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# **Linking Social Media Use to Leader-Follower Relationships: The Roles of Perceived Social Support and Secure Attachment**

*Research-in-Progress*

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## **Abstract**

*Social media present a critical role in changing and transforming workplace relationships. Drawing upon theories of Conservation of Resources and Sense-Making, this study purposes to develop a theoretical framework to describe the impact of leaders' social media use on leader-member guanxi. We specifically propose the mediating roles of perceived social support and secure attachment, and the moderating effect of task interdependence in this relationship. This study not only contributes to research on social media in interpreting how social media improve leader-member guanxi, but also assists practitioners in interpreting and developing strategies related to social media within organizations.*

**Keywords:** Social media use, leader-member guanxi, informational/emotional support, secure attachment, task interdependence

## **Introduction**

Prior literature has extensively examined the potential of social media in significantly changing the nature of work, employee interaction, and work relationships (Gibson 2018; Leonardi et al. 2017; Pillemer et al. 2018). The role of social media in improving and transforming workplace relationships becomes a critical topic and attracts recent academic attention (e.g., Gibson 2018; Pillemer et al. 2018). Leader-follower relationship, as one of the most fundamental relationships within workplace, is viewed as not only a contextual factor for work activities but also an outcome of social influence processes (Dulebohn et al. 2012). Despite the significant impact of social media on leader-follower relationships, few empirical studies examine how social media influence leader-follower relationships. To address the gap in the literature, this study purposes to develop a theoretical model to delineate how the usage of social media among leaders influences leader-follower relationships. We integrate theories of Conservation of Resources (COR) (Hobfoll 1989) and Sense-Making (Weick 1979) to examine the roles of leaders' social media use in transforming leader-follower relationship by enhancing perceived social support and secure attachment of followers.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Social Media Use***

Social media refer to the Internet-based applications that enable users to share, co-create, discuss and edit user-generated content (Kaplan et al. 2010). Extant research primarily focuses on social media technologies with higher interactivity, such as Facebook, WeChat, QQ's Qzone, Weibo and so forth. Social media use is defined as individuals' aggregate use, enabling users to create and consume user-generated content, as well as connecting, communicating, and interacting with each other through social media applications (Karahanna et al. 2015). Social media use has been theorized as either a unidimensional construct (often focusing on use frequency) or a multidimensional construct with various categories (usually based on different objectives or motivations of users) in different studies. We draw upon Gonzalez et al. (2013)'s conceptualization of social media use and theorize social media use as a concept containing both work- and social-related usage.

### ***Social Media and Workplace Relationships***

With very few exceptions (e.g., Gibson 2018; Pillemer et al. 2018), the role of social media in changing work relationships remains underexamined (Steinfeld et al. 2009). Despite the extant literature has identified the role of social media in shaping workplace relationships as one of the four affordances of enterprise social media (Vaast et al. 2013), no empirical investigation has been done to elaborate the mechanism how social media use influences workplace relationships, especially leader-follower relationships.

Social media are often viewed as organizational communication tools and used to trigger internal communication of organizations. Employees can share contents, activities, and interests, and communicate with each other via social media. The interactivity in communication enabled by social media is altering how employees form and maintain relationships within organization, and blurring the lines between colleague-ship and friendship. Leader-follower relationship, as a critical form of workplace relationships, is inevitably impacted by social media, considering the penetration of social media in online communication among employees. Social media might also be a way to strengthen

existing offline relationships within organization (Ellison et al. 2011). Thus, through identifying the mediating mechanism, the present study attempts to fill the gap by examining the effects of social media use on leader-follower relationships.

### Conceptual Model and Hypotheses

leader-member guanxi (LMG), referring to the dyadic relationship developed through formal or informal interactions between immediate supervisors and subordinates both inside and outside work settings, has been widely used to assess the dyadic relationship quality between leaders and subordinates (Chen et al. 2009). To understand the impacts of social media on LMG, we examine the roles of social media under the umbrella framework linking leader behavior and follower response and develop a conceptual model in Figure 1. Leaders, who are more resourceful and powerful compared to subordinates, are presumably considered to cause subordinates' responses and dominantly influence the dyadic leader-member relationship. We view leaders' usage of social media as a managerial communication behavior and argue that such behavior could influence followers' perceptions. According to the resource investment tenet of COR theory, we propose social media use by leaders (leaders' behavior) will promote followers' perceived social support (followers' perceptual response), considered as two critical resources, which will in turn motivate followers to attach security to leaders (followers' psychological response), and, ultimately, improve LMG (relational level outcome).

