

Social media impacts the relation between interpersonal conflict and job performance

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Abstract

Previous research has predominantly focused on the effects of cognitive and emotional reactions on the relation between interpersonal conflict and job performance. The effects of behavioral reactions, however, have been largely ignored. To fill this gap, this study aims to investigate how behavioral reactions indexed by Wechat use affects the above relation. Specifically, demand-control-support theory and demand-control-person theory form the basis for a stressor–strain model and a joint investigation of 1) Wechat use as mediating the link between interpersonal conflict with job performance and 2) relatedness need satisfaction and emotional social support as moderating the mediation. A moderated mediation model is tested with matched data collected thrice from 300 subordinates and their supervisors. Results highlight the importance of behavioral mechanisms and state-like individual differences when examining the relationships between interpersonal conflict and job performance.

Keywords: emotional social support, interpersonal conflict, job performance, relatedness need satisfaction, Wechat use

Interpersonal conflict includes ‘a broad range of interpersonal mistreatment behaviors...such as rude behavior, or other interpersonally deviant acts’ (Sliter et al. 2011, 427). It is a prevalent and consequential stressor, leading employees to feel disconnected, interact negatively, and show poor job performance (Mulki et al. 2015).

The stressor–strain model postulates that stressors cause cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reactions that lead to strain (Frese and Zapf 1988; Lazarus and Folkman 1984). Literature suggests that cognitive and emotional reactions mediate the relationship between interpersonal conflict and job performance (Wofford and Daly 1997). For instance, interpersonal conflict induces negative affectivity, anxiety, depression, and frustration, resulting in negative performance (Ilies et al. 2011; Spector and O’Connell 1994). Meta-analyses have also shown that interpersonal conflict undermines job performance by triggering negative emotions and cognitively appraising hindrance that impede personal growth and task accomplishment (LePine, Podsakoff and LePine 2005).

However, we noted that the predominant focus on cognitive and emotional reactions as mediators failed to consider critical behavioral reactions inherent in stressor–strain theory (Frese and Zapf 1988). Behavioral reactions, which have been largely ignored, may play critical roles in mediating the relation between interpersonal conflict and job performance.

Using social media has become a pervasive behavior for coping with daily social and work events. Indeed, ‘We are in the midst of yet another social revolution stimulated by the interaction between human desire for connectivity and technology. Social media are digital platforms that facilitate information sharing, user-created content, and collaboration across

people. ... [with] the potential to revolutionize organizational behavior' (McFarland and Ployhart 2015, 1653). Wechat, for example, is a popular social media application in Chinese society. Consequently, in this study, we first focus on Wechatting as a proximal behavioral reaction to distal interpersonal conflict at work.

Second, our study further explores the boundary conditions in the path from interpersonal conflict to job performance via social media use (Grant and Langan-Fox 2007; Johnson and Hall 1988; Rubino et al. 2012). We go beyond considering trait-like individual differences such as agreeableness (Ilies et al. 2011), neuroticism (Grant and Langan-Fox 2007), and locus of control (Meier et al. 2008) to argue that state-like individual differences are more dynamic, malleable over time, and proximal to interpersonal conflict (Chen et al. 2000). We focus on relatedness need satisfaction (RNS) and emotional social support (ESS), as they are state-like individual differences involving interpersonal relationships and should be more related to interpersonal conflict.

In short, in order to test the behavioral reactions mechanism and its boundary conditions of the relation between interpersonal conflict and job performance, we propose a moderated mediation model to jointly investigate Wechat use as a mediator and relatedness need satisfaction and emotional social support as moderators. To substantiate our moderated mediation model, we draw on the stressor–strain framework (Frese and Zapf 1988) and two expanded demand–control theories: demand-control-support theory

(DCS, Johnson and Hall 1988) and demand-control-person theory (DCP, Rubino et al. 2012). We test our model using data collected thrice from matched pairs of supervisors and subordinates.

Theoretical background and hypotheses

Wechat use

Wechat (Weixin), China's most popular social media application, combines the functions of WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook, and allows users to send instant messages and follow friends' updates. In the first quarter of 2017, Wechat had 938 million active users, of which more than 40% were employees (Statista 2017). About 50% of users use Wechat for at least 90 minutes a day; more than 30% use it for more than 4 hours per day (China Internet Watch 2016). Moreover, 61.4% follow friends' latest updates by accessing Wechat Moments every time they launch the Wechat app. Therefore, 'Wechatting' is at near-epidemic proportions in China and several recent works have emerged, investigating how it impacts on human behaviors (Wang, Zhang and Zeng 2019; Wang et al. 2018). In this paper, we attempt to investigate Wechat use as a unique mediator in the relationship between interpersonal conflict and job performance.

The mediating role of Wechat use

Few studies have directly demonstrated that Wechat use mediates the relationship between interpersonal conflict and job performance, but social psychology research has shown how Wechat use may impact this relationship. According to deprivation-satiation theory (Peng,

Nisbett and Wong 1997), people are driven to acquire what they lack. Interpersonal conflict at work causes employees to feel socially disconnected, isolated, deficient, and excluded. As relatedness is a basic psychological need, disconnection or social isolation motivates desires to seek ameliorative experience (Ryan and Deci 2000). Social media usage such as Facebooking or Wechatting serve as coping strategies driven by internal needs for relatedness and social connections. Indeed, previous studies revealed that disconnected feelings prompted social media use (Sheldon, Abad and Hinsch 2011). Therefore, interpersonal conflict should motivate desires to pursue connections through Wechat use.

