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The relationships between supervisor-subordinate guanxi, perceived supervisor autonomy support, autonomous motivation, and employee job satisfaction: Evidence from international hotel chains in China

This research aims to assess the structural relationships between supervisor-subordinate guanxi, perceived supervisor autonomy support, autonomous motivation, and employee job satisfaction at international hotel chains' operations in China. The theoretical model was developed and tested by an online questionnaire method. This study administered an online survey to employees working at international hotel chains in China, and a total of 328 valid responses were used for data analysis which was completed through SPSS Statistics 24.0 and SmartPLS 3.3.3. The results reveal that: there is a significant relationship between autonomous motivation and employee job satisfaction; perceived supervisor autonomy support exerts a significant impact on autonomous motivation and employee job satisfaction; supervisor-subordinate guanxi is positively related to perceived supervisor autonomy support and autonomous motivation; autonomous motivation and perceived supervisor autonomy support play mediating roles. This work enriches hospitality research through contextualising Chinese indigenous culture into international hotel chains' operations in China.

Keywords: supervisor-subordinate guanxi, perceived supervisor autonomy support, autonomous motivation, employee job satisfaction, international hotel chains

1. Introduction

Along with International hotel chains (IHCs) entering and operating in China, advanced management systems, marketing strategies, and expatriate employees were introduced, which established the standard and played a significant role in the rapid growth of the Chinese hotel

industry (Schuckert et al., 2019; Zhang & Huang, 2019). A chain of international hotels refers to hotel properties throughout the world being operated by a common brand with at least one centralised function being used in all affiliated properties, such as Double Tree by Hilton, JW Marriott, and Regent (Ivanova et al., 2016). Even though IHCs emphasise the maintenance of the policies, management, and culture of the parent companies, adaption to the local culture is indispensable to keep the competitive advantage in the local market (Xu et al., 2018). In Chinese culture, interpersonal interactions between leaders and followers, also known as leader-follower relationships, are commonly recognised as important for the success of both individuals and organisations – particularly in IHCs which are embedded into people-oriented organisations (Lv et al., 2022; Ren & Chadee, 2020). A poor relationship between a leader and a follower exacerbates the high turnover rate in hotels (Lv et al., 2022).

In China, relationship is explained as guanxi, which is a principal example of indigenous culture in relation to social interactions and influences on every facet of Chinese society (Ren & Chadee, 2017). According to Weng (2014, p. 321), guanxi is defined as 'formal and informal personal connection between two individuals bounded by an implicit psychological contract featuring long-term relationships in Chinese societies'. Relevant literature presents that guanxi is based on social exchange theory, which elaborately explains obligations and reciprocations with informal or noncontractual forms (Blau, 1964; Li et al., 2018). Similarly, leader-follower relationships are explained as supervisor-subordinate (Sr-Se) guanxi, referring to private relationships between a supervisor and a subordinate developed from non-work-related social exchanges (Cheung et al., 2009). Despite the fact that IHCs have made a large contribution to the growth of the Chinese hotel industry, there is the limited research attention on how IHCs' operations are influenced by Sr-Se guanxi, which represents Chinese culture. In addition, for the success of hotels' operations in China, increasing researchers note the significance of developing Sr-Se guanxi (Ren & Chadee, 2020; Wang et

al., 2020; Yang & Lau, 2015). However, the current research on Sr-Se guanxi focuses on career development (Cao et al., 2022; Ren & Chadee, 2020; Yang & Lau, 2015), which allows the further exploration of Sr-Se guanxi's outcomes in the research domain of hospitality.

In the hotel industry, employee job satisfaction, representing positive attitude in the workplace, has been the focus of human resource investments (Fang et al., 2021). The hotel industry is a service-oriented industry, which means that mistakes and customer complaints may often take place, therefore it is necessary for employees keeping a positive attitude to deal with and minimise negative outcomes (Karatepe et al., 2003; Lam et al., 2001). Employees who are more satisfied in the workplace have a higher level of productivity, deliver the more quality service to customers, and lower the turnover rate, which in turn keeps a hotel's competitive advantage in the market (Amissah et al., 2016; Chen & Wang, 2019; Fang et al., 2021; Pan, 2015). Even though the existing research has investigated on how Sr-Se guanxi contributes to employee job satisfaction (e.g., Chueng et al., 2009; Lv et al., 2022; Mejia et al., 2020; Zhai et al., 2013), inconsistent and mixed findings (significant or insignificant) allow the further assessment of the relationships between the two constructs in the hospitality research.

