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Abstract

Existing studies have suggested that enterprise social media (ESM) may be especially appropriate in facilitating the initial formation of guanxi, while public social media (PSM) is more suited to driving guanxi development past the initial stage. However, the different patterns of social media use in the context of guanxi development, and the antecedent factors that give rise to those patterns are two salient issues that remain understudied. We conducted a case study with the aim of exploring these issues, which revealed six user archetypes representing the different ways that the use of ESM and PSM can be combined for guanxi development. In addition, we identify a range of antecedent factors that influence how ESM and PSM are used. The user archetypes identified not only constitute a conceptual innovation, but also advance the sophistication of the current perspective of social media use in the context of guanxi development.

Keywords: Case study, Guanxi, Social Media, User Archetypes

1   Introduction

Guanxi, a key component of Chinese organizational life, is defined as the social practices of creating and leveraging personal relationships to thrive in life and work (Chen et al., 2004). Compared to the West, there is a much stronger tendency to divide people into different categories in China and treat them differently. This tendency for differential treatment is the primary reason why guanxi is of such importance in Chinese societies (Tsui & Farh, 1997). Guanxi differs from the concept of social capital in its multi-faceted nature (Ng et al., 2019). In fact, some researchers have argued that guanxi enriches social capital theory by providing "a means of identifying salient aspects of under-explored relationships" (see Qi, 2013, p. 322).

Many of the guanxi-oriented knowledge exchanges between Chinese employees are now mediated by technology in this era of digital ubiquity (Davison et al., 2018). Social media, in particular, has greatly improved the interpersonal communication of co-workers and the organization of work activities, with 80 percent of users of WeChat, the most popular social media platform in China, using it for workplace communication (Zheng and Davison, 2022). The extensive use of social media by employees in Chinese organizations has substantial and far-reaching implications for how guanxi is coordinated and leveraged (Ou et al., 2016). However, our understanding of exactly how guanxi can be cultivated and leveraged is limited, even as our social circles in the physical and virtual worlds become increasingly entangled (Ou and Davison, 2016). In particular, scholars have assumed that the application of social media for guanxi development is uniform and straightforward (e.g., Ng et al., 2019), but this assumption is implausible, given that there are many different ways of combining social media tools (Gu et al., 2016). This false

assumption suggests a gap in our knowledge about how guanxi is leveraged in practice. This is a significant gap, given the importance of guanxi to Chinese employees, and enhancing our understanding would enable us to make both practical (for employees in particular) and scholarly contributions.

Thus, given the ubiquity of social media and the salience of guanxi for Chinese employees more generally, we suggest that it is imperative to address this knowledge gap. This is because as social media transforms how we communicate and work, our current assumptions about, understanding of, and prescriptions for managing the way we develop and leverage online relationships, such as guanxi, may become less relevant and accurate or even obsolete (Ng et al., 2019). In light of this, we aim to answer two related research questions: (1) How do employees combine social media types in their communications? (2) How do these different combinations of social media influence the development of guanxi? In particular, we document an ongoing investigation of how Chinese employees develop, manage and sustain work and professional relationships (guanxi) when mediated by various types of social media. We are currently in the midst of a comparative case study where we are gathering data from two furniture firms whose employees engage with different combinations of social media tools for work-related communication. Following a review of the literature, we introduce our methods and then identify the various social media user profiles, in the context of guanxi development. These profiles correspond to distinct user archetypes, with a variety of influencing factors contributing to these profiles. We discuss the implications of these profiles for guanxi research and practice.

2   Theoretical Background

2.1   Guanxi and Guanxi Development

While existing conceptualizations of guanxi vary, the current discourse frequently frames the concept as crucial to the success of Chinese firms and the professional lives of Chinese employees (see Chen et al., 2013; Li et al., 2019). While the term can be literally translated as "relationship", it more accurately refers to the multiplex social ties between firms and individuals that are founded on shared interests and benefits (see Yang, 1994; Bian 2019). At the firm level, it can underpin a strategy for achieving competitive advantage (Li et al., 2008), while at the personal level, it can support transacting and contracting (Lovett et al., 1999).