Does Wechatting enhance or damage job performance? Past research suggests that the use of social media negatively affects job performance (for an exception, see Valkenburg, Peter and Schouten 2006). A study of 169 people in 73 households revealed that individuals who use the internet for communication have increased depression and loneliness (Kraut et al. 1998). More recently, Facebook use has been shown to increase envy, depression, rumination, and inappropriate social comparison (Steers 2016). A survey of 563 adults showed daily social media use to be significantly associated with anxiety (Vannucci, Flannery and Ohannessian 2017). An intervention conducted in Denmark with 1 095 participants showed that participants who broke from Facebook reported higher life satisfaction and more positive emotions, in comparison with continuing Facebook users (Tromholt 2016). More importantly, social media has been shown to exacerbate deviancy, poor physical and mental health, and poor performance (Li, Sallam and Ye 2019; Westgate and Holliday 2016). Facebook reduces hours spent studying and thus lowers academic performance and grade point averages (GPAs) (Kirschner and Karpinski 2010). Facebook

users are more likely to be distracted and off-task (Brooks 2015). Drawing from extant findings using various research methods and showing that social media use negatively affects performance among individuals of various ages and in various countries, we propose that Wechat use is negatively associated with job performance and hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1: Wechat use mediates the relationship between interpersonal conflict at work and job performance.

Relatedness need satisfaction and emotional social support as moderators

Although we propose that Wechat use mediates the relationship between interpersonal conflict at work and job performance, we also expect employees to differ in relatedness need satisfaction and emotional social support, which will moderate the effect of interpersonal conflict on job performance through Wechat use according to two expanded theories of the demand-control model (Karasek 1979): demand-control-support (Johnson and Hall 1988) and demand-control-person (Rubino et al. 2012).

The demand-control model (Karasek 1979) explains that employees who are unable to overcome work demands feel stressful and perform poorly. Meanwhile, job control, once called decision latitude, buffers the detrimental effects of job demands (Harter, Schmidt and Hayes 2002). In addition, personal resources and social support buffer the relationship between job demands and job performance. Thus the demand-control model is expanded to the demand-control-person (DCP) model, which includes personal resources (Rubino et al.

2012) and to the demand-control-support (DCS) model, which includes social support (Johnson and Hall 1988).

Clearly, DCP and DCS indicate that job control (decision latitude or autonomy), personal resources, and social support counter strain, but job control may be least effective for alleviating stress from interpersonal demands (Ilies et al. 2011). ‘Having control over specific tasks (i.e. task autonomy) may be helpful in reducing the stressfulness of task-related stressors such as workload, but it will not affect the stressfulness of unrelated stressors such as interpersonal conflict’ (Fox, Spector and Miles 2001, 293). Consequently, rather than focusing on job control, we examine relatedness need satisfaction providing personal resources and emotional social support providing social support as moderators.

Relatedness need satisfaction (RNS)

Consistent with DCP assumptions, individual differences have been examined as moderating the relationship between interpersonal conflict and performance, including neuroticism (Grant and Langan-Fox 2007), agreeableness (Ilies et al. 2011), negative affectivity (Spector and O’Connell 1994), locus of control (Meier et al. 2008), and trait anger (Sliter et al. 2011), but the focus has been on trait-like individual differences, largely ignoring state-like individual differences. However, coping processes may be contingent, dynamic, and evolving (Rahim 2000). State-like individual differences may differ from trait-like individual differences in being dynamic, malleable over time, and more proximal to performance (Chen et al. 2000). To offset the research gap, we focus on RNS, a state-like highly interpersonal-orientation indicating how individuals feel regarding their closeness with and acceptance by

important others or important groups of others (Ryan and Deci 2000). According to the DCP, relatedness need satisfaction should interface with interpersonal conflict at work as a situational stressor influencing job performance.

Relatedness need satisfaction has been shown to buffer the effects of negative life events. The (de)sensitization hypothesis (Moller, Deci and Elliot 2010) suggests that people with a history of need satisfaction may benefit more from need satisfying events (e.g. harmonious relationship), and be armed better against detrimental effects of need-frustrating events (e.g. interpersonal conflict). In contrast, people with a history of need frustration (e.g. low relatedness need satisfaction) may be more vulnerable to new frustrating events (e.g. interpersonal conflict). For example, suicidal behaviors were found to be more weakly related to negative life events among individuals with high RNS (Rowe et al. 2013), confirming that relatedness need satisfaction alleviates the detrimental effects.

Aligned with this hypothesis, high relatedness satisfaction may cause Wechat usage to play a weaker role in mediating the relationship between interpersonal conflict and job performance. Specifically, the moderation effect would emerge at first stage when individuals desire to search for social connection through Wechat. As we know, people who are threatened with social exclusion are more likely to try to reestablish social bonds, such as by using social media, making new friends, showing willingness to work with others, and being more generous toward partners (Sheldon and Gunz 2009). According to the (de) sensitization hypothesis, high relatedness satisfaction is like an immune system, may arm people better against detrimental effects, which then evoke lower motivation to use social media for

seeking connections. Alternatively, interpersonal conflict may be strongly linked to social media use only when relatedness needs are unsatisfied. That is, individuals with low relatedness need satisfaction are more likely to search for social bonds via using social media. Therefore, when individuals experience interpersonal conflict at work, those with high (low) relatedness need satisfaction would show less (more) desire to use Wechat to search for social bonds. Based on the theoretical and empirical research, we propose:

Hypothesis 2a: Relatedness need satisfaction will moderate the relationship between interpersonal conflict and job performance: individuals with high relatedness need satisfaction will show a weaker negative relationship.

