants' friends ruminated about their problems and continually sought support, participants began to need support boundaries. Additionally, interview responses depicted how their relational investments resulted in feelings of futility and being unqualified. Ultimately, although communication maintenance behaviors can have positive outcomes (e.g., emotional reserves and/or security appraisals and behaviors), these findings show how negative outcomes might arise when individuals feel like their investments are ineffective or purposeless. Comparably, communication maintenance discrepancies can lead to negative relational outcomes.

Communication Maintenance Discrepancies

According to TRRL, when one's relational investments are not reciprocated or their relational needs are not met, they begin to experience communication maintenance discrepancies (Afifi et al., 2016). These discrepancies influence how people perceive their stress as well as their security or threat appraisals and behaviors within the relationship (Afifi et al., 2016). Within the context of this study, many participants conveyed their experiences with communication maintenance discrepancies that primarily arose through their experience of *relational transgressions*. Responses showed how participant felt as though their needs were not met in their friendship, which manifested as a sense of frustration and exhaustion from the perceived minimal investment and harmful behaviors of their friends. The most prominent relational transgression was a lack of reciprocity, wherein participants felt irritated and burdened by supporting their friends without receiving a similar quality and/or quantity of support. Similar discrepancies and frustrations have been proven harmful in other literature, including assessment

of support gaps (McLaren & High, 2019). When there is not mutuality of investments, TRRL argues this can move relationships toward relational load (Afifi et al., 2016).

Moreover, numerous participants detailed how exploitative expectations and malicious behavior drove them to support boundary creation. In these circumstances, participants felt taken advantage of or overtly hurt by their friend. Relational transgressions take a toll on relationships and individuals likely must rely on emotional reserves to persevere (Vangelisti, 2009). However, if relational transgressions continue across a significant period, one's emotional reserves could become depleted and they may begin to enact threat appraisals and behaviors, in which they prioritize protecting themselves over the relationship (Afifi et al., 2016). This was seen with participants describing various strategies used to *protect themselves*, in which they began to minimize security appraisals and prioritize self preservation tactics (e.g., reducing their investments, offering less support, etc.).

Several participants described how their relationship with their friend became very close, very quickly and had high support expectations. Given what is known about the importance of emotional reserves to progress beyond moments of significant stress (Afifi et al., 2020; Davis, 2019), it is possible that these fast-forming friendships lacked the necessary investments that would help the relationship temporarily weather challenges when one party's needs went unmet. Various research investigating relational thriving depicts how investments take time to establish and develop (e.g., Driver & Gottman, 2004; Feeney & Lemay, 2012). In that way, participants in quickly escalating relationships might be set up for failure and pushed to implement threat appraisals and behaviors (rather than security appraisals and behaviors) because of the relationship's minimal accrued investments. Ultimately, communication maintenance behaviors and discrepancies affect emotional reserves and one's decision to employ security or threat

appraisals and behaviors. Many participants illustrated how their friend's communication maintenance behaviors ultimately drove them to enact threat appraisals and behaviors more frequently than security appraisals and behaviors.

Threat Appraisals and Behaviors

The results of this study depict how communication maintenance discrepancies and the depletion of emotional reserves led to the desire for self-preservation and, ultimately, contributed to support providers' need for boundary creation. Emotional reserves allow relationships to persevere beyond discrepancies, but they can be at risk of depletion after consistent, prolonged relational discrepancies (Afifi et al., 2016). As such, in situations where a person's relational investments are running low due to prolonged discrepancies, individuals enact threat appraisals and behaviors. They begin to prioritize protecting themselves over the relationship, which can further deplete emotional reserves and tax the relationship (Afifi et al., 2016). If people do not experience enhanced communication maintenance behaviors (i.e., investments) from their friends, they are more likely to prioritize self-preservation and reach relational load (Afifi et al., 2016).

For numerous participants, they described utilizing support boundaries as a means of *protecting the self*. In doing so, they shielded themselves from issues related to their friend's support-seeking and prioritized preserving themselves over their relationships. In two participants' experiences, they distrusted the truth and severity of their friend's disclosures and implemented boundaries to avoid substantial investment in disingenuous situations. As a result of their friend's communication behavior discrepancies (e.g., exaggerating or lying about their challenges), participants began to enact various threat behaviors (e.g., minimizing investment) to prioritize their individual needs instead of their friends. For others, disagreement about their

friend's decisions led various participants to need boundaries. Participants who detailed disapproval of their friend's decisions, especially those related to the challenges they were facing, often illustrated a desire to be separate from their friend and the corresponding problems. As such, these participants were shifting away from a communal orientation, which ultimately influenced their communication behaviors and threat appraisals. Most often, participants described how their friends excessive support-seeking prompted them to prioritize their own emotional needs by creating boundaries. In all these circumstances, communication behavior discrepancies and depleted emotional reserves drove participants enact various threat appraisals and behaviors to protect themselves from potential harm and negative support outcomes.