Numerous sub-components of guanxi have been identified and discussed in the literature (see Chen et al., 2013). These can be conceptually categorized along at least four interrelated dimensions (i.e., the OATS model proposed by Ng et al., 2019). The first dimension is 'obligation', which refers to a collection of acts or behaviors that individuals feel obligated to perform (Abraham and Stein, 2010). Obligation in the Chinese work environment, according to the guanxi literature, can emerge from receiving 'renqing' (i.e., a favor), which is characterized as a combination of substantive support (e.g., resources) and emotional concern, such as warmth and care (Leung et al., 2014). Receiving renqing, in turn, precipitates the need for 'huibao' (i.e., payback), a term that refers to an obligatory type of reciprocity that balances the instrumental and emotional capital between two parties as a "repayment" is made. Additionally, obligation can occur as a result of 'jiaoqing' (i.e., friendship), which is a sense of obligation and duty for caring based on affinity (e.g., hailing from the same place of origin, kinship, or other situational ties (see Barbalet, 2015).

The second dimension is affection, which refers to the inclination to sustain mutually satisfying relationships and motivates individuals to engage in warm, intimate, and emotional exchanges (Schutz, 1966). A sub-component of guanxi associated with this dimension called 'ganqing' has been defined as a sense of endearment and an emotional attachment between two individuals or organizations (Yen et al., 2017). Like renqing and jiaoqing, ganqing is a composite construct made up of a persistent type of loyalty and self-sacrifice, even in the face of adversity (Chen and Chen, 2004).

The third dimension is trust, which is defined as "the extent to which a person is confident in, and willing to action the basis of, the words, actions and decisions of another" (McAllister, 1995). 'Xinyong' (i.e.,

trustworthiness) is a sub-component of guanxi that falls under this dimension (Leung et al., 2005). Xinyong is a multifaceted concept that encompasses a person's integrity, credibility, and trustworthiness, as well as his or her reputation and character (Tong and Yong, 1998). It differs from the Western definition of trust as it also indicates a hierarchical relationship in which a person with a higher social status is often regarded as having more xinyong. According to Leung et al. (2011, p. 1196), xinyong directly associates an individual's credibility and trustworthiness with his or her social rank, obviating the need for a third party.

The fourth dimension is status, which refers to the recognition and respect of an individual's social standing by others (Lockett, 1988). 'Mianzi' (i.e., face) is a sub-component of this dimension that is frequently cited and studied in the guanxi literature (see Buckley et al., 2006; Hwang, 1987). Mianzi refers to "the respectability and / or deference, which 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 this way, mianzi is distinguished from other concepts such as integrity, prestige, and dignity.

Beyond the four dimensions, Chen et al. (2013) proposed that guanxi is strong when motivated by affection and weak when motivated by instrumental goals (e.g., obtaining favors - see Hwang, 1987). Additionally, Fu et al. (2006) suggested guanxi development traverses three progressive levels of guanxi quality: 'qinren' (family members), 'shuren' (familiars), and 'shengren' (strangers). Although shengren implies a dyadic relationship devoid of guanxi, guanxi can still be present if the interacting pair shares guanxi bases. Thus, shengren can become shuren, and possibly further evolve into qinren.

2.2 The Role of Social Media

Communication and relationship development in contemporary Chinese society are increasingly mediated by technology, most notably social media (Ng et al., 2019). Social media tools are conventionally located on a software platform. These platforms may be broadly classified into two categories in the work setting. First, public social media (PSM), such asWeChat, can not only be used for private socialization, but it also be used to communicate with external parties, such as consumers and the general public (Leonardi et al., 2013). Second, enterprise social media (ESM) can be utilized within a business to promote communication and social connections internally. For instance, Yammer and DingTalk are two ESM platforms that offer many of the same features and functionality as PSM platforms, but are designed exclusively for work-related communication and are generally restricted to internal employees. Text and voice messaging, video calls, commenting and feedback, file upload, and group conversations are all typical communication tools found across both types of platform which collectively facilitate interaction and information sharing (Cao et al., 2013). The global adoption of social media is accelerating, expanding from 1.2 billion users in 2011 to 4.59 billion in 2022[1]. The use of social media is expected to have a major impact on the development of guanxi, since it affects how users socialize and develop relationship networks (McKenna et al., 2016).