Hypothesis 2b: Relatedness need satisfaction will moderate the strength of mediated relationship between interpersonal conflict at work and job performance via Wechat use: individuals with high RNS will show a weaker mediated relationship (first stage).

Emotional social support (ESS)

As an alternative expansion, the demand-control-support model suggests that social support affects impacts of job demands (Cooper, Dewe and O'Driscoll 2001) by providing instrumental, informational, and emotional social support benefits (Cohen 2004). Emotional social support benefits include empathy, caring, reassurance, and trust, which are highly relevant to our focus on interpersonal conflict at work.

To cope with stress and gain emotional support, individuals often communicate and interact with others (Lazarus and Folkman 1984), originally suggesting that support from

others buffers job strain (Bakker and Demerouti 2014; Bakker, Demerouti and Sanz-Vergel 2014). Emotional social support might be expected to mitigate the impact of interpersonal conflict, but we counterintuitively argue that high emotional social support exacerbates the impact, based on problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategy research (Folkman 1982). Emotion-focused coping tends to emerge under uncontrollable stressful events and focuses on emotional responses such as venting feelings, seeking empathy, irrationally reinterpreting events, and searching for distractions through other activities (Folkman and Lazarus 1980). Emotion-focused coping is thought to be less effective because excessive attentiveness to emotions leads to rumination and increased negative affect and inhibits problem resolution (Baker and Berenbaum 2007). As noted, interpersonal conflict at work is a job demand, commonly perceived as more uncontrollable than task-related job demands (Fox, Spector and Miles 2001), and naturally more likely to evoke emotion-focused coping. Moreover, emotional social support may facilitate this coping proclivity by exacerbating stressful feelings. For example, an employee who receives comfort and empathy from colleagues after being yelled at may actually feel a greater sense of injustice, exaggerating the negative emotions and impairing job performance. Thus emotional support from supervisors or coworkers may actually strengthen stressor–strain relationships (Kickul and Posig 2001). Indeed, emotional support failed to buffer stressor–strain relationships within a wide range of strains including anxiety, depression, irritability, depersonalization, job dissatisfaction, emotional exhaustion, and somatic complaints (Jayaratne and Chess 1984). Thus, we propose:

Hypothesis 3a: Emotional social support will moderate the relationship between interpersonal conflicts and job performance: individuals with high (low) emotional social support will show a stronger (weaker) relationship.

We also expect that emotional social support moderates the mediated relationship between interpersonal conflict, Wechat use, and job performance. To reiterate, Wechat use, a behavioral response to interpersonal stress, mediates the negative relationship between interpersonal conflict and job performance. Consistent with the reverse buffering hypothesis, we expect that employees who are high in emotional social support and who face interpersonal conflicts may have easy access to emotional feedback from social media. Those high (low) in emotional social support will have strengthened (weakened) emotion-focused coping, accentuating (alleviating) the negative path from interpersonal conflict to job performance via Wechat use. To our knowledge, evidence is lacking regarding stages for the moderation effect, so we avoid predicting first or second stage moderation. Thus conceived, we propose:

Hypothesis 3b: Emotional social support will moderate the strength of mediated relationship between interpersonal conflict at work and job performance via Wechat use: individuals with high (low) emotional social support will show stronger (weaker) mediated relationships.

Methods

Participants and procedure

We recruited participants and collected data from 22 companies located in Beijing. The HR officers (who are also our MBA students) of each company learned about data collection procedures in Managerial Communication, a course taught by the first author. Data were collected thrice. At Time 1, occurring at 5:30 pm as the workday ended, subordinates completed questionnaires measuring interpersonal conflict at work and RNS. At Time 2, at 9:00 am of the beginning of the second workday, subordinates reported how frequently they had used Wechat from 6:00 pm of the first day to 9:00 am of the second day. At Time 3, at the 5:30 pm end of the second working day, supervisors evaluated subordinates' job performance and subordinates completed a questionnaire measuring ESS. The HR officers ensured that each supervisor graded the performance of only one subordinate, collected all data, and sent the data to the authors.

We recruited 300 participants (145 men, 155 women). Subordinates averaged 27.22 years old ($SD = 3.84$), had worked for the company for an average of 20.12 months, and had supervisor–subordinate relationships averaging 12.85 months. Most subordinates had completed a higher education program (90.4% had a bachelor's degree or higher). Industries represented were banking (29.3%), security (48.7%), insurance (14.3%), environmental protection (3.7%), and minerals (4%). Most of our MBA students work at finance-related companies, which explains the 92.3% representation in banking, security, and insurance.

Measures

Interpersonal conflict at work (ICW)

To assess interpersonal conflict among coworkers, we used the four-item ICW scale, developed by Spector (1987). The Chinese version was validated by Liu, Spector and Shi (2007). The items were rephrased to fit our data collection. Participants reported interpersonal conflict occurring during the previous three days.² For example, ‘During the past three days, I argued with others at work.’ ‘During the past three days, coworkers yelled at me.’ Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree). Higher scores indicated higher interpersonal conflict. Internal consistency $\alpha = 0.91$.

