

## The Impact of Social Media on Digital Guanxi Development in the Chinese Workplace

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### Abstract

*Organisational employees increasingly rely on various social media to develop guanxi online, resulting in the potentially huge value of identifying how social media can contribute to guanxi development in the workplace. In this study of digital guanxi development within Chinese organisations, we examine the role of different types of social media on the development of guanxi and its various dimensions. Based on an exploratory case study, we propose a theoretical framework that illustrates two mechanisms by which social media influence the development of digital guanxi at work. Our preliminary findings suggest that enterprise social media and public social media provide and reinforce instrumental and affective values, respectively, thereby facilitating guanxi development in the workplace.*

**Keywords:** Guanxi development, Enterprise social media (ESM), Public Social media (PSM), China

### 1. Introduction

Relationships are the essence of living systems and the basis of the organisation (Wheatley, 2006). The quality of workplace relationships is positively related to job satisfaction and commitment (Sias, 2005). Accordingly, scholars have been urged to focus on "how a workplace organises its relationships; not its tasks, functions, and hierarchies, but the patterns of relationships and the capacities available to form them" (Wheatley, 2006, p. 39). *Guanxi* refers to personal relationships that an individual may draw upon to obtain resources or advantages in business or social life (Davies et al., 1995). In contemporary Chinese society, communication and relationship building both in life and work are digitally mediated to

a large extent (Lien & Cao, 2014). Organisational employees routinely need to connect with colleagues and external parties. They often attempt to develop and maintain guanxi in the workplace online to enhance their communications. The rapid diffusion of information systems (IS) in the workplace shapes the professional communications landscape (Huang et al., 2015). Organisations continuously and strategically implement social media applications to support their employees and improve their business activities (Braojos et al., 2019). Given the pervasiveness and expected use of social media in personal and professional contexts, its impact on building digital guanxi in the workplace should not be underestimated (Ou & Davison, 2016).

A number of IS researchers have examined digital guanxi, which refers to the social networks developed and maintained through information and communication technologies (ICT) in an increasingly digital environment. Nevertheless, these studies (Cheng et al., 2020; Ou et al., 2014) tend to focus on developing and leveraging guanxi for instrumental purposes, particularly between buyers and sellers on e-commerce sites, using public social media (PSM) like WhatsApp or WeChat. They neglect the nuances of digital guanxi development between employees and their colleagues within organisations. The use of enterprise social media (ESM) in this context has not been examined significantly. Furthermore, most research on social media in business contexts has considered either ESM (e.g. DingTalk, Enterprise WeChat) or PSM (e.g. WhatsApp, WeChat) and often in isolation (Wang et al., 2016). However, scholars have yet to explore how ESM and PSM can be combined in the workplace and how the use of both forms may affect digital guanxi development.

In a context where the combined use of multiple social media is increasingly present in the workplace, our understanding of the development of digital guanxi driven by different types of social media is scant. Given the prevalence of social media in organisations and the demand for guanxi, it is imperative for both employees and management to be aware of how to encourage the development of digital guanxi for effective use and exchange of organisational resources. First, guanxi is essential for employees as it contributes to more robust communication and work performance (Ou & Davison, 2016) and helps employees gain access to people who can provide helpful knowledge to address work-related tasks (Davison et al., 2018). Second, the business benefits of social media can only be realised when organisations understand how to blend these technologies with corporate IT policies and organisational culture (Davison et al., 2014), thus enabling the development of an organisation-wide employee guanxi network to improve productivity. Third, academics have recognised the value of guanxi. Still, there is scant research examining how guanxi and its many dimensions can be developed and maintained through PSM or ESM applications. Notably, scholars have shown a growing interest in ESM's impact on the workplace (e.g., Song et al., 2019). However, much of the previous research on ESM has focused on organisational functions such as communication, collaboration and knowledge sharing but neglected its role in developing online guanxi. Further, very few IS scholars have carefully examined the different mechanisms by which PSM and ESM impact guanxi development in the workplace and the role of different guanxi dimensions. These would all be potential theoretical contributions of this research.