Relational Load

Relational load occurs when relationships experience continual depletion and amplified stressed, resulting in damage to the relationship (Afifi et al., 2016). It is important to note that as relationships ebb and flow, short-term depletion and relational load may occur, but these challenges can be reversed by replenishing the accrued relational investments through positive relational maintenance efforts (Afifi et al., 2016). However, long-term depletion and relational load has more significant implications (Afifi et al., 2016). Participant interviews illustrated their continual processing related to support boundary creation, and, for many, their perspective of their friend and the supportive situation shifted over time. As such, this seems to be a representation of the experience of relational load in action. Likewise, the results illustrate how most support providers reached a breaking point in their supportive process, which ultimately led to support boundary creation. For many, they detailed wanting to minimize their friend's support-seeking for a while at first, eventually reached a point of *needing* boundaries. This shift often occurred when their relationship had reached and remained in relational load.

When considering how participants' efforts at boundary creation represent different aspects of their relational load, it seemed as though individuals enacted more indirect boundaries when they wanted boundaries earlier into their relational load process, shifting to more direct or strict boundaries at the point of consistent, unsustainable relational load. Some participants recognized their relational load during their support process. For example, interviews illustrated how participants felt used and taken advantage of by their friends, which likely derived from minimal reciprocity, investment, and emotional reserves in their relationship. These communication discrepancies led to depletion and relational load, altering the supportive expectations and investments from the provider.

Growth, Resilience, and Thriving

For some participants, boundary creation came prior to relational load, and they effectively managed to replenish their emotional reserves and reframe supportive expectations in a way that felt comfortable for all interactants (as in the case of *collaborative communication*). As such, the participants and their friends were able to have an open and honest conversation about their needs and expectations, prompting behaviors and appraisals that promote self and relational preservation, ultimately leading to relational resilience. Thriving in other relationships also influenced the need for and creation of support boundaries.

Thus far, TRRL has primarily focused on understanding resilience and relational load within dyads, but it is important to acknowledge that relationships do not exist in a vacuum. Rather, relational dyads exist within the context of broader social networks (Parks, 2017; Sinclair & Wright, 2009). Interestingly, a lot of participants detailed how various *network negotiations* influenced their need for boundary creation. It is possible that network influences might be more impactful based on the status of resilience and growth or relational load in other relationships

(Sprecher, 2010). Many participants were prompted or supported in their need for boundary creation, which led to a heightened need for boundaries. Research evaluating third party responses to conflict has found that network members significantly influence how individuals feel about their circumstances (e.g., Eaton & Sanders, 2011; De Cremer et al., 2008; Klein & Milardo, 2000). In the current study, when support providers were supported or prompted to enact boundaries in a relationship that was experiencing stress and/or depletion, they were more likely to enact boundaries than prior to network encouragement. This could be related to the status of resilience and growth or relational load in other relationships. If a support provider is experiencing relational resilience with an individual who validates and/or encourages support boundaries, they might value the communication maintenance behaviors of that network member more than continued investment into their relationship approaching relational load. As such, when other relationships experience resilience and growth, individuals may be more receptive to insight on when and how to engage in self-preservation in other relationships (Feng & MacGeorge, 2006).

Some participants also expressed how helping their friend created challenges in other relationships. For example, Charlie described how her friend's support-seeking was causing tension within her marriage. To preserve her relationship with her husband, she minimized the amount of investment she was giving her friend and invested more into her marriage. Therefore, to avoid potential relational risks or depletion in another important relationship, participants enacted boundaries and risked relational load in their friendship that already felt strained.

These findings are significant, because they provide insight for how networks are influential in support boundary contexts, particularly where decision-making can lead to resilience or relational load. Thus far, TRRL has been primarily applied to understand dyadic

relationships, but we know there is interconnection between dyads and broader social networks (Parks, 2017). As such, future scholarship should continue to expand current understandings and applications of TRRL to investigate how network dynamics might influence growth or depletion in specific dyads. Additionally, future research should consider how dyadic resilience or relational load might influence thriving or depletion within broader networks. Beyond theoretical implications, this study provides practical insight for how boundary creation in supportive contexts might influence personal and relational health.