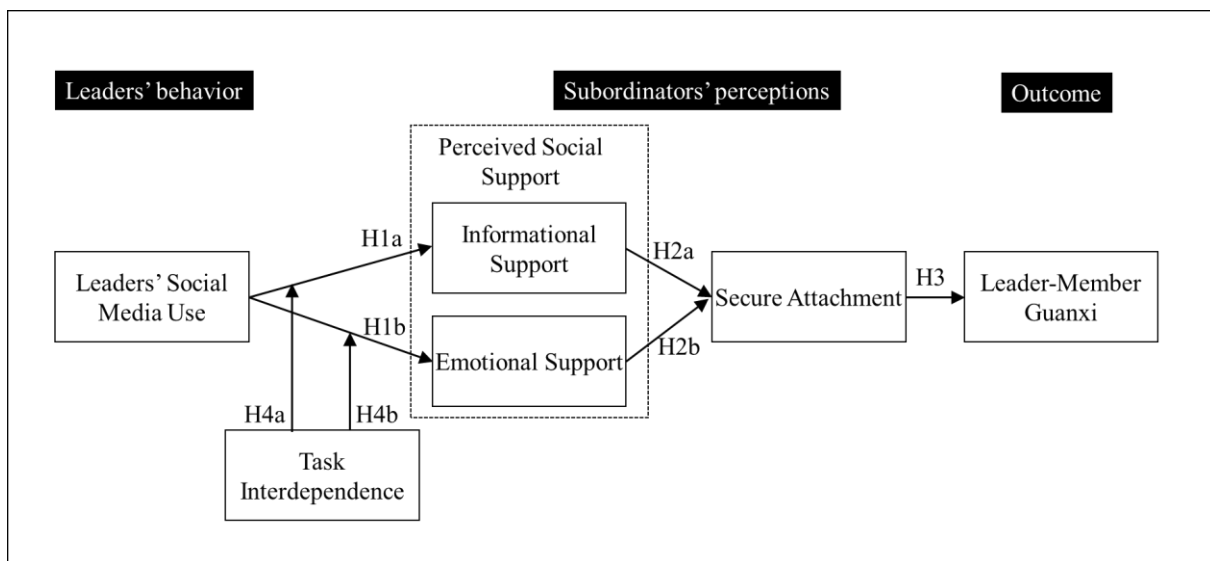


Figure 1. Conceptual Model

#### *Social Media Use by Leaders and Perceived Social Support of Followers*

Social-media-enabled communication becomes overwhelming and significantly complements face-to-face communication in today's increasingly fragmented and flexible workplaces. As consequently, the usage of social media by leaders can be viewed as a critical managerial communication behavior with implications of influencing or shaping followers' perceptions and cognitions.

Social support refers to the social resources that individuals actually receive or perceive to be available in the context of both formal and informal interpersonal ties. Social support consists of two dimensions, i.e., informational support and emotional support (Madjar 2008). Informational support refers to providing messages, in the forms of advice, recommendations, guidance, knowledge, and other useful

information that could be helpful for solving problems, making decisions and generating new ideas (Liang et al. 2011). Empirical evidence has supported the impact of social media use on informational support (Huang 2016). Managers or leaders can use the communicative functions of social media tools to distribute work-related information and knowledge to subordinates (Treem et al. 2012). Upon requests, they also provide specific guidance by using various features of social media, such as instant messaging, video conference, group chat, document sharing, and etc. (Cheng et al. 2017).

Emotional support refers to providing messages, involving emotional concerns such as understanding, caring, trust, encouragement, or empathy (Taylor et al. 2004). The interactive nature of social media allows users to interact more easily with each other and facilitates relationship building (Zhao et al. 2017). For example, social media allow leaders to create or use emoticons and smiley faces to enrich communication and interaction. Leaders can easily share posts, files, and videos to others and view contents which are “liked” by their contacts. It is useful for employees to understand leaders’ interests and to develop social relations with their leaders because this can shorten their emotional or psychological distance. Empirical research has also established that social media use can strengthen perceived emotional support (Huang 2016). Hence, we hypothesize,

*Hypothesis 1a: Social media use by leaders is positively related to perceived informational support by followers.*

*Hypothesis 1b: Social media use by leaders is positively related to perceived emotional support by followers.*

### ***Perceived Social Support and Secure Attachment***

Social support produced from interpersonal interaction is found to be a major social value and benefit that users can obtain in the social media context (Shaw et al. 2002). Prior studies have widely viewed social support as a critical resource in the COR framework (Hobfoll 1989). When followers perceive social support (as external resources) from the behaviors of immediate leaders on social media, they achieve psychological benefits and feel satisfied psychologically (i.e., having secure attachment to leaders). The COR theory postulates that individuals are less vulnerable to resource depletion and are more likely to obtain additional resources when they possess more resources. Perceived social support from leaders acts as an external resource that provides assistance, guidance, and feedback to followers. Consequently, individuals with high-level perceived social support tend to reinvest these resources in order to achieve better outcomes. Individuals with security attachment have a tendency to trust and be open to others, and seek balance between autonomy and closeness (Mikulincer et al. 2007). In the case of followers with secure attachment style, they view their immediate leaders trustworthy, full of empathy, and considerate.