The recent literature in tourism and hospitality has presented that motivation is a primary determinant of employee job satisfaction (e.g. Dorta-Afonso et al., 2021; Norbu & Wetprasit, 2021; Silva et al., 2021; Sobaih & Hasanein, 2020). In general, motivation is divided into intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation, with intrinsic motivation playing a more lasting and dependable effect (Deci & Ryan, 2000). According to two-factor theory (Herzberg, 1966), it is indicated that intrinsic motivation promotes job satisfaction, while extrinsic motivation only prevents from dissatisfaction. However, a review of relevant literature finds that the role of extrinsic motivation in explaining employee job satisfaction exists controversy within the hospitality research. Some researchers (e.g., Norbu & Wetprasit, 2021; Silva et al., 2021; Sobaih & Hasanein, 2020) believe that extrinsic motivation significantly promotes

employee job satisfaction in the hotel industry. To moderate the controversy of extrinsic motivation, autonomous motivation plays a convincing role. In the light of self-determination theory (Gagné & Deci, 2005), autonomous motivation, explained by self-consistence and volition, is made up of intrinsic motivation and two types of extrinsic motivation, representing strong autonomy degree (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Gillet et al. (2012, 2016) demonstrate the significant relationship between autonomous motivation and employee job satisfaction. Notwithstanding a lot of research on autonomous motivation, relatively less is known about how non-work-related and dyadic-relational behaviours (e.g., developing Sr-Se guanxi) lead to autonomous motivation.

Extant empirical evidence has shown that autonomous motivation is influenced by perceived supervisor autonomy support (Gillet et al, 2012; Yoo, 2015). However, current researchers pay little attention to antecedents of perceived supervisor autonomy support. The foundation of developing high-quality Sr-Se guanxi is reciprocal affection and trust (Cheng et al., 2009), and supervisors are more willing to provide privileged support to subordinates who have high-quality guanxi with them (Ren & Chadee, 2020). Therefore, it is worthwhile to elaborately consider whether high-quality Sr-Se guanxi contributes to perceived supervisor autonomy support.

Against the above background, the purpose of this study is to explore the structural relationships between Sr-Se guanxi, perceived supervisor autonomy support, autonomous motivation, and employee job satisfaction at IHCs' operations in China through integrating social exchange theory and self-determination theory. The study makes several contributions to existing literature and extending Sr-Se guanxi's outcomes in the research domain of hospitality: firstly, this work is one of the first to assess how dyadic relationships and non-work-related behaviours influence autonomous motivation; secondly, perceived supervisor autonomy support obtains further theoretical explanations; lastly, this study enriches the

hospitality research through contextualising Chinese indigenous culture – Sr-Se guanxi into IHCs' operations in China.

2. Literature review and hypotheses development

2.1 Sr-Se guanxi in China

In Western society, the concept of leader-member exchange, originating from social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), is employed to explain dyadic leader-follower relationships in the workplace (Chen & Tjosvold, 2006; Ali et al., 2020). The development of leader-member exchange relationship is based on role-making processes performed by leaders (e.g., empowerment, significant task assignment, and providing care and support) to result in mutual trust and respect between the two parties (Zhang et al., 2015). Subordinates are finally expected to perform better than fundamentally required in the workplace in the high-quality leader-member exchange relationship (Nie & Lamsa, 2015). In Chinese society, a similar concept to leader-member exchange is Sr-Se guanxi, which explains leader-follower relationships with Chinese culture (Wei et al., 2010; Weng, 2014). Guanxi is the integration of "ganqing", "renqing", and "xinren". "Ganqing", the most fundamental element of guanxi, means affection, which is established by social interaction (Wang & Murphy, 2010). In other words, if the mutual do not have any affection, guanxi will not be developed (Bedford, 2011). "Renqing" is described as reciprocal exchange of favours (Yang & Lau, 2015). According to social exchange theory, when someone receives a favour from another person, he or she takes a responsibility to return this favour (Li et al., 2018; Yang & Lau, 2015). "Xinren" means trust, based on "renqing"; to develop guanxi, an individual who does a favour for another person believes that this favour can be repaid to him or her when necessary (Bedford, 2011). As hotels have a

people-oriented trait, developing guanxi to strengthen interpersonal interaction is important; previous researchers in the field of hospitality (e.g. Li et al., 2018; Ren & Chadee, 2020; Wang et al., 2020; Yang & Lau, 2015) have drawn on social exchange theory to demonstrate guanxi's influence within interpersonal interactions.

Compared to leader-member exchange, which is restricted to work-related interpersonal interactions with the absence of emotionality, the cultivation of supervisor-subordinate guanxi is based on personal connections and emotional attachment, primarily developed from non-work-related interpersonal interactions and activities (e.g., thoughts sharing, visiting, gatherings, doing favours, etc) both inside and outside working time (Ding & Yu, 2020; Mejia et al., 2020; Wei et al., 2010; Zhang et al., 2015). Affective attachment, inclusive personal life, and loyalty to supervisors are also included into the concept of Sr-Se guanxi (Yang & Lau, 2015).