Notwithstanding the growing body of work on social media and guanxi development, our analysis of the existing literature reveals a research gap in relation to the topic. More specifically, the two types of social media can be combined in a myriad of ways given different socialization scenarios and communication requirements (Gu et al., 2016). However, perhaps in pursuit of parsimonious theorizing, the assumed use pattern of these platforms is one that favours a universally consistent style across organisations and cultures. To illustrate, Ng et al. (2019) found ESM to be a critical enabler of the earlier stages of guanxi development, while PSM became progressively important as individuals developed stronger guanxi. In a similar vein, Zheng and Davison (2022) found that work-related social media usage has a positive effect on team members' guanxi identification. While these studies may be reflective of typical social media use, they neglect the fact that different types of users use social media differently, and there are distinct patterns of use even within the same category of users (Bolton et al., 2013). The

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[1] https://www.statista.com/statistics/278414/number-of-worldwide-social-network-users/

different patterns of social media use are there in the context of guanxi development, and the antecedent factors that give rise to those patterns are two salient issues that are yet to be explored. Our objective is to address this knowledge gap by conducting an in-depth investigation of these issues. In the following sections, we will present our research method and the preliminary findings from our ongoing study.

3 Research Method

The case research method (Yin, 2003) was chosen for our study because it enables theory development through integrating the perspectives of human subjects related to the phenomenon under study, and is especially suited for exploring topics where little is currently known (Pan and Tan, 2011). These are all relevant conditions for our study. In terms of our case selection criteria, we selected two organizations whose employees have been noted in previous studies (citations omitted for blind review) to have been highly effective at using social media for guanxi development. We wanted to develop theory based on proven, if not best, practices (Tan et al., 2015), and the effectiveness of these organizations in using social media for guanxi developments makes them revelatory or "extreme" (see Gerring, 2009, p. 653) cases for the purpose of our study.

Our first case is Tybbyx (a pseudonym), the Hong Kong branch of one of the world's largest furniture firms, whose employees use a combination of WhatsApp and Microsoft Teams within the organization. Our second case is Zhonyx (a pseudonym), a furniture manufacturing firm based in China, whose employees use a combination of WeChat and DingTalk. As the employees at the two firms use different combinations of ESM and PSM, our multiple case study approach allows us to explore what influences the usage patterns. At the same time, the fact that both organizations are in the furniture business is important because many contextual variables are kept constant, which helps to rule out some alternative interpretations of the data.

3.1 Data Collection and Analysis

Case access was granted in May 2021 for Zhonyx and June 2021 for Tybbyx, and both studies have been ongoing for the last 16 months. Each study was divided into two phases: preparatory and fieldwork. The objective of the preparatory phase was to collect and evaluate data from a range of secondary sources, including news articles, internal corporate documents and industry reports, in order to obtain a general grasp of the organization under study.The information from these "nontechnical" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 52) sources was used to enhance our knowledge of Zhonyx and Tybbyx, which formed the basis for formulating our subsequent interview questions.The ongoing fieldwork phase, on the other hand, is focused on collecting primary data relevant to our research question (Pan and Tan, 2011) and delving deeply the specifics of how social media is used for the development of guanxi at each organization. As face-to-face interviews were not possible due to travel restrictions against the backdrop of the COVID pandemic, virtual interviews formed the primary means of data collection in this phase. Following established conventions, we selected our informants via chain referral sampling (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981). The informants included representatives of the two firms' senior management, product development team, and various business units. A total of 28 one-to-one interviews have been conducted at the two firms to date, including 15 interviews in Tybbyx and 13 interviews in Zhonyx.