Practical Implications

The findings from this research provide significant considerations for real-life relationships and interpersonal engagement. Social support is an essential aspect of relationships (Reis & Franks,1994), but providers might reach their limit because of various personal and relational conditions (Parks, 2016; Ray et al., 2019). To manage supportive challenges that arise from discrepancies between provider and recipient needs, individuals can enact support boundaries to protect themselves and their relationship. However, if support boundaries are not created skillfully, it might result in heightened relational risks. Based on the research findings outlined in this manuscript, there may be certain communication strategies that are more effective at accomplishing certain goals than others during boundary creation. While indirect communication is less effective at lessening support provision, it is highly effective at not offending the support seeker. Similarly, direct communication might be highly effective at ending support-seeking but might also drive the friendship toward relational load. Many participants detailed their indirect communication (e.g., spending less time with their friend, not responding to texts as frequently, making excuses, etc.) in attempt to minimize or eliminate their friend's undesirable support-seeking. Although these strategies allowed both the provider and

their friend to maintain face, participants described how these efforts often went unnoticed or ignored. Collaborative communication might prove to be most effective, as it lessens miscommunication and face threats, while still creating parameters around support provision.

Moreover, participant responses illustrated how their unacknowledged indirect approaches led to more direct communication strategies. Unfortunately, their direct tactics were often implemented after participants experienced a breaking point and/or their relationship had reached depletion. Support boundaries can promote personal and relational health by managing the discrepancies of provider and recipient needs but might have fewer positive outcomes if people do not enact them until depletion is already reached. Additionally, results suggest that collaborative communication is the healthiest and most effective approach to enact support boundaries and move toward relational resilience. As such, people might benefit from trying to co-create boundaries with their friend (e.g., openly talking about what each person is able and unable to provide, implementing regular check-ins, etc.) rather than indirectly or directly creating them individually. Collaborative communication minimizes the risk of miscommunication and enhances relational closeness. However, it is important to note that co-creation is not always possible depending on the relationship and/or supportive context, as different relationships and circumstances might inhibit one's comfort or ability to collaborate. Regardless, to avoid suffering from supportive challenges and potentially damaging their relationship, support providers should enact boundaries once they notice warning signs of relational load to avoid reaching depletion in their relationship.

Numerous participants described the challenges they faced while supporting a friend who experienced intimate partner violence. Furthermore, they detailed their hesitancy and inner struggle with boundary creation in these contexts, because they did not want to abandon their

friend and, at the same time, they did not know how best to help them. Abusive relationships are particularly challenging to escape, because victims are often isolated and lack a supportive network (El-Bassel et al., 2001). Although social support is beneficial for various life stressors, it provides an especially meaningful bridge to resources for those experiencing crises like abuse (Porritt, 1979). As such, these results clearly suggest additional work should be done to support the supporter in these circumstances. By effectively managing discrepancies that exist between provider and seeker needs, individuals can continue to provide vital support to vulnerable individuals. Contrarily, significant damage could result for the provider, recipient, and/or their relationship if steps are not taken to support all individuals involved with the supportive situation, particularly in such complex and difficult contexts.

Overall, this study provides initial insight for how support providers can effectively manage the challenges they experience while helping their friends in various contexts. Still, additional investigation is needed to ensure that friends are equip with effective strategies to support one another while preserving their personal and relational health.

Limitations and Future Research

Although this study offers important insight about support provider experiences, it is not without limitations. Participant demographics (i.e., predominately mid-20s, White/Caucasian, cisgendered women) can be explained by the convenience and snowball sampling methods. More diverse participants would likely provide additional insight about support boundaries. This limitation could be remedied in the future by utilizing a criterion sampling method to investigate the experiences of specific groups of people (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). For example, perspectives and experiences surrounding support boundary creation may look significantly different for older populations, as they might have more experience establishing boundaries in various contexts and

relationships (Petronio, 2002). As such, examining support boundaries with older participants could provide enriched insight about the intricacies of boundary creation. Furthermore, this research study focused primarily on support provider experiences within friendship dyads. Given the intimate nature of support boundary creation, further investigation is needed to understand recipient experiences. Researchers should interview both primary individuals to gain a more holistic understanding of support boundaries and how relational partners manage these challenges.