Relatedness need satisfaction (RNS)

To measure relatedness need satisfaction, we used three items developed by Sheldon et al. (2001) and used in a social media study by Sheldon, Abad and Hinsch (2011). Following their practices, we asked participants to rate their feelings ‘over the past few days,’ using a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much). For example, ‘I felt a sense of contact with people who care for me, and whom I care for.’ Internal consistency $\alpha = 0.76$.

Wechat use (WU)

We measured Wechat use during nonworking time, after and before work, according to methods used by Sheldon, Abad and Hinsch (2011): ‘In the last 15 hours (since 6:00 pm yesterday to 9:00 am today), how much combined time did you spend using Wechat?’ (1 = less than 0.5 hour, 2 = 0.5–2 hours, 3 = 2–4 hours, 4 = 4–6 hours, 5 = more than 6 hours) and ‘In the last 15 hours (since 6:00 pm yesterday to 9:00 am today), what percentage of your

free time did you spend actively engaging in Wechat?' (0%–100%). The two measures were highly correlated ($\alpha = 0.80$), so they were combined.

Emotional social support (ESS)

Emotional social support was assessed with the brief COPE inventory developed by Carver (1997), which indicates how extensively participants use emotional support to cope with stress. The two items were rephrased to fit the measurement of a state-like individual difference: 'for the past few days, I got emotional social support from others' and 'during the past few days, I received comfort and understanding from someone.' Response choices: 1 (not at all) to 4 (very much). Internal consistency $\alpha = 0.67$.

Job performance (JP)

To fit the one-day performance assessment, supervisors rated subordinates' job performance at the end of a workday with four items adapted from Goodman and Svyantek (1999). For example, 'Today, [subordinate] achieved job objectives,' and 'Today, [subordinate] fulfilled all job requirements' Responses were from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree). Internal consistency $\alpha = 0.88$.

Control variables

Gender similarity and the length of supervisor–subordinate working relationships are likely to influence supervisors' evaluations of subordinates' job performance (Shi et al.

2013). Therefore, we included gender similarity and the length of working relationship as control variables.

Results

Descriptive statistics

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, bivariate correlations, and Cronbach alphas for the variables. As shown, the main variables were significantly inter-correlated. Specifically, workers who experienced more interpersonal conflict used more Wechat after work and showed poorer job performance the next day.

Prior to analysis, we centered the variables (interpersonal conflict at work, Wechat use, relatedness need satisfaction, emotional social support). We also entered gender similarity and length of working relationship as control variables in all analyses.

Table 1 Mean, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Interpersonal conflict at work (Day $T-3$ –Day T)	2.32	1.17	1						
2. Wechat use (Day T –Day $T+1$)	26.24	16.57	.54**	1					
3. Job performance (Day $T+1$)	3.82	.64	-.12*	-.20**	1				
4. RNS	3.91	.83	.17**	.37**	.20*	1			
5. ESS	2.67	.92	.33**	.52**	-.01	.16**	1		
6. Gender similarity	1.43	.50	-.06	-.06	-.02	.01	.01	1	
7. Length of working relationship (months)	12.85	7.81	.21**	.02	.32**	.25**	.11	.001	1

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

ESS = emotional social support; RNS = relatedness need satisfaction.

Mediation effect of Wechat use

We proposed that Wechat use mediates the relationship between interpersonal conflict at work and job performance. Table 2 presents the regression in detail. Results in the second and third columns of Table 2 show that, after controlling for gender similarity and length of working relationship, interpersonal conflict at work was positively related ($B = 0.56, p < 0.001$) to Wechat use, and negatively related ($B = 0.20, p < 0.001$) to job performance. Results from the fourth column of Table 2 show that Wechat use was negatively related ($B = 0.17, p < 0.05$) to job performance. Furthermore, after Wechat use was taken into account, interpersonal conflicts at work ($B = 0.11, ns$) had nonsignificant effects on job performance, suggesting a full mediation.

Table 2 Regression results for testing mediation effect of Wechat usage

	Wechat usage	Job performance	
		Step 1	Step2
Constant	.20	-.53**	-.50**
Gender similarity	-.003	-.04	-.04
Length of working relationship	-.01	-.05***	.04***
Interpersonal conflict at work(ICW)	.56***	-.20***	-.11
Wechat use (WU)			-.17*
<i>F</i>	42.54***	15.39***	13.37***
Adjusted R^2	.31***	.14***	.16***
<i>F</i> change			6.44*
ΔR^2			.02*

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Bootstrap analysis was conducted to further test the mediation effect. Results suggested a significant indirect effect from interpersonal conflict at work and job performance, by showing the 95% CI was [0.18, 0.03], without zero.

Moderation effects of relatedness need satisfaction

We hypothesized that high relatedness need satisfaction would weaken the direct effect of interpersonal conflict on job performance and indirect effect via Wechat use. We further proposed the moderation on the indirect effect would emerge at the first stage (Edwards and Lambert 2007). That is, the interaction between interpersonal conflict and relatedness need satisfaction would influence the mediation effect of Wechat use for the interpersonal conflict–job performance relationship. To assess the moderated mediation model, beyond the mediation analysis of Wechat use, we examined two extra conditions: a) significant interaction between interpersonal conflict and relatedness need satisfaction in predicting Wechat use; b) different conditional indirect effect of interpersonal conflict on job performance through Wechat use, across low and high relatedness need satisfaction levels. We tested the moderated mediation with the Process program developed by Andrew F. Hayes (www.afhayes.com, Model 8).