Each interview lasted around one hour and was guided by a semi-structured interview guide (Myers and Newman, 2007). The guide included a standard series of questions on the use of PSM and ESM, their features and functionalities, as well as the contextual factors (e.g., culture, organizational guidelines in relation to social media use, etc.) influencing workplace communication at the two firms. Additionally, there were questions customized for each informant based on their role in the interview process (e.g., informants from the respective sales departments were asked about how they used WeChat/WhatsApp and DingTalk/Teams to communicate and develop rapport with their interlocutors). All interviews were recorded digitally and subsequently transcribed for data analysis.

We are analysing our data while data collection is still ongoing as we wanted to take full advantage of the flexibility of the case research method (Eisenhardt, 1989). To manage the data gathered, we first applied the visual mapping and narrative strategies (Langley, 1999). The visual mapping strategy involved documenting our emergent theoretical ideas in a series of diagrammatic sketches. In particular, visual maps are especially useful for this study because they enable the simultaneous representation of a high number of dimensions and may be easily utilized to illustrate precedence, parallel processes, and the passage of time (Langley, 1999). By using the visual mapping strategy, we were able to document the different patterns of social media use in the two organizations in a series of conceptual diagrams (e.g., the last version of these diagrams, which represents a summary of our preliminary findings, is presented as Figure 1 in Section 4). On the other hand, the narrative strategy entailed the construction of a coherent storyline that represented our account of what happened at each of the case organizations. This account contained a textual description of the key influencing factors and usage profiles that emerged in our interviews, which ultimately had important implications for guanxi development. Apart from functioning as summary devices, the visual map and narrative were repeatedly verified with some of our informants to validate our interpretation of the informants' accounts (Klein and Myers, 1999).

Our analysis also entailed the coding of the data collected where a mix of open, selective and theoretical coding techniques were used (Urquhart, 2001). More specifically, open coding was first employed to apply conceptual labels in the informants' vernacular to the relevant pieces of data (van Maanen, 1979) to create first-order concepts (e.g., "I don't really know how to use social media" is coded as "Lack of knowledge on using social media"). Selective coding was then used to categorize the first-order concepts into second-order themes (e.g., "Lack of knowledge on using social media" was categorized as "Lack of Technology Self-Efficacy"), while theoretical coding was used to abstract the second-order themes into aggregate dimensions (e.g., "Lack of Technology Self-Efficacy" was abstracted as one of the "Influencing Factors" that affected social media use). Additionally, whenever new concepts, themes, or dimensions emerged that required substantive changes to our coding schema (i.e., concepts, themes, or dimensions had to be added, changed, or replaced), the coding process would be restarted. This process of iterating between data, analysis, and theory development will continue until we reach a point of theoretical saturation, at which we will be able to account for all of our findings comprehensively and no additional data need be collected to further modify or improve the developed theoretical framework (Eisenhardt, 1989).

4   Preliminary Findings

Our preliminary findings reveal little difference in terms of how the WhatsApp/Microsoft Teams combination and the WeChat/DingTalk combination are used at Tybbyx and Zhonyx respectively. In addition, the most common usage profile we found, which we termed **User Archetype (UA) I**, resonated with Ng et al.'s (2019) findings that ESM may be especially appropriate in facilitating the formation of guanxi, while PSM is more suited to driving guanxi development past the initial stage. A Sales Executive at Tybbyx provided a description of this usage profile: "Sometimes, apart from talking about business matters, colleagues may talk about company gossip or share their holiday activities on WhatsApp. But you wouldn't use Teams to talk about things that are not necessarily work-related. Therefore, with WhatsApp, we don't just have to treat one another as colleagues, but we can also treat one another as friends".

Moreover, in relation to our second research question, our findings also corroborated Ng et al.'s (2019) assertion that both forms of social media will not facilitate guanxi development completely, and offline interactions are still required in the most advanced stages of this process (Tong and Yong, 1998). This is illustrated in the following quote from the Purchasing and Planning Specialist of Zhonyx, who indicated: "I often go out with colleagues to drink, watch movies, and play computer games. Because we have common hobbies, we can do the things we like together… These are ways of developing guanxi that WeChat can't substitute". While the UA I appears to represent the default and most common pattern

of use, our findings revealed six other usage profiles that deviated from the baseline, which we named UAs II-VII.