Accordingly, our overarching research question is: How do organisational employees leverage PSM and ESM in tandem to develop guanxi in the workplace? Additional sub-questions that we plan to explore include: "Which aspects of guanxi are more suited to digital development with social media (whether enterprise or public)?" and "How do PSM or ESM impact digital guanxi development through different pathways?". To address these research questions, we will investigate the influence of various social media on employees' guanxi networks within Chinese organisations, and provide corroboratory evidence on how the combined usage of PSM and ESM in the workplace support different aspects of the guanxi development process. More specifically, this research is grounded in empirical evidence obtained from the case of a multinational software services firm based in China that deploys PSM and ESM to enable digital guanxi development. This context was chosen given that guanxi is an indigenous Chinese concept that

profoundly impacts the daily and professional lives of Chinese employees (Xin & Pearce, 1996). Furthermore, China is the world's largest social media market, with approximately 1.07 billion social media users as of 2022, according to Statista; 80% of the users of WeChat (the most prevalent PSM in China) use it for workplace communication (Zheng & Davison, 2022). Most importantly, the case organisation we selected had proven experience in the effective deployment of both ESM and PSM; in addition to WeChat, our case organisation has strategic collaborations with several core IT service providers in China and has consistently deployed a variety of ESM throughout the firm. Based on our findings to date, we will present a preliminary theoretical framework that illustrates the mechanisms of digital guanxi development mediated by both PSM and ESM.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Guanxi and Guanxi Dimensions

Guanxi is prevalent in Chinese society (Chen et al., 2013). The term 'guanxi' can be translated into English as 'relationship', but more accurately, it refers to "relational entities and their relationships" (Tsui & Farh, 1997). Hwang (1987) viewed guanxi as the reciprocal exchange between two individuals, while Xin and Pearce (1996) considered guanxi a special connection and interdependence in social networks. In the business context, guanxi can be interpreted as relationships or social connections built upon mutual interests and benefits (Yang, 1994); as a network of informal ties and favour swaps that dominates commercial activities in China (Lovett et al., 1999); as a component of a strategy used by organisations seeking to achieve long-term competitive edge (Li et al., 2008).

Prior research has shown that guanxi consists of several dimensions, namely *mianzi* (face), *renqing* (favour), *huibao* (obligatory reciprocity), *xinyong* (trustworthiness), *xinren* (interpersonal trust), *hexie* (harmony), *ganqing* (affection), and *jiaoqing* (obligation) (e.g., Chen & Chen, 2004; Davison et al., 2018). Specifically, Chen and Chen (2004) suggested two Chinese concepts that are closely related to predictors of guanxi development, namely *xing* (trust) and *qing* (feeling). *Xing* essentially refers to the trustworthiness of the other party (i.e., *xinyong*), while *qing* comprises both obligation (*jiaoqing*) and affection (*ganqing*). *Mianzi* is also considered a major mechanism supporting the operation of guanxi that consists of an expected self-image (Cheng, 1986) that is validated through public perception and recognition (Hwang, 1987). While these dimensions may exist independently, they are generally regarded as

interconnected. In particular, Ng et al. (2019) recently proposed the OATS model (i.e., obligation/jiaoqing, affection/ganqing, trust/xinyong, status/mianzi), which conceptualises guanxi as a composite of these four inter-related dimensions. Consistent with this theoretical framework, we will focus our exploration of guanxi dimensions on the concepts of mianzi, jiaoqing, xinyong and ganqing.

The first concept is *mianzi (face)*, which refers to "the respectability and deference that a person can claim for himself from others, by virtue of the relative position he occupies in his social network and the degree to which he is judged to have functioned adequately in that position as well as acceptably in his general conduct" (Ho, 1976, p. 883). In light of its nature, mianzi is different from other concepts such as reputation, dignity, and integrity but relates to the outcome of an individual's achievements during social interactions (Leung et al., 2014). Several studies combine renqing and guanxi with the evolution of the concept of mianzi. According to Hwang (1987), individuals who share guanxi establish commitments to one another through social norms of mutual benefit and obligations. An individual who receives renqing from others is obligated to return it in the future; otherwise, his or her mianzi and reputation would suffer.