Sr-Se guanxi also incurs ethical considerations; for example, bribery through sending gifts may become the outcome of the development of guanxi, which leads to corruption (Ali et al., 2020; Cheung et al., 2009). However, Zhang et al. (2015) argue that gift-giving is different from corruptions. They believe that gift-giving represents respect and deference to a supervisor rather than illegally claiming the returns, and sending a gift is considered as manifestations rather than guarantee of the high-quality guanxi. This argument highlights that Sr-Se guanxi is more associated with social-emotional than tangible products (Chen & Chen, 2004). Based on social exchange theory, previous research in relation to hospitality demonstrates that high-quality Sr-Se guanxi contributes to employees' career development through the exchange of reciprocity (Ren & Chadee, 2020; Wang et al., 2020; Yang & Lau, 2015). Even though existing research of Sr-Se guanxi is primarily on career development, increasing studies explore psychological impacts brought by Sr-Se guanxi, such as work meaningfulness (Guan & Frenkel, 2020), employee job satisfaction (Chueng et al., 2009; Mejia et al., 2020; Zhai et al., 2013),

and emotional exhaustion (Charoensukmongkol, 2022); however, relevant research in the field of hospitality remains rare. In addition, despite of the fact that social exchange theory is the foundation to construct the concept of Sr-Se guanxi, this theory is insufficient to fully explain the outcomes of Sr-Se guanxi, due to limited cognitive capacity (Ren & Chadee, 2020). In response to this limitation, the study supplements social exchange theory with self-determination theory to further investigate psychological impacts of Sr-Se guanxi in the field of hospitality.

2.2 Autonomous motivation

Motivation is a psychological process resulting from an individual's response to a variety of situations (Latham & Pinder, 2005), and presents different types due to different effects. According to self-determination theory, the nature of autonomous (or self-determined) motivation is self-expression or self-consistent, highlighting the fact that individuals' behaviour is volitional and they need to internalise the external regulations and values; in contrast, controlled (or non-self-determined) motivation means that employees tend to work on an activity with an experience of pressure or control (Gagné & Deci, 2005). As individuals who are intrinsically motivated to engage in a work task or activity have higher level of psychological autonomy or self-determination to do it, intrinsic motivation is a type of autonomous motivation (Roche & Haar, 2013). In the hotel industry, intrinsic motivation of employees is a significant intangible asset for the effectiveness of operations (Fang et al., 2021).

In addition, one of the principal contributions of self-determination theory is to divide extrinsic motivation into different types (external regulation, introjected regulation, identified regulation, and integrated regulation), in accordance with the degree of autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Of the four types of extrinsic motivation, the autonomous degree of identified

regulation and integrated regulation are the strongest, therefore identified regulation and integrated regulation are also classified as forms of autonomous motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Specifically, identified regulation refers to an attitude of consideration of external needs as having personal significance, while integrated regulation refers to an attitude of consideration of external needs as having personal significance and self-expression (Gagné & Deci, 2005). In contrast, external regulation and introjected regulation are included in controlled motivation (Gagné & Deci, 2005).

Compared to intrinsic motivation which asks individuals to find genuine interest at work, autonomously motivated employees may be not interested in work tasks at times; however, autonomous motivated employees are able to keep the high level of volition and willingness to work, because the work is significant to them or they find personal meaning from the work tasks (Vujčić et al., 2017). In other words, individuals are autonomously motivated, when they feel that their work is interesting, meaningful, or consistent with personal values and identity (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Hon, 2012). In the context of the hotel industry, researchers have found that autonomous motivation is a driver to enhance employees' behaviours and attitudes at work, such as creative performance (Hon, 2012), pro-environmental behaviours (Kim & Lee, 2022), knowledge sharing intention (Hon et al., 2021), workplace spirituality (Gatling et al., 2016), and job satisfaction (Hewagama et al., 2019).

2.3 Employee job satisfaction

Job satisfaction concerns people's attitudes towards their employment; positive attitudes towards their work, triggered at the time of meeting psychological needs, enhance job satisfaction, while negative attitudes reduce it (Aziri, 2011; Locke, 1969). Weiss & Cropanzano (1996) explain that job satisfaction is expected to be the outcome of an affective

antecedent. Thus, job satisfaction is a dependable factor to reflect the extent to which individuals enjoy their job (Weaver, 1980). The recent empirical studies present that job satisfaction is significantly related to burnout (Silva et al., 2021), absenteeism, in-role and extra-role performance (Ozturk et al., 2021), and organisational commitment (García-Rodríguez et al., 2020), which are the key issues for delivering high quality service to customers in the hotel industry, as hotels are seen as high-contact service organisations. In this regard, the assessment of employee job satisfaction is necessary for the success of hotels' operations.

2.4 Perceived supervisor autonomy support

Autonomy, one element of empowerment, manifests the extent to which employees obtain freedom, independence, and discretion to make a decision in relation to their work (Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Kanjanakan et al., 2023; Pearson & Moomaw, 2005). However, Cirka (2005) argues that autonomy support, based on self-determination theory, is different from autonomy, which represents an objective state and can be measured by characteristics of job itself. Instead, autonomy support is related to how employees subjectively explain attitudes and behaviours of their supervisors who take responsibilities for directing and assessing subordinates' performance (Cirka, 2005; Gagné & Deci, 2005). Therefore, perceived autonomy support from supervisors depends on subordinates' perception about their supervisors' capability to understand and acknowledge subordinates' feelings and thoughts, to highlight choice rather than control, to provide a meaningful rationale for completing a task, to encourage proactivity, and to relieve subordinates' pressure (Beenen et al., 2017; Gagné & Deci, 2005). Perceived supervisor autonomy support is also distinct from perceived supervisor support, which is a widely researched concept; perceived supervisor support includes subordinates'