Our mediation analyses showed that interpersonal conflict at work was negatively related to job performance, and Wechat use mediated the relationship. Table 3 demonstrates the regression analyses in detail. Results show a nonsignificant moderation effect of relatedness need satisfaction on the relationship between ICW and job performance ($B = 0.03$, $p = 0.40$). Hypothesis 2a was not supported. However, the interaction terms for interpersonal conflict at work and relatedness need satisfaction ($B = 0.18$, $p < 0.001$) significantly predicted Wechat use. That is, those with high relatedness need satisfaction had a weaker association between

interpersonal conflict and Wechat use, satisfying condition (a).

Table 3 Testing the moderation effect of relatedness need satisfaction

	WU			Job performance		
	Coefficient	SE	95% CI	Coefficient	SE	95% CI
Constant	.37*	.16	[.06, .68]	3.60***	.12	[3.36, 3.84]
Gender similarity	-.03	.09	[-.21, .14]	-.04	.06	[-.18, .09]
Length of working relationship	-.02***	.006	[-.03, -.01]	.02***	.004	[.01, .03]
ICW	.51***	.05	[.42, .60]	-.05	.04	[-.13, .03]
RNS	.20***	.06	[.09, .31]			
ICW × RNS	-.18***	.05	[-.28, -.08]	-.03	.04	[-.11, .05]
WU				-.18***	.05	[-.27, -.09]
<i>F</i>		40.68***			12.09***	
<i>R</i> ²		.42***			.20***	

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

ICW = interpersonal conflict at work; RNS = relatedness need satisfaction; WU= Wechat use.

To further validate moderated mediation relationships, we examined condition (b), which requires levels of relatedness need satisfaction to show different indirect effect from interpersonal conflict at work to job performance via Wechat use. Following Edwards and Lambert's (2007) recommendations, we operationalized high and low levels of RNS as one standard deviation above and below the mean score. Table 4 displays the results of conditional indirect effects: the conditional indirect effect of Wechat use was stronger (coefficient = 0.12) and significant [95% CI (0.21, 0.11)] in low relatedness satisfaction, and weaker (coefficient = 0.05) and significant [95% CI (0.13, 0.02)] in high relatedness satisfaction. Considering significant conditional effects of Wechat use across levels of relatedness satisfaction, we further examined whether the difference of the first stage moderation is significant. Again following Edwards and Lambert (2007), we used the regression coefficients of interpersonal conflict and its interaction terms with relatedness

need satisfaction on Wechat use to calculate first stage moderation effects. The number of bootstrap samples for bias corrected bootstrap confidence intervals is 1 000. Results show significant difference with a 95% CI (0.43, 0.11), containing no zero, supporting hypothesis 2b of the first stage moderated mediation of RNS. Following Cohen et al. (2003), we plotted the moderation effect at conditional values of relatedness need satisfaction (1 standard deviation). As Figure 1 shows, compared with low relatedness need satisfaction ($b = 0.04$, $p = 0.80$), high relatedness need satisfaction ($b = 0.34$, $p = 0.19$) greatly attenuated Wechat use under interpersonal conflict.

Table 4 Moderated mediation for interpersonal conflict at work on job performance via Wechat use across levels of RNS

Moderator	Level	Indirect effect of interpersonal conflict at work on job performance (mediator: Wechat use)				Difference of first stage moderation effects 95% CI
		Conditional indirect effect	SE	95% CI		
Relatedness need satisfaction	Low	-.12	.03	[-.19, -.07]		-.26 [-.43, -.11]
	High	-.06	.02	[-.12, -.03]		

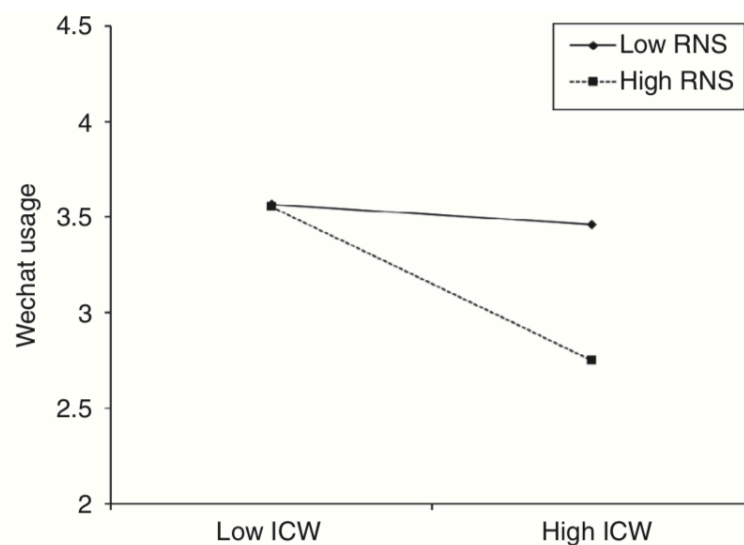


Figure 1 Moderating effect of RNS on the relationship between interpersonal conflict at work and Wechat use. ICW = interpersonal conflict at work; RNS = relatedness need satisfaction

Moderation effects of emotional social support

We hypothesized that high emotional social support would strengthen the direct effect of interpersonal conflict on job performance and indirect effect via Wechat use. In a similar vein, we used Hayes's Process program (Model 59) to test this moderated mediation model.