The second concept is *jiaoqing (obligation)*, which encompasses the obligation and sense of responsibility arising from social and economic activities in order to satisfy the actual needs of work and life (Chen & Chen, 2004). Jiaoqing refers to how people believe they can share mutual obligations and relationships with others (Mills & Smith, 2011). An obligatory form of reciprocity is triggered by receiving renqing, which refers to the substantive assistance via resources and/or emotional concern (Leung et al., 2014). It can serve as an instrumental or affective resource for debt repayment purposes (Ng et al., 2019). Chen and Chen (2004) suggested that jiaoqing is often defined in terms of quantity and breadth to indicate a lengthy trade history or a vast scope of exchanges. The accumulation of jiaoqing will strengthen the bond between two guanxi partners.

The third concept is *xinyong (trustworthiness)*. It refers to integrity, trustworthiness, credibility, or a person's character and reputation (Tong & Yong, 1998). Leung et al. (2014) stated that xinyong could derive from guanxi development and links an individual's overall trustworthiness to their social status. Tong and Yong (1998) conceptualised xinyong as a highly advanced form of trust. Lewis and Weigert (1985) distinguish trust into cognitive and affective trust. Cognitive trust is rooted in rationality and experience, based on rational

and empirical judgments of the other person's competence at work. Affective trust, on the other hand, is based on mutual care or feeling attached between two parties, which is a subjective assessment of the other person's personality formed in the course of informal interactions. In the Chinese setting, individuals must cultivate both xinyong and ganqing to enhance the maintenance and development of long-term guanxi (Huff & Kelley, 2003).

The fourth concept is *ganqing (affection)*, defined as the degree of emotional connection and understanding and the sharing of feelings among the individuals of a guanxi network (Chen & Chen, 2004). The authors suggest that expressive and instrumental interactions target ganqing and affective trust on the one hand, and jiaoqing and cognitive trust on the other. The former refers to more social activities such as celebration gatherings, while the latter refers to work- or business-related pragmatic transactions and exchanges. Notably, ganqing emphasises people's emotional attachment and willingness to exchange resources, while jiaoqing emphasises the obligation of mutual benefit (Chen & Chen, 2004).

## 2.2. Guanxi Development

Chen et al. (2013) suggested three main aspects (i.e., guanxi bases, guanxi quality, and guanxi dynamics) for explaining the guanxi development in the Chinese context. First, *guanxi bases* are defined as "the pre-existing particularistic ties between two interacting parties" (Chen et al., 2013, p. 171); as the nature of the relationship (Fan, 2002); as a commonality of shared identity or attributes between individuals (Chen & Chen, 2004). Guanxi bases are important determinants of existing relationships (Chen & Peng, 2008) and future relationship development (Tong & Yong, 1998), as the more commonly shared guanxi bases or the closer the guanxi bases to family-like guanxi, the more interpersonal trust is likely to exist between parties on a guanxi network. Hwang (1987) classified guanxi into three categories: socio-affective, instrumental, and mixed. Socio-affective guanxi refers to the exchange of feelings of fulfilling expectations for affection and a sense of belonging in family ties. Instrumental guanxi involves the exchange of social resources for personal development and success. Mixed guanxi comprises both emotional and material transactions with non-family members.

Second, *guanxi quality* reflects the strength of a relationship at a specific period (Chen & Chen, 2004). Ng et al. (2019) suggested that guanxi quality assumes guanxi is strong when motivated by affection and weak when driven by instrumental purposes. Regarding the measurements of guanxi quality, Tsui and Farh (1997) considered that the quality of guanxi can vary in the degree of closeness or strength; Yen et al. (2011) suggested

that three constructs of ganqing, renqing and xinren are closely associated with each other and together reflect the quality of guanxi; Kuo et al. (2020) noted that the overall evaluation of guanxi quality is reflected by the degree of xinren/trust, commitment, and satisfaction. In addition, Fan (2002) identified three levels of guanxi quality based on different guanxi types: qinren (family and family-like relationships), shuren (familiar), and shengren (strangers). The quality of qinren- or shuren-based guanxi is stronger and requires a long-term commitment.

Lastly, *guanxi dynamics* explain how guanxi is initiated, maintained, and strategically applied over time (Ng et al., 2019). Chen and Chen (2004) developed an interpersonal guanxi network model at the individual level by placing three circles in which the radius reflects guanxi distance - the smaller the distance, the better the guanxi quality. In addition, the authors identified three sequential stages of guanxi development: initiating, building, and applying. At the organisational level, Chen and Peng (2008) explored guanxi dynamics regarding relationship closeness change among coworkers. They pointed out that guanxi can be influenced by the incidents in one's interactions with another. Specifically, both job- and non-job-relevant behavioural incidents will impact coworkers' relationship closeness.