The current study is comprised of almost entirely cisgender women participants, which likely impacted the results. Substantial scholarship has considered how both gender presentation and biological sex might influence support provision and seeking (e.g., Burleson et al., 2007; Holdstrom et al., 2021; Kaur et al., 2021; MacGeorge et al., 2004; Shebib et al., 2019). Past research illustrates how men in the United States have been reluctant to provide sensitive support messages out of fear for being viewed as feminine (Burleson et al., 2007). Shebib and colleagues (2019) found that highly feminine providers were more likely to use emotion-centered messaging in supportive communication than masculine individuals. Some data depicts gender differences in support seeking (Kaur et al., 2021), whereas others argue there are more similarities than differences in supportive contexts (MacGeorge et al., 2004).

Given the somewhat inconsistent findings related to social support and gender, it is vital to consider how gender might influence the need for and creation of boundaries in supportive contexts. Future scholarship should aim to investigate support boundaries with more inclusivity regarding the gender of participants. Additionally, it is essential to acknowledge the intersection of various identities (e.g., gender and race) and how these intersections impact supportive communication. These potential variances in support needs are represented with Davis (2018)

detailing how Black women supported their friends through racial microaggressions. More research should be done to consider how various aspects of identity might influence support boundary creation. The current study depicts multifaceted and enriched results related to support boundaries. However, it is limited by the lack of intersectionality and diversity within the participant sample, which would likely add new dimensions and complexities to our understanding of support boundary creation.

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, minimal restrictions existed for the supportive context. Future scholarship should consider investigating boundaries in specific contexts, as the cause of support-seeking might alter providers' sense of agency to create boundaries as well as how the boundaries are interpreted by recipients (Wortman & Lehman, 1985). For example, research could focus on specific traumatic life events, such as sexual assault, to further understand the complexities of boundary creation in various supportive contexts (Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Popiel & Susskind, 1985; Wasco, 2003). Another limitation is due to the lack of participant responses demonstrating positive conditions that led to support boundaries. As seen in the results, every participant expressed various negative and damaging conditions that eventually led to their need for boundary creation. Contrarily, none of the participants discussed their circumstances in a positive light. This might be explained by the word choice used in the study description (Tracy, 2020). Additionally, the lack of positive responses might be correlated with Western cultures and master narratives surrounding boundary creation, but minimal research currently investigates cultures' influence on boundaries. Future research should investigate how positive conditions (e.g., investing more in a separate relationship) might lead to support boundaries, as well as how cultural narratives might alter our understanding of boundary creation.

Given the voluntary nature of friendships (Silas & Bartoo, 2007), as well as the heightened support-seeking in these relationships (Pennebaker & O'Heeron, 1984), friendships proved to be a valuable relational context for an initial investigation of support boundaries. However, future scholarship should examine support boundaries in various relationship types, as differing expectations and norms might influence one's need and enactment of boundaries in supportive contexts (Lombardi et al., 2016; Rodriguez et al., 2003). Additionally, some participants were in long-distance friendships while other participants lived in close proximity to their friend. More research should be done to determine how physical distance in relationships potentially influences experiences of needing and creating support boundaries. Finally, when reflecting on their experiences with support boundaries, most participants alluded to the various personal benefits and relational costs of their boundary creation. Currently, there is minimal knowledge about the implications of boundaries in supportive contexts. We do not know who benefits or faces challenges from boundaries, nor do we know how these implications fit into broader social networks or societal circumstances. Further investigation should be done to examine various outcomes of support boundary creation and explore if different boundary creation strategies result in distinctive outcomes.

Conclusion

This study offers new insight for challenges that might arise in supportive contexts, specifically for support providers. Two primary goals motivated this research: to understand what conditions influence providers' need for support boundaries and what communicative strategies they utilize to create these boundaries. Various conditions, both personal and relational, drove providers to need support boundaries, including *ineffective involvement*, *relational transgressions*, *protecting the self*, and *network negotiations*. It is important to note

that most participants experienced more than one of the aforementioned conditions, and their need for boundaries often accrued over time. As such, by skillfully enacting support boundaries, individuals might be able protect themselves and their relationships from potential depletion, possibly saving the relationship. Participants expressed using *direct communication*, *indirect communication*, and *collaborative communication* to create support boundaries with their friend. However, the findings depict that when participants needed and created boundaries, their relationship was often experiencing depletion and their boundaries were an attempt at self-preservation.