Table 5 presents the results in detail. First, for the moderation on direct effect of interpersonal conflict and job performance, the interaction term for interpersonal conflict and emotional social support was significant in predicting job performance ($B = 0.11$, $p < 0.05$), indicating that emotional social support strengthened rather than weakened the relationship between interpersonal conflict and job performance. Hypothesis 3a was supported.

Table 5 Testing the moderation effect of emotional social support

	WU			Job Performance		
	Coefficient	SE	95% CI	Coefficient	SE	95% CI
Constant	.21	.16	[−.09, .52]	3.59***	.12	[3.35, 3.83]
Gender similarity	−.02	.09	[−.20, .16]	−.03	.07	[−.16, .11]
Length of working relationship	−.01*	.01	[−.03, −.002]	.02***	.005	[.02, .03]
ICW	.42***	.05	[.32, .52]	−.03	.05	[−.12, .06]
WU				−.14**	.05	[−.24, −.04]
ESS				.07 ($p = .09$)	.04	[−.01, .15]
ICW×ESS	.03	.04	[−.05, .11]	−.11 [†]	.04	[−.19, −.02]
WU×ESS				.01	.04	[−.07, .08]
<i>F</i>		44.70***			9.75***	
<i>R</i> ²		.44***			.19***	

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

ESS = emotional social support; ICW = interpersonal conflict at work; WU = Wechat use.

Following Cohen et al. (2003), we plotted the moderation effect at conditional values of emotional social support (1 standard deviation). As Figure 2 shows, ICW had a stronger negative association with job performance under high ($b = 0.43$, $p < 0.05$) rather than low

emotional social support ($b = 0.22, p < 0.05$).

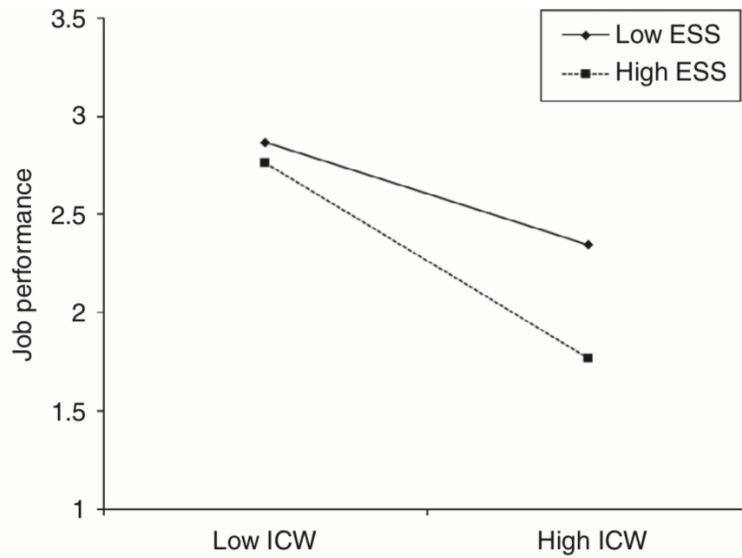


Figure 2 Moderating effect of use of emotional support on the relationship between interpersonal conflict at work and job performance. ESS = emotional social support; ICW = interpersonal conflict at work

Second, for the moderated mediation model, beyond the mediation effects of Wechat use on the relationship between interpersonal conflict and job performance, we needed to verify two extra conditions: a) significant interaction between interpersonal conflict at work and emotional social support in predicting Wechat use, and Wechat use and emotional social support in predicting job performance; b) different conditional indirect effect of interpersonal conflict on job performance through Wechat use across levels of emotional social support. The interaction term for interpersonal conflict and emotional social support was insignificant in predicting Wechat use ($B = 0.03, p = 0.46, ns$). The interaction term for Wechat use and emotional social support was also not significant in predicting job performance ($B = 0.01, p = 0.81, ns$). Thus, condition (a) was not satisfied. For condition (b), we examined whether the indirect effect from interpersonal conflict at work to job performance via Wechat use is different across levels of emotional social support. Table 6 shows the conditional indirect

effect analysis in detail. Results indicate that the conditional indirect effects of Wechat use were almost the same as between low emotional social support (coefficient = 0.0581, [95% CI (0.30, 0.01)]) and high emotional social support (coefficient = 0.0583, 95% CI [0.21, 0.03])). The differences of the moderation effects failed to be significant for the first stage (coefficient = 0.11, [0.002, 0.24]) and the second stage (coefficient = 0.01, [0.20, 0.22]). Therefore, emotional social support did not moderate the indirect effect from interpersonal conflict at work to job performance via Wechat use. Hypothesis 3b was not supported.

Table 6 Moderated mediation for interpersonal conflict at work on job performance via Wechat use across levels of emotional social support

Moderator	Level	Indirect effect of interpersonal conflict on job performance (mediator: Wechat Use)			
		Conditional indirect effect	SE	95% CI	Difference of first/second stage moderation effects 95% CI
Emotional social support	Low	-.0581	.04	[-.15, .001]	.11 [-.002, .24]/.01[-.20, .22]
	High	-.0583	.02	[-.11, -.02]	

Discussion

In this study, we examine an integrated moderated mediation model by collecting data thrice from subordinates and their supervisors over two consecutive days. Our findings make two contributions to knowledge about the link between interpersonal conflict and job performance. First, we propose and confirm that Wechat use is an important mediator, that is, interpersonal conflict at work increases Wechat use, which then deteriorates job performance.