perception about rewarding their effort, which induces a perceived external locus of causality and prevents from autonomy (Kanat-Maymon & Reizer, 2017). In contrast, according to self-determination theory, supervisor autonomy support provides subordinates with a perceived internal locus of causality, which makes subordinates feel their working interesting or meaningful, in turn producing more desirable outcomes at work (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Zhang et al., 2021). There is rare research about perceived supervisor autonomy support in the hotel industry, however, the recent empirical studies demonstrate that perceived supervisor autonomy support enhances job satisfaction (De Backer et al., 2021) and organisational commitment (Holliman et al., 2022), and alleviate burnout (Slemp et al., 2021), which are the primary elements of delivering the quality service in hotels.

2.5 Hypotheses development

2.5.1 The effects of Sr-Se guanxi on autonomous motivation, employee job satisfaction, and perceived supervisor autonomy support

According to high-quality guanxi established, subordinates' needs and strengths are better understood by their supervisors so that there is a better match between their abilities and tasks (Guan & Frenkel, 2020). These positive outcomes, facilitated by Sr-Se guanxi, make employees tend to put into a lot of effort and keep a high degree of volition at work. Wang et al. (2020) explain that, within the hotels' operations, subordinates may feel stronger motivation to achieve a positive outcome when they develop a high-quality guanxi with their supervisors, because they think that they are more important than others in the supervisors' perception and they should live up to supervisors' trust. The work of Wang (2016) employs leader-member exchange to demonstrate that dyadic leader-follower relationship contributes to employee work motivation in the international hotels. Thus, the study proposes that:

H1a: Sr-Se guanxi is positively related to autonomous motivation at IHCs

As establishing a strong guanxi tie with supervisors provides more opportunities, resources, and support to employees, it is easier for employees to satisfy needs in relation to working (Cheung et al., 2009). In addition, affection, a driver for job satisfaction enhancement, is developed through establishing positive Sr-Se guanxi (Zhai et al., 2013). The studies of Cheung et al. (2009) and Zhai et al. (2013) verifies that Sr-Se guanxi exerts a positive impact on employee job satisfaction. Within the extant research of hospitality, Mejia et al. (2020) make an attempt to assess the direct relationship between Sr-Se guanxi and employee job satisfaction in the Chinese hotel industry; Lv et al. (2022) find the close link between Sr-Se guanxi and employees' psychological satisfaction at work in Chinese five-star hotels. Thus, the study proposes that:

H1b: Sr-Se guanxi is positively related to employee job satisfaction at IHCs

Because autonomy support from supervisors depends on employees' subjective explanations, promoting the communication between employees and supervisors is important to make supervisors understand employees' thoughts (Cirka, 2005; Kanat-Maymon & Reizer, 2017). A strong Sr-Se guanxi tie developed mean that there is a higher possibility to open dialogue and exchange thoughts with one another (Chen & Tjosvold, 2006). In addition, according to social exchange theory, reciprocal affection and trust are gradually cultivated during the process of establishing guanxi tie (Cheng et al., 2009; Ren & Chadee, 2017). Consequently, employees are expected to receive privileged opportunities, resources, support,

and understanding from supervisors (Ren & Chadee, 2020; Zhang et al., 2015). Thus, the study proposes that:

H1c: Sr-Se guanxi is positively related to perceived supervisor autonomy support at IHCs

2.5.2 The effects of perceived supervisor autonomy support on autonomous motivation and employee job satisfaction

According to self-determination theory, employees, perceiving supervisor autonomy support, experience internal locus of causality (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Kanat-Maymon & Reizer, 2017). This is the foundation to keep self-determined and volitional for a specific behaviour (Beenen et al., 2017). Zhang et al. (2021) emphasise that the higher level of employee autonomy support leads to employees to feel more self-determined but less constrained. The empirical studies of Gillet et al. (2012), Kuvaas (2009), and Yoo (2015) find the significant relationship between perceived supervisor autonomy support and autonomous motivation. Thus, the study proposes that:

H2a: Perceived supervisor autonomy support is positively related to autonomous motivation at IHCs

According to self-determination theory, employees have the capacity to seek their own growth in the workplace, but successfully going through well-being depends on opportunities for personal development being found (Roche & Haar, 2013). Supervisor autonomy support provides these opportunities for employees' growth at work, which is a facilitator to satisfy subordinates' psychological needs and well-being (Chong et al., 2021; Roche & Haar, 2013), and to alleviate job burnout (Slemp et al., 2021). Consequently, perceived supervisor autonomy

support is expected to promote job satisfaction. De Backer et al., (2021), Chang et al. (2015), and Moreau & Mageau (2012) provide empirical evidence to verify the positive relationship between perceived supervisor autonomy support and employee job satisfaction. Thus, the study proposes that:

H2b: Perceived supervisor autonomy support is positively related to employee job satisfaction at IHCs

2.5.3 The effects of autonomous motivation on employee job satisfaction

In two-factor theory, it is proposed that motivators (intrinsic motivation) keep employees satisfied, while hygiene factors (extrinsic motivation) prevent from dissatisfaction (Herzberg, 1966). However, Silva et al. (2021) argue that the hospitality industry should give more attention on extrinsic motivation as an important way to enhance employee job satisfaction. Norbu & Wetprasit (2021) and Sobaih & Hasanein (2020) make the empirical research to find the positive relationship between extrinsic motivation and employee job satisfaction in the hotel industry of developing countries.