### **2.3. Guanxi Development Mediated by PSM and ESM**

Social media is a set of internet-based applications, which includes one or several characteristics such as participatory, openness, connectivity, communication and community that allows users to connect and socialise with friends, family, business partners or other parties (Gnyawali et al., 2010). In this era of digital near-ubiquity, companies' and individuals' use of social media has become a core trend for both business activities (companies) and social activities (individuals). Accordingly, social media used by individuals in the workplace can be divided into two general types – work- and social-oriented social media (Song et al., 2019). Work-oriented social media is often known as ESM, which refers to digital platforms designed to be used in the workplace to facilitate creativity, collaboration and the formation and exchange of core work-related content (e.g., task management, work and event tracking, knowledge sharing, and formal intra-company communication) (Benitez et al., 2018). Examples of these social media are Microsoft Teams, Yammer, DingTalk and Enterprise WeChat. On the other hand, social-oriented social media, known as PSM (e.g., WeChat, Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp), refers to digital platforms that allow users to share social

and personal information and encourage expressive connections through social and emotional support (Leonardi et al., 2013). It should be noted that although ESM applications are restricted to the organisational context, PSM may also be used for organisational purposes (Ng et al., 2019).

Prior research has examined how guanxi networks are facilitated by social media use at work. For instance, Ou and Davison (2016) investigated how the use of an IM tool influences the formation of guanxi in the workplace. They illustrate the influences of IM on improving communication quality at work and building employees' mutual trust, consequently facilitating guanxi development. In a similar vein, Wong et al. (2014) suggested that the use of Web 2.0 technologies (i.e., instant messaging, social networking websites, microblogs) facilitates communication performance (effectiveness, quality, and synchronicity), thereby positively impact on an employee's guanxi network development. Huang (2019) noted that social media provides newcomers opportunities to self-disclose to their colleagues, which may facilitate workplace relationship development. This is in line with prior findings that the operating principle of guanxi initiation is a mutual self-disclosure (Chen & Chen, 2004). In recent research, Chen et al. (2020) concluded that ESM affordances (i.e., visibility, association, editability, and persistence) improve employees' in-role and innovative work performance by permitting and promoting instrumental and affective relationships.

Given the subtle nuances in the conceptualisation and nature of ESM and PSM, the mechanisms by which they support digital relationship formation in the workplace can be different. Nevertheless, in the pursuit of theoretical parsimony, usage of these social media platforms is often viewed as singular and universally consistent (Song et al., 2019), and differences in guanxi development pathways across both types of social media remain uncharted territory. One exception is the study by Ng et al. (2019). They suggest that while the initial connection between potential guanxi parties may begin with ESM, the interactions may shift progressively to PSM as guanxi is enhanced. However, they neglect the differences between PSM and ESM in terms of their technical features and the pathways through which they support different forms of guanxi development (i.e., instrumental and socio-affective guanxi) along the various guanxi dimensions. Clearly, further exploratory research is required to investigate the intersection between PSM and ESM and digital guanxi.

### 3. Research Method

We adopted the case research method for two reasons. First, the case study is especially useful for examining processes (Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991). This study investigates the digital guanxi development process mediated by ESM and PSM. Second, the case study is appropriate for exploring emerging phenomena and answering 'how' research questions (Walsham, 2006); both conditions are relevant to our study, which makes the case study method particularly suitable. The case of SmoothJade (a pseudonym) suits our study well by fulfilling two criteria arising from our research question. First, the selected case should be a well-established Chinese company in a digital and ICT environment with proven experience in deploying ESM and PSM, as digital guanxi is an indigenous, context-independent Chinese concept and is prevalent in the ICT industry. Second, employees of the selected case organisation should be using a combination of ESM and PSM within the company as we are studying how both these forms of social media are jointly used.

Founded in Beijing in 2005, SmoothJade is a leading provider of innovative software and IT services in China, with more than 100 offices in 40 cities worldwide, 20 global delivery centres and over 90,000 employees. SmoothJade has established strategic partnerships with leading groups providing Internet services in China, thus consistently using a variety of ESM applications provided by these business partners (i.e., DingTalk, owned by Alibaba, WeLink, owned by Huawei and Enterprise WeChat, owned by Tencent). In terms of public social media, WeChat is also extensively used in SmoothJade as it is the most prevalent social networking platform in China. As such, the case of SmoothJade is particularly appropriate because not only is it one of the most well-known and leading companies in China, but also it uses various combinations of ESM and PSM, making it a revelatory or extreme case for our study (Gerring, 2008).