Given the minimal research exploring the dark sides of support, this study contributes to our understanding of potential challenges that individuals face while supporting their friends. This study also provides enriched insight to support provider experiences, which has limited scholarly investigation. This study's results contribute to Theory of Resilience and Relational Load (TRRL; Afifi et al., 2016) literature by depicting how supportive situations and boundary creation can enhance relational growth and thriving or result in relational challenges and depletion. In a practical sense, these findings depict the importance of noticing warning signs and creating support boundaries prior to relational depletion. With support boundaries, we can enhance our connections and engage in healthy communication tactics that promote individual and relational well-being. Ultimately, this exploratory study emphasizes the importance of support boundaries and positions boundary creation in supportive contexts as an enriched area for further investigation.

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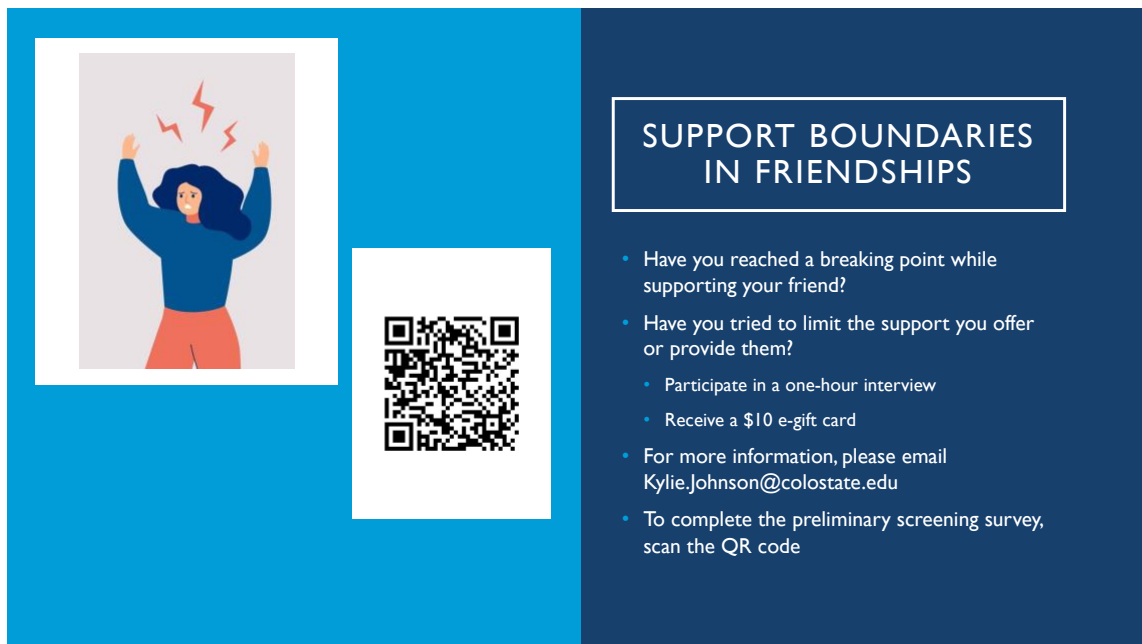
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Recruitment Flyer

In-Class Announcement: PowerPoint Slide

In-Class Announcement: Sample Script

A new research study is exploring support boundaries in friendship contexts and interviews will be conducted over the next month. The researchers are seeking participants who have reached a breaking point while providing support for a friend and have attempted to create boundaries around the support they are willing to offer. Interviews can take place in person or online and will last approximately one hour. For participating, individuals will be able to choose one $10 e-gift card to Amazon, Target, or Starbucks at the conclusion of their interview. If you are interested, please take the preliminary screening survey by scanning the QR code. If you would like more information, please reach out via email.

APPENDIX B: PRELIMINARY SCREENING SURVEY

Welcome

"I Just Need Some Space": Exploring the Need for and Creation of Support Boundaries in Friendships

This research study seeks to understand the challenges and dark sides of social support, with specific focus on support provider experiences. In particular, this project investigates what conditions lead support providers to reaching a point of needing support boundaries, as well as how they create and enact them.

Support providers are individuals who offer various types of support surrounding another's specific stressor(s). Support boundaries are defined as a support provider's effort to decrease or eliminate another's disclosure and support-seeking.

If you are interested in participating in this research study, please fill out the following preliminary screening survey. After survey submission, your eligibility for participation will be determined. If you qualify, the research team will contact you to schedule an interview. Interviews can take place virtually or in-person and will last approximately 60 minutes. All participants will receive a $10 e-gift card as compensation for their time.