As the differences between intrinsic motivation and extrinsic needs are in practice vague, and extrinsic motivation varies according to the degree of autonomy available, self-determination theory indicates that internalising external regulations and needs contributes to the development of a positive attitude at work (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Gagné & Deci, 2005). Vujčić (2017) indicates that employees are willing to keep the positive attitude towards the work which is significant and meaningful for them, even though they are not interested in the work. In this regard, autonomous motivation may more comprehensively explain job satisfaction than intrinsic or extrinsic motivation in the hotel industry. In the research of Hewagama et al. (2019), it emphasises the role of autonomy in improving job satisfaction

within hotels. Even though previously empirical studies have verified the positive relationship between autonomous motivation and employee job satisfaction (Gillet et al., 2012; Gillet et al., 2016), there is still devoid of relevant research in the hotel industry in particular IHCs' operations. Thus, the study proposes that:

H3: Autonomous motivation is positively related to employee job satisfaction at IHCs

2.6 Potential mediating effects

Mediation provides a further explanation of the relationship between constructs (Hair et al., 2021). In the research domain, motivation is generally considered as the process between an antecedent and an outcome. For example, the work Gillet et al. (2012) presents that perceived supervisor autonomy support induces autonomous motivation, which in turn influences job satisfaction; Yoo (2015) confirms that autonomous motivation mediates the relationship between perceived supervisor autonomy support and behavioural engagement. Within the research in relation to hospitality, Hon et al. (2021) confirm the mediating role of autonomous motivation; Hewagama et al. (2019) find that employee job satisfaction is enhanced through the mediating role of job autonomy. Further, in the relevant research of dyadic relationship, Wang (2016) demonstrates that work motivation is a mediator of the relationship between leader-member exchange and performance in the hotel industry. Thus, the study proposes that:

H4a: Autonomous motivation mediates the relationship between perceived supervisor autonomy support and employee job satisfaction at IHCs

H4b: Autonomous motivation mediates the relationship between Sr-Se guanxi and employee job satisfaction at IHCs

In the previous research, Slemp et al. (2021) confirm the mediating role of perceived supervisor autonomy support between the two constructs. Rasoolimanesh et al. (2021) draw on a systematic review to reveal the validity of segmentation approach for mediation hypothesis and analysis in the field of tourism and hospitality research. In this study, H1a, H1b, H1c, H2a, and H2b are developed based on theoretical analysis and literature review. According to segmentation approach (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021), the impact of Sr-Se guanxi on autonomous motivation and employee job satisfaction can be further explained through the mediating role of perceived supervisor autonomy support. Thus, the study proposes that:

H5a: Perceived supervisor autonomy support mediates the relationship between Sr-Se guanxi and autonomous motivation at IHCs

H5b: Perceived supervisor autonomy support mediates the relationship between Sr-Se guanxi and employee job satisfaction at IHCs