UA II shows an expanded PSM range of use where ESM is only used in the very initial stage of guanxi development to establish a connection, but is quickly replaced by PSM for most, if not all communication scenarios. The range of PSM use is so extensive that even some of the most intimate exchanges required for the development of advanced levels of guanxi are enacted via PSM as opposed to face-to-face (F2F). Our findings suggest that UA II is more likely to be manifested among users who are digital natives, i.e. people who are highly digitally literate and competent to express ideas purely through digital channels. However, not only do the UA II users tend to be digital natives, but also, they are uninhibited in that they are not restricted by organizational guidelines for social media use. These users may also be individuals who are highly familiar with the use of PSM in their personal lives. The Service Fulfilment Manager at Tybbyx described this familiarity: "Because we all get used to WhatsApp already, the problem is that many people in Hong Kong are using WhatsApp, and it is tough for us to change this pattern".

UA III is a pattern of use characterized by limited or no overlaps between the ranges of ESM and PSM use. Our initial findings reveal that UA III is more likely to be manifested among users who maintain a clear separation between their work and personal lives, seeing other individuals within their organization as merely "co-workers" and not "friends" (see Marks, 1994). This clear divide can be a result of strong restrictions on use that are imposed at the organizational level or by the business unit the focal individual belongs to, or it can be self-imposed. For instance, a Sales Manager at Tybbyx explained: "I think WhatsApp is a private social networking app, but Microsoft Teams is used for work. So, my preference is to keep my business and personal life separate".

UA IV is a usage profile that is marked by the smallest possible ranges of ESM and PSM use, where the user is engaging in F2F and other offline exchanges (e.g., via the telephone) for most communication scenarios. Our data suggests that UA IV tends to be manifested among users with low technology self-efficacy because they may be older or from disadvantaged backgrounds (Kim et al., 2015). Alternatively, they could be users who have consciously elected not to use both ESM and PSM because they are generally sceptical of all forms of social media (Su et al., 2021). Zhonyx' Director of Engineering who eschews both ESM and PSM use, provided an illustration of this scepticism: "Through face-to-face communication, I always feel more able to trust others because everything is visible and tangible… [However] it is more challenging to verify someone's identity on the internet". In any case, these users are not required to use both ESM or PSM because there are no formal guidelines mandating use, and/or use is not necessary in their professional roles.

UA V is diametrically opposed to UA IV, characterized by extended ranges of ESM and PSM use while F2F exchanges are minimized. Some of our informants indicated that like UA II, UA V is more likely to be manifested among digital native users who have high technology self-efficacy (Vodanovich et al., 2010) and would therefore be comfortable with communicating and socializing on social media. What is different, however, is that there may be existing guidelines for use, which meant that users falling into this category would be encouraged to use ESM quite extensively. These users may also be more likely to be introverted who eschew offline interactions but take on a different persona in the virtual space (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2002). A Sales Executive at Tybbyx who is a digital native explained why he preferred virtual interactions: "When you use social media, it would be more comfortable than talking face to face. If you find it hard to start the conversations face to face, you can leave a message and wait for the reply. There would be more time to be well prepared".

UA VI is a pattern of use marked by an extended range of ESM use, to the extent that it replaces the use of PSM for most communication scenarios. Like UA V, our data suggests that UA VI is more likely to be manifested among users who are introverted. But the difference is that the users who fall into this category tend to see PSM as frivolous (Humphreys and Wilken, 2014) and/or they are highly work-oriented, keeping work priorities front of mind as they are engaged in communication or social interaction in the professional setting. Another Sales Executive at Tybbyx provided an illustration of

this work orientation: "For some official stuff, we need to discuss it on Teams as it is our officially approved channel, so both parties are protected, that is, there is a record kept".