Screening Questions

Have you created and enacted at least one support boundary in the last six months?

O Yes
O No

Were the support boundaries you created and enacted within a friendship context?
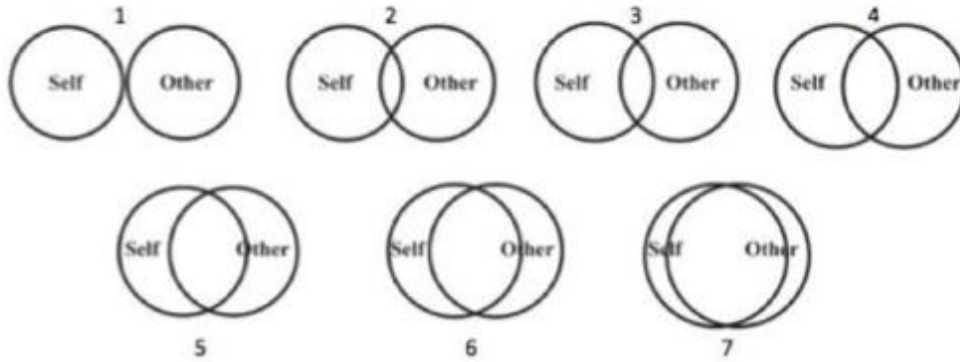
O Yes
O No

When providing support for your friend, did you attempt to make your friend feel cared for, validate their emotions, and/or try to boost their self-esteem?

O Yes

○ No

Please indicate which picture best describes the relationship between you and your friend prior to any support boundary creation.

○ 1
○ 2
○ 3
○ 4
○ 5
○ 6
○ 7

Thinking about your interactions with your friend, please indicate how much you agree/disagree with the following statements.

While I was supporting my friend:

	1 - Strongly disagree	2	3	4	5 - Strongly agree

	1 - Strongly disagree	2	3	4	5 - Strongly agree
I considered my friend's problem to be very serious.	○	○	○	○	○

Thank you for your interest for participating in this study. Unfortunately, at this time, you do not qualify for the interview portion.

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study. You qualify for completing the interview portion. If you are still interested in completing an interview, please provide your email address in the space below and a member of the research team will contact you shortly.

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APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORM AND DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Default Question Block

Thank you for your interest in this research study. Before we can include your experiences in the research, we must obtain your consent or permission to include you. Please read the following information carefully.

Project Title: "I Just Need Some Space": Exploring the Need for and Creation of Support Boundaries in Friendships

Principle Investigator: Meara H. Faw, PhD, Associate Professor, Colorado State University
Co-Investigator: Kylie Johnson, Colorado State University

Researcher's Statement

You are invited to participate in a research study that is being conducted by a research team based at Colorado State University. The purpose of this consent form is to give you the information you will need to help you decide whether to be in the study or not. Please read the form carefully. You may ask questions about the purpose of the research, what I would ask you to do, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else about the research or this form that is not clear by contacting the co-investigator via email (Kylie.Johnson@colostate.edu). When I have answered all your questions, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called "informed consent." You may print a copy of this text for your records.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this research is to understand what conditions lead support providers to need support boundary creation and how they create and enact them.

Study Procedures

If you agree to participate, I will ask you to complete one in-person or virtual interview. Approximately 30 participants will participate in the study, and each individual's participation will last approximately 60 minutes. In order to participate in this study, all participants must identify as a support provider who has created and enacted at least one support boundary within a friendship in the last six months. They must also be 18 years of age or older and capable of completing the interview in English.

This interview will ask you to respond to several open-ended questions about the relational history with your friend, various factors of your support context and boundary creation, and reflection about how support boundaries have impacted you.

Study Confidentiality

The research team will protect all participants' confidentiality by anonymizing all data. This means that all information about you in the demographic survey and interview will be made anonymous. Anonymous means that we will not store or share any information about you that could identify you from your participation in this study. This means that we will not keep record of your name, address, phone number, date of birth, etc. If you agree to take part in the study, there will be no way to link your responses back to you. Therefore, all data will be stored in an anonymized format.

The research team and the Institutional Review Board at Colorado State University are the only parties that will be allowed to see the data, except as may be required by law. If a report of this study is published, or the results are presented at a professional conference, only group results will be stated. All study data will be kept indefinitely in an anonymized format on a password-protected OneDrive that only members of the research team have access to.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, and you may withdraw at any time during the study procedures without any penalty to you. In addition, you may choose not to answer any questions with which you are not comfortable.