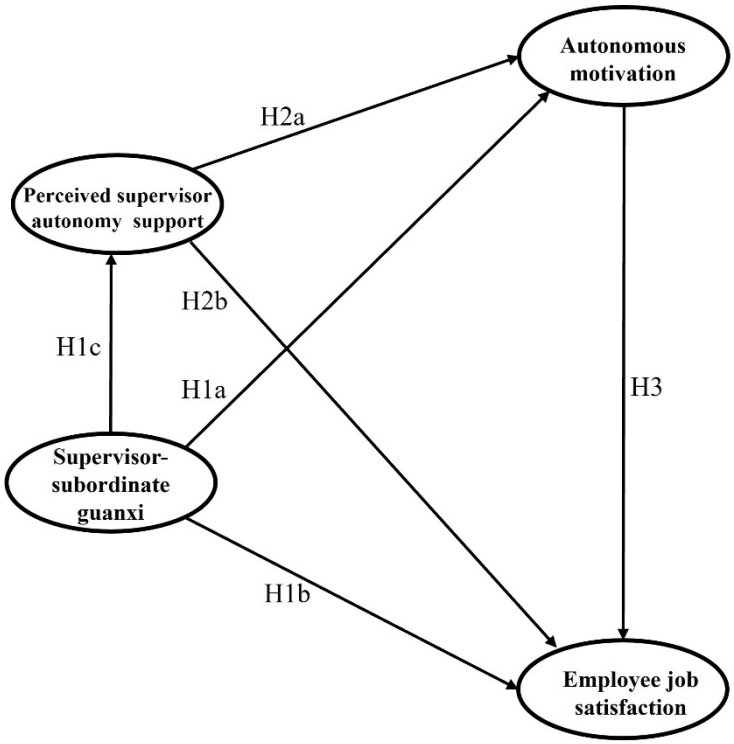

Figure 1. The theoretical model

3. Method

3.1 Participants and procedure

The sample of this study is full-time employees from IHCs in Chengdu and Chongqing, which are the Chinese national central cities where tourism and hospitality experienced rapid development and a lot of international hotel chains' properties have been established. Furthermore, Chengdu and Chongqing are core cities of the Chengdu-Chongqing Economic Circle which is a Chinese principal strategy to drive the co-construction of the Belt and the Road Initiative and the development of the Yangtze River Economic Belt (Xinhua News Agency, 2021). According to contacting human resource managers of a number of randomly selected international hotels, a total of 10 properties finally agreed to participate this research. All participated properties are affiliated to international hotel chains (e.g. Marriott, Hilton, Holiday Inn, Sheraton, etc.). The online survey was conducted through Wenjuanxing, which is an online survey platform for questionnaires' publishing and collection. Before formal use, the questionnaire was sent to several human resource managers and employees for pilot testing. Their comments and feedback led to the minor change of the questionnaire. After that, the human resource managers sent the finalised questionnaire link to employees of their properties via WeChat. All participants completed the questionnaire on the basis of volunteering and anonymity, and they received 5-10 RMB (randomly drawing at WeChat) at the time of submission.

A total of 364 employees participated this survey. After deleting carelessly completed questionnaires (either completed very quickly or filling the same option for all items) and incorrectly completed questionnaires (participants are not from selected properties), 328 valid questionnaires were used for data analysis. Respondents' profiles were summarised in Table 1,

where it was indicated that most respondents were female (63.4%). This result reflects the fact that there are more female than male employees working in the hotel industry. In addition, respondents with a bachelor's degree (55.5%) and 1-3 years working experience (39.0%) took the highest proportion. In terms of departments, respondents from Front Office accounted for the highest proportion (28.0%), followed by Food & Beverage (23.5%).

Table 1. Demographic profiles of respondents

Variable	**Group**	**Frequency**	**Percentage (%)**
Gender	Male	120	36.6
	Female	208	63.4
Education	Diploma or below	126	38.4
	Bachelor's degree	182	55.5
	Master or above	20	6.1
Department	Housekeeping	39	11.9
	Food & Beverage	77	23.5
	Sales & Marketing	48	14.6
	Human Resources	41	12.5
	Front Office	92	28.0
	Finance	9	2.7
	General Manager Office	12	3.7
	Other	10	3.0
Tenure	Less than 1 year	81	24.7
	1-3 years	128	39.0
	4-10 years	96	29.3
	More than 10 years	23	7.0

3.2 Measures

The questionnaire consisted of five sections. The first section was related to respondents' demographical profiles, including gender, education, department, and tenure.

The second section measured autonomous motivation, which contained six items, adapted from the study of Gagné et al. (2010). The sample item included 'because I enjoy this work very much'. As it has been seen as a formative construct in this study, there was not the Cronbach's Alpha estimate for this measurement scale.

The third section sought to analyse employee job satisfaction. Referring to the work of

Hackman & Oldham (1975), three items were developed. The sample item included 'all in all, I am satisfied with my present job'. The Cronbach's Alpha was 0.854.

The fourth section focused on perceived supervisor autonomy support, and seven items were developed from the research of Hagger et al. (2007). One of items for measurement was 'My supervisor provides me with positive feedback when I do work'. The Cronbach's Alpha was 0.972.

Sr-Se guanxi was measured in the final section. Referring to Yang & Lau (2015), five items were developed. The sample item included 'I will call or visit my supervisor after office hours or in holidays'. The Cronbach's Alpha was 0.897.

Except for the first section, all items were measured with a seven-point Likert scale (1 means 'strongly disagree' and 7 means 'strongly agree'). Because the respondents are Chinese, the questionnaire was translated into simplified Chinese. To guarantee that the language was consistent in its meaning, a back-translation method designed by Brislin (1976) was adopted. Specifically, a bilingual linguist was invited to translate all items from English to Chinese, and then the study invited another bilingual scholar to back-translate the questionnaire before the pilot testing was conducted.

3.3 Common-method variance (CMV)

Referring to Podsakoff et al. (2003), this study undertook the three key stages to minimise the impact of CMV. First, the study adopted available scales and simplified expressions to avoid the questions' ambiguity, which had been confirmed through the conversation with hotels' practitioners during the pilot testing. Second, the study noted the research's anonymity and confidentiality in the questionnaire's instruction to obtain the truthful response. Third, the study ran Harman's one-factor test through SPSS Statistics 24.0, and the

results showed that there was no single factor which accounted for more than 50% of the variance.