Second, our moderated mediation analyses address the previously unexplored role of state-like individual differences in the stressor-strain model (Chen et al. 2000). Based on

theories of demand-control-person and demand-control-support, we find that relatedness need satisfaction weakens the relationship between interpersonal conflict and Wechat use and thus attenuates the overall behavioral process underlying interpersonal conflict and job performance. We find emotional social support to exaggerate the negative relationship between interpersonal conflict and job performance.

Theoretical implications

Our moderated mediation model lays a broad framework for future investigation to advance understandings of stressor-strain relationships. To expand the stressor-strain model, researchers have distinguished between challenge and hindrance stressors (Zhang et al. 2014), or highlighted person-context interactions through the demand-control-person model (Rubino et al. 2012), but we contribute by discovering a behavioral mechanism and clarifying boundary conditions. We demonstrate that interpersonal conflict induces Wechat use which then damages job performance, suggesting that behavioral mechanisms exist. Specifically, our results indicate that high levels of interpersonal conflict will cause employees to spend more time using Wechat, like sending messages or following friends' latest updates, perhaps aiming to obtain more social support or to fulfill relatedness needs. However, Wechat use may fail to generate feelings of social acceptance or connections. Instead, it may generate envy, loneliness, depression, or anxiety (e.g. Steers 2016; Tromholt 2016; Vannucci, Flannery and Ohannessian 2017). Results of mediation analysis echo such probability that the behavioral reaction to interpersonal conflict through Wechat use undermines job performance. Furthermore, the moderated mediation analysis verifies that only employees

who have unsatisfied relatedness needs are more likely to turn to Wechat in reaction to interpersonal conflict. In other words, states of relatedness need satisfaction determine how Wechat use is related to interpersonal conflict and job performance.

Future research in this area could explore effects of other behavioral reactions toward interpersonal conflict, such as compromising, yelling, insulting, threatening, withdrawing, sulking, and denying. Given that cognition and emotion are highly related to behaviors, future work may also integrate three reactions for a more comprehensive picture of stressor–strain relationships.

Another contribution is about the understanding on social media usage. Sheldon, Abad and Hinsch (2011) claimed that both interpersonal connection and disconnection motivate individuals to use social media to fulfill needs for interpersonal, harmonious relatedness. However, almost no studies investigate the question of ‘will social media usage driven by different psychological motivations have different effects on performance?’ Our preliminary investigation suggests that social media usage will have negative effects if driven by interpersonal conflict and disconnection, but we know little about effects when social media usage is motivated by needs for interpersonal harmony and connections. Future work should conduct more systematic comparisons to examine social media usage effects motivated by desires to connect or desires to escape disconnection. We believe that failure to make this distinction explains why researchers have observed negative sides of social media usage (e.g. Brooks 2015; Kirschner and Karpinski 2010; Steers 2016; Tromholt 2016; Vannucci, Flannery and Ohannessian 2017; Westgate and Holliday 2016).

A third contribution may focus on the effects of emotional social support. Our results indicate that emotional social support has reverse buffering effects. Under higher emotional social support, interpersonal conflict had a stronger negative association with job performance ($B = 0.22$). However, contrary evidence indicates that emotional social support may alleviate the stressor–strain link by promoting health (Orford et al. 2010) and counteracting stress (Sonnentag and Zijlstra 2006).

The mixed findings may be understood from two perspectives. First, emotional social support effects can be differentiated according to whether emotional social support is received or perceived. Perceived ESS has been shown to be a stronger buffer against stress (for a review, Kawachi and Berkman 2001) by determining whether individuals perceive that they are threatened by stress or that they can master it. For example, interpersonal conflict is less threatening if victims perceive that friends will provide needed resources and support (Wethington and Kessler 1986). We may have missed the buffering effect because we measured actual received rather than perceived emotional social support. Second, emotional social support effects can be differentiated according to whether individuals are providers or receivers. Past research suggests that individuals benefit more by providing rather than receiving emotional social support. For example, mortality was found to be significantly reduced for individuals who provided emotional social support to their spouse but not for those who received spousal support (Brown et al. 2003). Those empirical findings indicate that compared with psychological perceived or active provided emotional social support, actual received emotional social support does not necessarily buffer stressful events and may actually cause interpersonal conflict to have a stronger negative association with job

performance. Future work may clarify its effects in organizational contexts by involving three different types of emotional social support.

Practical implications

Our findings have two important practical implications. First, regarding conflict management, the significant moderation effects of state-like individual differences suggest that if employees use media to fulfill their relatedness needs, interpersonal conflict may have reduced negative effects on job performance. But if they use media to gain emotional support, the negative effects may be exaggerated. On one hand, the use of media to maximize social bonds and belongingness may counter the undesirable impacts of interpersonal conflict. For example, employees could increase their feelings of relatedness through special interest groups, multiple collaborative experiences, and multiple interactions with colleagues or friends. On the other hand, refusing to intentionally seek emotional social support may be better for handling interpersonal conflict. Employees eager to seek comfort and empathy are likely to irrationally reinterpret events, become more sensitive about their feelings, and fail to recognize the real problems causing conflicts. To eliminate stressors and avoid exacerbating emotional reactions, organizations should cultivate problem-focused cultures by providing training in problem-solving, time management, communication, and obtaining instrumental social support.