Risks, Stress, or Discomfort

During your participation in this study, you might feel uncomfortable answering certain questions about your relationships and behavior. You are allowed to withdraw from the study at any point in time. You may also decide to skip questions that you find invasive or uncomfortable.

If you find your participation in this study causes you distress, we recommend you reach out using the following resources:

For CSU students, please contact CSU Counseling Services at 970-491-7121 or 970-491-7111 (for after hour emergencies).

All participants can contact the SAMHSA's National Helpline (1-800-662-4357) or the Crisis Text Line (Text HOME to 741741).

Benefits of the Study

Though you may not personally benefit from this study, its information is important for researchers and society. This study will benefit society by expanding our understanding of support processes. A chief goal of this study is to understand what conditions lead providers to need support boundary creation and how they create and enact them. The data from this study might lead to information that would help people have more satisfying relationships with others as well as enhanced mental health. Additionally, this research may lead to further investigation of support boundaries which may help providers create and enact boundaries more effectively and with minimized relational and personal risks.

Compensation

Participants who complete this interview will receive one $10 e-gift card from their choice of Amazon, Target, or Starbucks as a thank-you for their participation.

Contact Information

If you have any questions about the study or study procedures, you may contact the co-investigator (Kylie Johnson) at Kylie.Johnson@colostate.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the Institutional Review Board at Colorado State University (which is a committee that reviews research studies in order to protect research participants):

Institutional Review Board
Colorado State University
Phone: 970-491-1553
Email: ricro_irb@mail.colostate.edu

You may print a copy of this consent form for your records. Or, you can contact the researcher and make arrangements to receive a copy of this form from me.

If you have read this form in its entirety, please continue to the survey signifying your consent. By continuing, you are agreeing to the following statements:

This study has been explained to me. I volunteer to take part in this research. I have had a chance to ask questions via email. If I have questions later about the research, I can ask one of the researchers listed above. If I have questions about my rights as a research subject, I can contact an administrator at Colorado State University.

O I consent to participate in this study

○ I do not consent to participate in this study

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this research! We'd like to ask you a few questions about yourself.

Please write your name in the space provided below. We need your name in order to match this survey with your interview responses. Once your survey and interview are matched, all data will be anonymized.

[   ]

How old are you, in years?

[   ]

What is your gender?

○ Cis Male

○ Cis Female

○ Trans Male

○ Trans Female

○ Nonbinary

○ Prefer not to say

○ If your preference is to describe your identity using your own words, please describe it here:
   [   ]

What is your racial/ethnic background?

○ White/Caucasian

○ Latinx/Hispanic

○ Black/African American

○ Asian/Asian American

○ Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian

○ Indigenous

○ Prefer not to say

○ If your preference is to describe your identity using your own words, please describe it here:
   [   ]

Now, we would like to ask you a couple questions about the friend you created and enacted at least one support boundary with.

How old is your friend, in years?

[   ]

What is your friend's gender?

○ Cis Male

○ Cis Female

○ Trans Male

○ Trans Female

○ Nonbinary

○ Prefer not to say

○ If their preference is to describe their identity using their own words, please describe it here:

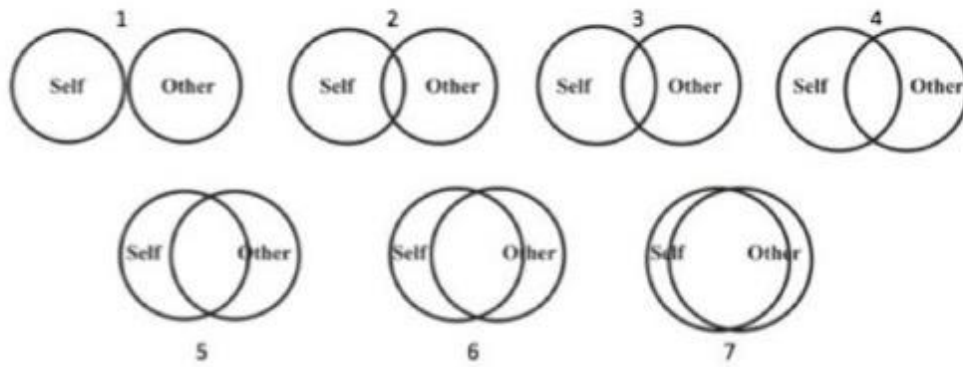To the best of your knowledge, what is your friend's racial/ethnic background?