#### 3.1. Data Collection and Analysis

Case access was granted in July 2021. The research process consists of a preparatory and a fieldwork phase. In the preparatory phase, the focus was to collect and review data from various secondary sources for a case-organisation overview. The subsequent fieldwork phase aimed to gather primary data specific to our research question (Pan & Tan, 2011), and explore how organisational employees engage in digital guanxi development mediated by ESM and PSM. Interviews constituted the primary source of data in the fieldwork phase (Myers & Newman, 2007). The informants were selected via chain

referral sampling (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981), by which suitable informants are most likely to be adequately identified, as researchers often lack sufficient internal information to do so independently. The informants include key marketing team members, process management & operation team, and executives and managers of various business units (e.g., Government Affairs Department and Customer Support Centre). A total of 20 informants have been interviewed to date.

The one-to-one interviews were conducted with a semi-structured interview guide (Myers & Newman, 2007), which contained a standard set of open-ended questions on ESM and PSM usage, their features and functionalities, IT regulation policies related to social media use, and guanxi and its dimensions. There were also specific questions tailored for each informant based on their role in the interview guide (e.g., the informants from Government Affairs Department were asked how they used social media to connect with officials). Each interview took an average of 45 minutes and was digitally recorded and transcribed for data analysis.

Data analysis is conducted concurrently with data collection to take full advantage of the flexibility of the case study method (Eisenhardt, 1989). We first adopted visual mapping and narrative strategies to organise the volume of data on hand (Langley, 1999). More specifically, the visual mapping strategy depicted the different influences of ESM and PSM use in conceptual diagrams, while the narrative strategy entailed developing a complementary textual account of the mechanisms that facilitate digital guanxi development at SmoothJade. Beyond serving as summary devices, the visual maps and narrative were (and will continue to be as our study unfolds) repeatedly verified with some of our informants to ensure the accuracy and consistency of our findings (Klein & Myers, 1999).

A theoretical lens consisting of an initial set of aggregate dimensions and second-order themes (Gioia et al., 2013) was first derived from the literature on guanxi to guide our data collection. The data collected was then coded using a mix of open, axial and selective coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998). More specifically, open coding was used to assign conceptual labels to our interview data to create several first-order concepts in the language of our informants (e.g., "Contacts on ESM are all colleagues within the company", and "Like authenticated e-business cards"). Axial coding was then used to categorise the first-order concepts into second-order themes (e.g., the aforementioned first-order concepts are categorized under "Identity-Based Xinyong"), while selective coding was applied to abstract the second-order themes into aggregate dimensions (e.g., Instrumental Guanxi Development). The first author independently

coded the translated interview transcripts. Although we did not formally conduct interrater reliability tests, the two coders conducted several rounds of discussion on concepts and themes to achieve agreement. For each concept or theme, we also made sure that we had multiple sources of evidence for triangulation. Through these steps, the themes were identified in a careful and rigorous manner. In addition, the coding process would be restarted whenever new second-order themes or aggregate dimensions had to be created to account for the first-order concepts that emerged. While our study is still ongoing, we will keep iterating between data analysis and theory development until we reach the state of theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

#### 4.1. ESM and PSM Features

While our findings suggest that both types of social media support all the four dimensions of guanxi (i.e., xinyong, jiaoqing, ganqing, mianzi), ESM and PSM facilitate guanxi development through distinct pathways. First, the **corporate branding** feature of ESM enables the company's basic information, such as its company profile, products and services, annual reports and industry competitiveness, to be clearly presented and shared among users. In addition, the employees' professional information (e.g., department, position and contact details) can also be accessed via the ESM. Consequently, ESM appears to be more salient for role-based connections - such as those between supervisors and subordi-