3.4 Data analysis

SPSS Statistics 24.0 was employed for descriptive analysis of respondents' demographical profiles and initial data screening. To test the research hypotheses, PLS-SEM was employed, as it is suited to small sample size and allows the flexible inclusion of both reflective and formative measures (Hair et al., 2019). A reflective measurement model indicates that a construct leads to the indicators, while a formative measurement model demonstrates that the indicators lead to a construct (Hair et al., 2021). In addition, a formative measurement model is suited to indicators, which are combined to form a construct and cannot be mutually interchangeable, such as different dimensions of autonomous motivation (Hair et al., 2021). This study, therefore, consisted of three reflective constructs (Sr-Se guanxi, perceived supervisor autonomy support, and employee job satisfaction) and one formative construct (autonomous motivation). The software programme SmartPLS 3.3.3 was used to assess measurement and structural models.

4. Results

4.1 Assessment of reflective and formative measurement models

According to Hair et al. (2021), the assessment of reflective measurement models depends on four steps. Firstly, Table 2 showed that all values of Cronbach's Alpha and composite reliability (CR) are between 0.80 and 1.000, which met the minimum requirement

of 0.70 for internal consistency reliability. Secondly, Table 2 indicated that all values of average variance extracted (AVE) were above 0.50, so convergent validity was achieved. Thirdly, indicator reliability normally refers to assessment of the size of the outer loadings, which should be greater than the threshold of 0.708. Table 2 presented that all outer loadings were no smaller than 0.708. Finally, the discriminant validity was confirmed, because Table 3 presents the square root of AVE on the diagonal (also known as Fornell-Larcker Criterion) has the greatest value (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), and all Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio values are smaller than 0.85 or 0.90 (Henseler et al., 2015).

Table 2. Assessment of reflective measurement model

Constructs and indicators	Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	rho_A	AVE
Supervisor-subordinate guanxi		0.897	0.923	0.907	0.705
I actively develop a positive guanxi with my supervisor.	0.826				
I will call or visit my supervisor after office hours or in holidays.	0.855				
I often share my thoughts and feelings with my supervisor.	0.864				
My supervisor often invites me for lunch/dinner.	0.850				
I will send my supervisor gifts on special occasions.	0.803				
Perceived supervisor autonomy support		0.972	0.977	0.974	0.857
My supervisor provides me with positive feedback when I do work	0.896				
I feel that supervisor provides me with choices, options, and opportunities	0.943				
My supervisor displays confidence in my ability to do work	0.939				
I trust my supervisor's advice about the work I do	0.937				
My supervisor encourages me to devise my own plan for handling the problem	0.944				
My supervisor listens to my viewpoints about the work	0.930				
I am able to talk to my supervisor about the work I do	0.889				
Employee job satisfaction		0.854	0.910	0.873	0.772
All in all, I am satisfied with my present job	0.837				
In general, I like working here	0.899				
I am generally satisfied with the kind of work I do in this job	0.898				

Table 3. Results of discriminant validity

		PSAS	Sr-Se GX	EJS
Fornell-Larcker Criterium	Perceived supervisor autonomy support (PSAS)	0.926		
	Sr-Se guanxi (GX)	0.735	0.840	
	Employee job satisfaction (EJS)	0.695	0.654	0.879
Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio	Perceived supervisor autonomy support (PSAS)			
	Sr-Se guanxi (GX)	0.771		
	Employee job satisfaction (EJS)	0.747	0.709	

In contrast, the critical level of collinearity should be avoided for formative measurement models (Hair et al., 2021). As Table 4 showed all variance inflation factor (VIF) values of formative indicators were below five, there was no issues of collinearity (Ali et al., 2018; Hair et al., 2019). Further, the formative indicators' significance and relevance were tested by Bootstrapping, and the results of this are presented in Table 4. There was an outer weight not significant, showing the weakly relative contribution to the construct; however, the outer loading of this indicator was greater than 0.50, which presented its absolute contribution to the construct and allowed this indicator to be retained (Hair et al., 2021). Further, according to Hair et al. (2019) and Li et al. (2021), it was indicated that deleting any indicator may reduce the content validity of the model, as formative indicators are not interchangeable. Therefore, 6 indicators were retained. With verification of the reflective and formative measurement models, the study was able to assess the structural model.

Table 4. Assessment of the formative measurement model

Constructs and items	VIF	Outer weights	Outer loadings
Autonomous motivation			
Because I enjoy this work very much	1.754	0.038 n's	0.668
Because I have fun doing my job	3.141	0.718**	0.983
For the moments of pleasure that this job brings me	3.238	0.296*	0.906
I chose this job because it allows me to reach my life goals	2.232	0.349**	0.840
Because this job fulfils my career plans	2.419	0.373**	0.875
Because this job fits my personal values	1.413	0.462**	0.823

Note: **p<0.01, *p<0.05, n's. p>0.05.

4.2 Assessment of the structural model

The structural model was assessed to test the relationships between constructs. Firstly, as all values of VIF in the structural model were below the threshold of five, there were no collinearity issues (Ali et al., 2018; Hair et al., 2019). Secondly, as all R^2 values were no less than the minimum limit of 0.10, R^2 values of all constructs were satisfactory (presented in

Table 5). Thirdly, Table 5 presents that all Q^2 values were larger than zero, so the predictive relevance of endogenous constructs was achieved (Sarstedt et al., 2014).