○ White/Caucasian

○ Latinx/Hispanic

○ Black/African American

○ Asian/Asian American

○ Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian

○ Indigenous

○ Prefer not to say

○ If their preference is to describe their identity using their own words, please describe it here:

○ Don't know/Unsure

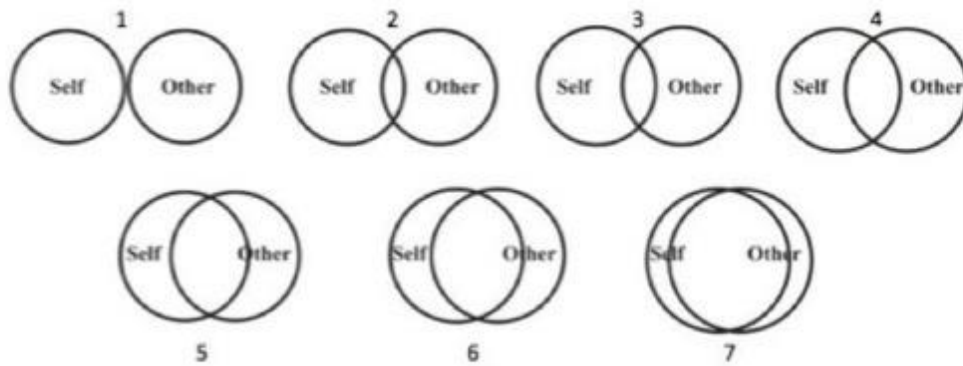Lastly, we would like to ask you a few questions about your relationship with your friend.

At the time of support boundary creation, what was the length of your friendship?

Please indicate which picture best describes the relationship between you and your friend prior to any support boundary creation.

126

O 1
O 2
O 3
O 4
O 5
O 6
O 7

Please indicate which picture best describes the relationship between you and your friend now.

127

O 1

O 2

O 3

O 4

O 5

O 6

O 7

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APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Relationship History

1. Can you please tell me about the relationship that you have with your friend?

   a. How long have you been friends?

   b. What is the nature of your friendship?

   c. Can you please describe the expectations and norms within your friendship?

2. What was/were the challenge(s) you were supporting your friend with?

   a. How long were you supporting them with this/these challenge(s)?

   b. Can you please describe your perception of the severity of your friend's problem?

3. Can you describe what support looked like within your friendship, prior to your boundary creation?

   a. How did you provide support to your friend?

      i. What was the primary medium you gave this communication through?

   b. What was the frequency of your support provision?

      i. Were they receptive to your given support?

   c. Did you seek support from your friend?

      i. How did they support you?

      ii. How did you perceive that support?

Support Boundaries

1. What do boundaries mean to you?

2. What led you to desiring or needing a support boundary with your friend?

   a. At what point did you feel this way?

b. How long after you wanted or needed boundaries did you create/enact them?

    i. Are there specific moments, instances, or circumstances that influence your decision to create boundaries?

3. What were you worried about when you first decided to set a boundary?

    a. What were you worried about after you set the first boundary?

4. What were you looking forward to when you first decided to set a boundary?

    a. What were you looking forward to after the first boundary was set?

5. What ways do you attempt to set boundaries within the supportive situation?

    a. Has this been a continual process?

        i. Have your strategies for boundary creations shifted over time?

    b. How do you explicitly communicate your boundaries with your friend?

    c. Are there any implicit actions or behaviors that you utilized to enact your boundaries?

        i. In what ways did you implicitly communicate you needed a support boundary?

    d. Were your boundaries created for a particular circumstance or around supporting your friend generally?

6. How did your friend respond to your boundary creation?

    a. Have they respected the boundaries you created?

    b. Did the supportive norms and expectations change within your relationship?

        i. How did they change?

        ii. Who did they change for?

        iii. When did they change?

      c.   Did your friend's support for you shift after your support boundary creation?

Reflection

1. Looking back, is there anything you wish you would have done differently?

2. What positives came from creating your support boundaries?

      a.   Were there any positive factors leading you to need boundaries?

3. What were the personal impacts of your boundary creation?

      a.   What emotions did you feel after the fact?

      b.   Have you set boundaries in other relationships?

4. Are you still friends with the individual you set boundaries with?

5. What does support look like within your friendship, after your boundary creation?

6. Is there anything else you would like to share with me today?