A second practical implication is that managers may take advantage of the ‘near-epidemic’ use of social media, recognizing its important role in mediating the relationship between interpersonal conflict and job performance. Managers may be unable to intervene in

personal social media usage, but they could focus on organizational social media use.

Interpersonal conflicts commonly occur because organizational members have different vocabularies, situations, and understandings of work (Muller 2007). Managers could build a social media system using technologies such as blogs, wikis, and social networking sites to make communications more visible and persistent and to help employees make connections (Treem and Leonardi 2012).

Limitations

There are several limitations of our current study that bear mentioning. First, our mediation model implies causal relationships between interpersonal conflict, Wechat use, and job performance. Although we collected the data thrice, we cannot guarantee causal direction. To ascertain causality and better establish the direction of relationships we have demonstrated, future work could use experimental designs, such as manipulating interpersonal conflict and then assessing the frequency of social media usage, or prohibiting participants from using social media for a certain period and then examining job performance (e.g. Sheldon, Abad and Hinsch 2011). Second, we focused on task performance rather than contextual performance to measure job performance. Future studies could include contextual performance for multiple perspectives regarding effects of social media usage on the interpersonal conflict–job performance relationship. Third, we assessed time spent on Wechat but not gratification obtained from Wechat use. Uses and gratifications theory (Katz, Blumer and Gurevitch 1974) explains that what people do with media critically affects their feelings and behaviors. Therefore, future studies could collect data regarding how social media is

used, such as whether it is used to share problems, discuss entertainment, establish social connections, or search for social information. Analyzing time spent and types of social media usage will provide more fruitful observations. Fourth, we used a three-day period to capture the effects of interpersonal conflict on Wechat usage. Although previous studies suggest that people's reactions to external events are surprisingly short-lived (e.g. Birditt and Fingerma 2003), a three-day period may not be accurate enough to grab the effects of interpersonal conflicts in work. To address this issue, future investigations should explore how long interpersonal problems in work may arouse people's reactions. Fifth, the current study is actually a longitudinal design, of which conflict in work and social media usage were tested prior to job performance. Thus, we measured job performance in a relatively short period given it must be assessed after the actions of social media usage. Although assessing overall job performance for once in a short period is acceptable (Breevaart et al. 2016), future studies with a comprehensive measurement on job performance may provide higher validity. Last but not least, we failed to consider interpersonal surveillance and its impacts on social media usage (Fuchs and Trottier 2015). Users' attitudes and behaviors are commonly guided by a care of the virtual self, compelling them to manage their reputation online. That is, the awareness of being watched may push them to distort the representation of themselves, by the content of their exposure or the ways of their interaction. The current study was unable to differentiate the real self-expression from presence of self-scrutiny and impression management. Future studies, based on such discrimination may bring more insights into the effects of social media usage on the relation between interpersonal conflict and job performance.

Because Western social media like Facebook and Twitter are blocked in China, recent studies on the effects of social media are separate and independent, for example, the effects of Facebook and Wechat can only be observed in Western and Eastern society, respectively. Thus, a critical issue on this topic can be raised as ‘would Wechat play the same role of any other Western social media?’ We believe the answer may be a little bit complicated. On one hand, regarding the basic function of interpersonal communication (e.g. sending text, picture, voice, or video), Wechat and Facebook share many similarities. People can use both of them to make friends, seek feedback, and obtain social support. Hence, some Chinese scholars investigating psychological functioning of Wechat, adopted the scales on Facebook by simply replacing ‘Facebook’ with ‘Wechat’, and the results were as similar as those in Western society (Wang et al. 2018). On the other hand, Wechat displays some unique functions, which may exert special impacts on interpersonal relationship. For examples, unlike Facebook, the friends of a Wechat user will only be able to see the likes and comments from other users if they are in a mutual friends group. Such function may help Wechat users strengthen their interpersonal relations and make them closer than Facebook users. More importantly, given the interactions can only happen among mutual friends, it can easily catalyze the online ‘weak ties’ into the offline ‘strong ties’. In other words, Wechat users may more easily develop a tight friendship than do Facebook users, which may result in different degrees of perceived social support. Therefore, it is worth to compare the effects of different social media applications across cultures and societies.

Conclusion

The development of mobile internet technologies has caused social media to become a significant feature of our era. We responded to the new reality by developing and testing a model that simultaneously investigates Wechat use as a mediating mechanism and relatedness need satisfaction and emotional social support as moderating factors in the link between interpersonal conflict and job performance.

Our study empirically validates Wechat use as a proximal behavioral mechanism occurring between distal interpersonal conflict and job performance. We also find that relatedness need satisfaction attenuates the link between interpersonal conflict and Wechat use, thus weakening the effects of interpersonal conflict on job performance. Although emotional social support failed to moderate the overall mediational path, it directly strengthened the negative impact of interpersonal conflict on job performance.

Note

¹ We used a three-day period to avoid the possibility that one day might be too short to capture interpersonal conflict and one week might be too long to associate Wechat use with interpersonal conflict.

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Conflict of interest

All authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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