Finally, **UA VII** is a usage profile that is characterized by a minimized ESM usage range, as the use of ESM is replaced by PSM and F2F exchanges under most communication scenarios to the extent that ESM may only be used for searching and making initial contact. Our findings reveal that users in this category may be in roles where communication with co-workers across the organization may be less necessary (e.g., an assembly line worker). In addition, there may be few organizational guidelines to encourage ESM use, or the user may be negatively disposed toward the usefulness and necessity of ESM to begin with (Choudrie and Zamani, 2016). This negative disposition is illustrated in the following quote from an Engineering Specialist at Zhonyx: "I seldom use DingTalk because it is pretty cumbersome to use as it seems to have many functions. I don't think it's very useful or as convenient as WeChat"

Overall, by integrating our findings across the various usage profiles, our studies suggest that the antecedent factors that influence how ESM and PSM are used in guanxi development may include personality factors, social/communication norms, the presence of formal usage guidelines, the intended audience, self-perception, the user's attitude toward social media, the requirements of the communication scenario, and technology self-efficacy. These influencing factors and the seven UAs we have discussed earlier are summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Social Media User Archetypes in Guanxi Development
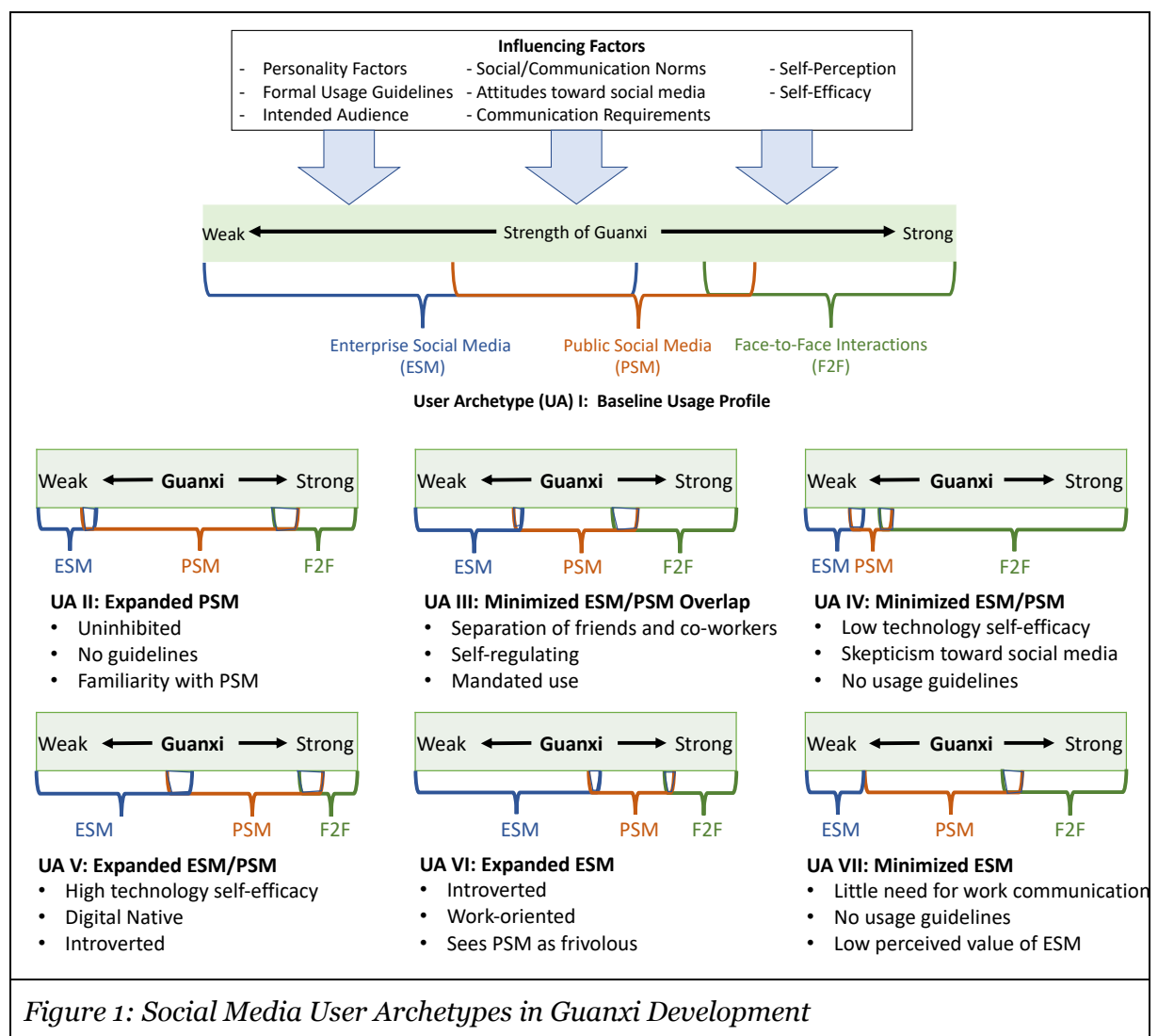
5   Discussion and Concluding Remarks