Information support is one important type of social support, which provides messages in the forms of knowledge, advices, and other useful information to help users solving problems (Chen et al. 2015). Leaders use social media to distribute useful information and knowledge to subordinates (Trepte et al. 2015). Followers receiving informational support from leaders are therefore be more inclined to result in perception of security (Mikulincer et al. 2008), due to the effectiveness in gaining resources. The more followers receive the information offered by leaders, the more positive affective feelings, attitudes, and psychological states they develop related to leaders (i.e., secure attachment).

Complementary to informational support, emotional support places a greater emphasis on the emotional aspect of social support, such as being cared about, esteemed, loved, valued and encouraged (Madjar 2008). Emotional support can bring about psychological benefits to followers and satisfy their psychological needs (Hajli 2015). Emotional support can also empower followers to open up and seek for help from leaders. Thus, receiving informational and emotional support from leaders results in a feeling of “security”. Extant research has shown that attachment response can be activated when individuals receive social support (Yip et al. 2018). Prior studies have identified that perceived support from supervisors is one of the most important factors eliciting subordinates’ commitment and psychological attachment to supervisors (e.g., Cheng et al. 2003). Thus, we propose:

*Hypothesis 2a: Informational support is positively related to secure attachment.*

*Hypothesis 2b: Emotional support is positively related to secure attachment.*

### ***Secure Attachment and LMG***

Secure attachment is related to a preference comfortable initiating and maintaining social connections with others. Empirical studies have highlighted the implications of secure attachment in leader-follower relationships (Hinojosa et al. 2014). The principle of gain spirals of COR theory argues that individuals with resources have the ability to generate or gain new resources and further yield positive outcomes. In the context of social media use at work, when followers perceive secure attachment to their immediate leaders (generating new resources) and they will feel psychological benefits and have the satisfaction of psychological needs. In turn, this is likely to result in positive outcomes, such as rating high quality of LMG. Attachment secure followers tend to trust their leaders, which is fundamental to high quality leader-follower relationships (Dirks et al. 2002). Therefore, we propose the following:

*Hypothesis 3: Secure attachment is positively associated with LMG.*

### ***The Moderating Effect of Task Interdependence***

Previous research has empirically demonstrated that task interdependence as a critical contextual factor for work relationships (e.g., Vidyarthi et al. 2014). According to sense-making theory, a tightly coupled interpersonal structure between followers and their immediate leaders is more likely to be created when they share a high level of task interdependence (Weick 1979). With high task interdependence, followers need high-level interaction and coordination with their immediate leaders to successfully complete their work. Sharing a high level of task interdependence with leaders, subordinates are more likely to pay close attention to leaders’ actions and behaviors. In addition, previous studies have also verified a positive moderating effect of task interdependence on the relationship between leadership and followers’ outcomes (e.g., Barrick et al. 2007). Thus, we hypothesize,

*Hypothesis 4a: Task interdependence positively moderates the relationship between leaders’ social media use and informational support perceived by followers.*

*Hypothesis 4b: Task interdependence positively moderates the relationship between leaders’ social media use and emotional support perceived by followers.*

## Research Design, Expected Contributions and Limitations

The data from leader-follower dyad for this study are collected by using paper-based survey method in five organizations. The questionnaire was originally designed in English and we followed the back-translation procedure to develop a Chinese version. We administered separate surveys at two time points to reduce common method bias. At Time 1, supervisors completed measures of social media use and demographic information (e.g., age and gender), whereas subordinates rated a measure of task interdependence and demographic information (e.g., age and dyadic tenure). Two months later (Time 2), subordinates rated the measures of perceived social support, secure attachment and LMG. Both subordinates and their supervisors received a unique code to enable us to match their responses.

We expect to contribute to the literature on social media and work relationships in the following ways. First, our research appears to be the first effort to empirically explore the impact of social media use on leader-follower relationship and extends the social media research to the area of the relational impacts of social media use. Second, by examining perceived social support and secure attachment as mediators, this research proposes the mechanism that social media use behavior indirectly influences interpersonal relationship by changing individuals' perceptual and psychological states. Further, responding the recent call for focusing on the role of leaders in social media context (El Ouiridi et al. 2015), the current study uses a relational-level approach to examining the impact of leaders' social media use on followers' perceptions and leader-follower relationship. Our study thus can complement and add more insights to the extant individual level research in social media area.

This study will be subject to several limitations that will open avenues for future research. First, albeit we expect to use longitudinal data from multilevel to examine the research model, a principal limitation can come from self-reported data, which are prone to measurement and response bias. Future investigations should incorporate other research methodologies, such as field experiment, to complement the present study. Second, this study relies on subjective measures of LMG rated by followers, which can be subject to measurement bias. In this regard, future research should address the limitation by measuring LMG both from leaders and followers. Third, the current study only focuses the moderation effect of task interdependence and can neglect the effects of other possible moderators.

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