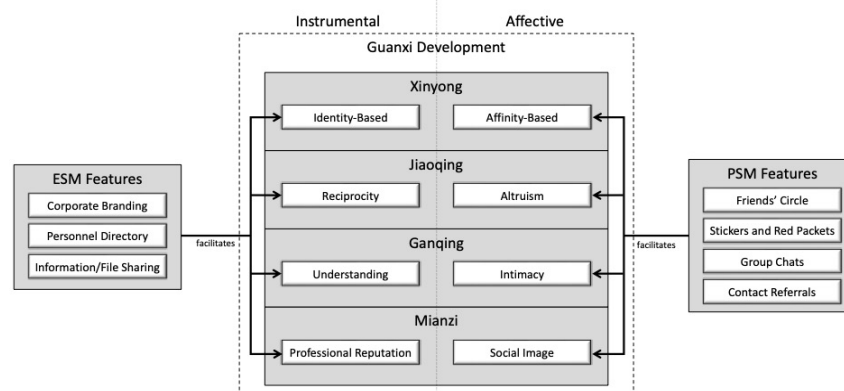


Figure 1. The impact of ESM and PSM on guanxi development

#### 4. Preliminary Findings

The preliminary findings from our ongoing study of SmoothJade suggest that the use of PSM and ESM has an influence on four inter-related dimensions (i.e., *xinyong*, *jiaoqing*, *ganqing* and *mianzi*) of the digital guanxi development through complementary functional features (see Figure 1). Further, in line with Hwang's (1987) conceptualisation of the different guanxi categories (i.e., socio-affective and instrumental), our study suggests that the process of guanxi development can be divided into an affective pathway and an instrumental pathway that are distinct (Chen & Peng, 2008). Specifically, our findings reveal that ESM and PSM are significant enablers of instrumental and affective guanxi respectively. In addition, each pathway influenced a different aspect of the four dimensions of guanxi development (e.g., ESM facilitated identity-based xinyong, while PSM facilitated affinity-based xinyong). These dimensions, along with corroborating evidence from our case study, are described and explained in the following stream of reporting.

nates, as well as between colleagues, rather than affective relationships (Song et al., 2019). Second, while text and voice messages, video calls and group conversations are typical communication features of both types of social media, ESM offers additional technical features tailored to support work-related professional interactions between users. For instance, features are specifically incorporated to enable efficient synchronisation and sharing of information within the organisation, such as real-time information sharing and collaborative editing of documents (i.e., **information/file sharing**). Users could also search for colleagues within the organisation based on their roles, and see the organisational structure as well (i.e., a **personnel directory**). These features provide business users with increased confidence (i.e., there is an assurance of whom they are speaking with) and control over professional communication and interaction. The manager of the Customer Support Centre at SmoothJade explained: "*DingTalk is probably used more for internal communication and management, on a few levels: for example, for day-to-day workflows, such as regular company announcements, and for colleagues to quickly build an internal team via a network connection, and then to rapidly set up project-based or business-based communication*". This is consistent with

the conceptualisation of ESM by Leonardi et al. (2013), who argue that ESM allows employees to exchange information or post and edit documents with colleagues and helps communicate with particular colleagues.

On the other hand, our findings reveal that PSM offers better support for informal and expressive connections. Individuals may not only discuss work-related issues on PSM but are also likely to engage in personal communication, such as discussing leisure activities (Zheng & Davison, 2022). The HR Manager at SmoothJade commented: *"We set up groups with colleagues who are close to each other or in the same department, and we would discuss things other than our work, such as our daily life, sharing some exciting news or learning materials"*. As such, PSM enhances the scope, diversity and flexibility of communication. Related to its nature, a PSM like WeChat offers additional informal communication and interaction features, such as **friends' circle**, **stickers and red packets**, and **group chats** (both work and non-work related). For instance, users can create personalised stickers and emoticons to enhance engagement and communication. Users can share updates on WeChat Moments, and like or comment on others' posts, facilitating the development and maintenance of social relationships with others. Furthermore, in contrast to the existing internal communication networks available on ESM, users on PSM can expand their social networks by **contact referrals**, thereby triggering new social connections. Our findings suggest that these interactive features of PSM facilitate organisational members' engagement in their personal and social lives and allow others to participate in their own non-work lives, thereby enabling guanxi development (Chen & Chen, 2004). PSM users can reduce their unfamiliarity with other members through close social interaction and learn more about their interests, goals, and experiences. This facilitates the development of guanxi networks on PSM platforms (Shao & Pan, 2019).