While both case studies are still in progress, our work to date already hints at a number of potential theoretical and practical implications. First, in relation to the existing studies of social media use in the IS literature, the seven UAs identified based on our preliminary data analysis, not only constitute a conceptual innovation, but also advance the sophistication of the present understanding. In particular, social media use in the context of guanxi development is typically assumed to be monolithic and straightforward (e.g., Ng et al., 2019; Zheng and Davison, 2022). In contrast, our theoretical framework presents a more nuanced view of how the use of ESM and PSM can be combined in different ways to foster guanxi development.

Moving forward, although our focus is on guanxi development among Chinese employees, PSM and ESM are universal, as indeed are relationships, it may be valuable to examine the ways in which PSM and ESM, as well as in-person interactions, combine in different societal contexts. For instance, our study is restricted to one industry (furniture), one country (China) and indeed one firm type (private). It may be that in other industries, other countries and other firm types we will see different patterns emerge, and so new user archetypes may be identified. Thus, although in UA IV PSM and ESM appear to play minimal roles, they are still present. Could there be a UA where all interactions are face-to-face? At the other extreme, could there be a UA where there is no face-to-face or ESM interaction at all, but all communication is mediated by PSM? Such UAs are plausible, but remain to be identified in future research.

Apart from the seven UAs, a second contribution to the IS literature is that we have identified eight antecedent factors that work in different ways to give rise to these different usage profiles. In doing so, our study has the potential to catalyze two research streams to advance our knowledge of how these antecedent factors work. First, some of the antecedent factors, such as personality factors and social/communication norms, are complex and multi-faceted constructs that can be unpacked further to gain a more thorough and holistic understanding of their influence. Second, given that there appears to be the presence of some of the antecedent factors and not others in every UA uncovered, there may be scope for a configurational analysis (see Rihoux and Ragin, 2009) of the joint influence of these factors.

In terms of implications for practice, our study demonstrates that there is a need for organizations to be sensitive to the various UAs. In some organizations it may be felt necessary to take steps to adapt the UAs based on the communication scenarios and requirements associated with their operations. Thus, our work may catalyze future research seeking to fully unlock the potential of the two forms of social media for both guanxi and more general relationship development among employees. Alternatively, organizational managers may employ our techniques to map out their own social media profiles and UAs as part of their regular assessment of employee interactions, and perhaps encourage employee behaviour as a result.

In our future research, we will focus on extending and validating our theoretical framework with the collection and analysis of additional data from Tybbyx and Zhonyx. In particular, an area of focus would be organize our empirical findings in a data structure (Gioia et al., 2013), so as to ensure that each of our findings and theoretical propositions are substantiated by multiple sources of evidence (Klein and Myers, 1999). By expanding our dataset, we may also be able to find additional patterns of ESM/PSM use that falls beyond the current typology of seven UAs. In addition, to ascertain, and potentially improve, the generalizability of our framework, we will also collect data from other firms representing different types of cases (see Gerring, 2009). The boundary conditions and implications of our framework will also be further explored through a continuing examination of the literature and additional analyses of our data. By expanding our dataset and analyzing it more thoroughly, we intend to further enhance our framework to offer a more nuanced understanding of social media use and its consequences for guanxi development.

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