#### 4.2. Instrumental Guanxi Development

Our findings indicate that the ESM features discussed above are expected to affect instrumental guanxi development along the four dimensions. First, in terms of *xinyong* (*trustworthiness*), our findings suggest that ESM facilitates **identity-based xinyong** by providing the means for the authentication of organisational employees, enabling organisation members to identify each other quickly (e.g., via corporate branding and the personnel directory). A trainee at the Exhibition Hall of SmoothJade explained: *"One advantage of enterprise social media is that I can search for the person's work number to get a clear picture of their personal information because it is authenticated, and I can be sure it*

*is real"*. Chen and Wei (2019) similarly revealed that users do not need to question the authenticity of the identity of colleagues on ESM. That identity visibility can help establish employee identities creating swift trust. Notably, organisation-wide identity credibility empowers employees to initiate relationships with people they may not know well (Van Osch & Steinfield, 2018), reinforcing the channels through which information and resources flow (i.e., instrumental interactions) within the organisation (Song et al., 2019).

Second, our findings indicate that ESM may serve as a channel for the manifestation of **reciprocity** under the *jiaoqing* (*obligation*) dimension of guanxi development. Notably, those who share guanxi at work are particularly bonded by the social obligation of reciprocity, mainly reflected in the acceptance and repayment of renqing (Yen et al., 2011). In addition, the directory search function available on ESM enables employees to quickly locate someone who can help, thus facilitating reciprocal interactions. An example was provided by a clerk from the Marketing Department at SmoothJade: *"I would use DingTalk to ask for help because enterprise social media allows employees to locate someone directly by searching their work ID. I can quickly contact a colleague in another department when in need"*. This echoes Chen and Wei (2019), who suggest that employees tend to request work-related assistance through ESM when they encounter problems.

Third, we suggest that ESM facilitates *ganqing* (*affection*) between employees by establishing mutual **understanding**, thus stimulating subsequent instrumental interactions. Since a personnel directory of organisational users is integrated and automatically created in ESM, users can get a sense of the colleagues they interact with and identify commonalities (Chen et al., 2013) that facilitate future interactions (e.g., information/file sharing on ESM). The leader of the Innovation Research Institute at SmoothJade explained: *"We are now officially using DingTalk and Enterprise WeChat, in which our colleagues have already established a corporate contacts list, making it easier to communicate"*.

Fourth, many of our interviewees indicated concern about their **professional reputation** within guanxi networks on ESM since it represents the collective *mianzi* (*face*) rather than personal interests. An Exhibition Hall Narrator at SmoothJade explained: *"What I post and portray on enterprise social media is often more than just a personal representation... you are not only representing yourself but the whole department"*. A Specialist in Strategic Affairs Department provided an example: *"As I am the only one representing our department in Nanjing, I need to be careful about the mianzi of our department... it is fine if I lose my own face, but it could be*

*a big deal if I damage the reputation of our department".* As such, our findings suggest that guanxi networks across ESM enhance employees' consciousness of social expectations. This is in line with the research of Barbalet (2014), who concluded that guanxi assurance derives from public exposure in which effective adherence to the norms and social expectations of involvement results in an enhanced reputation or acquisition of *mianzi*.

#### 4.3. Affective Guanxi Development

Our findings also suggest that social-oriented PSM complements work-oriented ESM by supporting informal and emotional exchanges and affective guanxi development, which manifests in different aspects across the four guanxi dimensions. First, unlike identity-based *xinyong* with ESM and instrumental guanxi development, PSM facilitates a form of **affinity-based xinyong**, which emphasises expressive interactions targeted at affective trust (Chen & Chen, 2004). The HR Manager at SmoothJade stated: *"Colleagues on WeChat are usually close to each other, as there are further interactions outside work"*. The Customer Support Centre Manager at SmoothJade explained with an example: *"WeChat brings colleagues closer together and allows us to have more contact, which creates a stronger sense of trust between each other"*. This resonates with Tong and Yong (1998), who conceptualise *xinyong* as a high-level form of trust in guanxi that needs to be developed and maintained through constant social interaction.

Second, many of our informants highlighted the benefits of using PSM to develop and maintain close guanxi, such as assistance, advice, and emotional support, consolidating the development of affective relationships. In contrast to the obligatory reciprocity on ESM, such benefits stem from **altruism** under the **jiaqing** dimension, referring to voluntary mutual help among employees. Altruism-based *jiaqing* involves affective interactions, informal communication, and in-depth social exchange (Chen & Chen, 2004). Our findings suggest that organisational employees are more willing to be altruistic on PSM as long-term expressive interactions result in a more friend-like relationship. Thus employees are more inclined to offer help and return favours voluntarily. The process management and operations department director at SmoothJade indicated: *"We often interact on WeChat in our daily lives. This brings a warm feeling, so colleagues on WeChat are more like friends ..... If they help me in my time of need, I will not forget people who have helped me, and I will definitely be there when they need me"*. Once employees have established strong guanxi with others, they are more inclined to voluntarily and proactively help others

in trouble because they have built emotional attachments with a broader community over a long period (Cheng & Huang, 2013).

Third, our findings show that features embedded in PSM (e.g., friends' circle, stickers, red packets, group chats) are essential enablers of expressive interactions, which reinforce **intimacy** between employees. Moreover, it has become a pervasive pattern for employees to switch to socialising on PSM after becoming closer (Ng et al., 2019). The leader of the Innovation Research Institute at SmoothJade explained: *"I think that is probably the tacit pattern - to transfer those more intimate relationships to WeChat"*. In particular, expressive interactions on PSM can facilitate intimacy between employees and contribute to an affective, friend-like relationship (Song et al., 2019). The Operation Director explained: *"We send stickers frequently and create groups on WeChat, in which we will not only communicate about work but also discuss some emotional issues. We have gradually developed from colleagues to friend-like relationships through the long-term communication and interaction in the group chats"*.

Finally, our findings reveal that employees tend to carefully nurture a **social image** on PSM because of its reach in terms of broadcasting information to the broader community (Wang et al., 2016). Contrary to the professional reputation that interactions on ESM cultivate, PSM interactions emphasise individual rather than collective status and recognition to enable the acquisition and maintenance of *mianzi*. An Exhibition Hall Narrator at SmoothJade indicated: *"What people learn about me on WeChat is what I expect them to see; whether I say in groups or what I post on WeChat Moments, it is what I believe will make me look good...I think social media somehow maintains my face or allows me to keep a decent image"*. This finding is in line with the research of Cardon and Scott (2003), who suggest that individuals typically expect members of their guanxi networks to enhance each other's social image (e.g., by liking each other's posts). Preserving *mianzi* enhances guanxi among members and vice versa.

#### 5. Discussion, Conclusion and Future Work

While our study is still in progress, our work to date already hints at several potential theoretical contributions. First, the theoretical framework developed based on our preliminary data on the SmoothJade case is not only a conceptual innovation, but presents an overview that illustrates how ESM and PSM facilitate guanxi development via two separate pathways. Our preliminary model also reveals their impact on the instrumental and affective aspects across the four guanxi dimensions.



More specifically, our model suggests that the features and values offered by ESM are better suited for instrumental guanxi development (Song et al., 2019). PSM, on the other hand, integrates interactive features that are less prominent in ESM, and are more appropriate for promoting affective guanxi development. Second, our ongoing research can potentially contribute to a more nuanced understanding of guanxi as a theoretical concept. Our research framework corroborates the four salient dimensions of guanxi development, namely *xinyong*, *jiaoqing*, *ganqing*, and *mianzi*, as proposed in the OATS model of Ng et al. (2019). Moreover, our framework goes a step further in revealing that the mechanisms for developing instrumental and affective guanxi under each sub-component are not monolithic or isolated states. Instead, they are complementary and generate positive synergies to facilitate the development of digital guanxi in the workplace (Song et al., 2019). Our study suggests that this is because the combination of instrumental and affective value delivered by ESM and PSM is superior to the aggregate of its parts in facilitating the various dimensions of guanxi. Furthermore, our findings suggest that to fully facilitate the development of digital guanxi in the workplace, it is imperative to understand and combine the use of ESM and PSM.

Our future research will focus on extending and validating our theoretical framework by collecting additional data from representatives of SmoothJade. Our model's boundary conditions and implications will also be explored in greater depth through a continuing literature review and further analyses of our data. By collecting and incorporating further data and subjecting the data to more in-depth analyses, we hope to refine our process model further so that a more holistic understanding of the role of social media in digital guanxi development can emerge.

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