Table 5. Results of values for R^2 and Q^2

Construct	**R^2**	**Q^2**
PSAS	0.539	0.428
AM	0.605	0.363
EJS	0.717	0.492

Note: PSAS, perceived supervisor autonomy support; EJS, employee job satisfaction; AM, autonomous motivation.

Finally, the significance and relevance of path coefficients was tested by running Bootstrapping, and the results of hypotheses testing were presented in Table 6. Sr-Se guanxi significantly impacted on autonomous motivation (β=0.373, p=0.000<0.01) and perceived supervisor autonomy support (β=0.734, p=0.000<0.01), however, the relationship between Sr-Se guanxi and employee job satisfaction was insignificant (β=0.057, p=0.322>0.05). Therefore, H1a and H1c were confirmed, while H1b was rejected. Perceived supervisor autonomy support was found to be significantly related to autonomous motivation (β=0.462, p=0.000<0.01) and employee job satisfaction (β=0.154, p=0.031<0.05), therefore, H2a and H2b were confirmed. As autonomous motivation was positively related to employee job satisfaction (β=0.683, p=0.000<0.01), H3 was confirmed.

Table 6. Results of hypotheses testing

Hypothesis	Structural path	Path coefficients	Confidence intervals		t values	*p* values
			2.5%	97.5%		
H1a	Sr-Se GX→ AM	0.373	0.249	0.485	5.971	0.000**
H1b	Sr-Se GX→ EJS	0.057	-0.057	0.156	0.992	0.322 n's.
H1c	Sr-Se GX→ PSAS	0.734	0.679	0.784	25.872	0.000**
H2a	PSAS → AM	0.462	0.359	0.578	7.605	0.000**
H2b	PSAS → EJS	0.154	0.015	0.275	2.158	0.031*
H3	AM → EJS	0.683	0.574	0.809	10.962	0.000**

Note: Sr-Se GX, Sr-Se guanxi; PSAS, perceived supervisor autonomy support; EJS, employee job satisfaction; AM, autonomous motivation; **p<0.01, *p<0.05, n's. p>0.05.

4.3 Mediation analysis

Table 7 presented the results of direct and indirect effects of four groups of structural paths. Partial mediation means both indirect and direct effect significant (Hair et al., 2021), therefore, testing results confirmed that autonomous motivation partially mediated the relationship between perceived supervisor autonomy support and employee job satisfaction, and perceived supervisor autonomy support partially mediated the relationship between Sr-Se guanxi and autonomous motivation. In addition, full mediation occurs, when indirect effect is significant but direct effect is not (Hair et al., 2021). In this regard, this study's results verified that autonomous motivation fully mediated the relationship between Sr-Se guanxi and employee job satisfaction, and perceived supervisor autonomy support fully mediated the relationship between Sr-Se guanxi and employee job satisfaction.

Table 7. Results of mediation

	Mediator	**Direct effect**		**Indirect effect**		**Mediation**
		Coefficient	**p value**	**Coefficient**	**p value**	
PSAS → EJS	AM	0.154	0.031*	0.316	0.000**	Partial mediation
Sr-Se GX → EJS	AM	0.057	0.322 n's.	0.055	0.000**	Full mediation
Sr-Se GX → AM	PSAS	0.373	0.000**	0.339	0.000**	Partial mediation
Sr-Se GX → EJS	PSAS	0.057	0.322 n's.	0.113	0.031*	Full mediation

Note: **p<0.01, *p<0.05, n's. p>0.05; PSAS, perceived supervisor autonomy support; EJS, employee job satisfaction; AM, autonomous motivation; Sr-Se GX, Sr-Se guanxi.

5. Discussion, conclusion, and implications

This study proposed and empirically tested a model that investigated the structural relationships between Sr-Se guanxi, perceived supervisor autonomy support, autonomous motivation, and employee job satisfaction at IHCs in China. With the confirmation of the significant relationship between Sr-Se guanxi and autonomous motivation, the study provides

the empirical explanation for a general viewpoint that developing a high-quality guanxi tie with supervisors makes subordinates feel stronger motivation for a positive outcome within the hotels' operations (Wang, 2016; Wang et al., 2020). In contrast, the study's result shows that Sr-Se guanxi cannot contribute to employee job satisfaction enhancement, which contradicts the work of Cheung et al. (2009), Lv et al. (2022), and Zhai et al. (2013). Data of this study collected from IHCs may provide an explanation of the different result. Specifically, IHCs are impacted by home countries' culture to some extent, which resonates with Ren & Chadee's (2020) finding that Sr-Se guanxi as Chinese indigenous culture may be weakened in international hotels' operations. However, it does not mean that Sr-Se guanxi's role is weakened in all aspects at IHCs. For example, among all direct relationships of the model, the study finds that the relationship between Sr-Se guanxi and perceived supervisor autonomy support is the strongest one. This result not only reflects the fact that supervisors' autonomy support is based on development of mutual affection and trust, which are included into a high-quality guanxi (Cheng et al., 2009; Ren & Chadee, 2017), but also provides empirical evidence to show Sr-Se guanxi's strong role in IHCs' operations with the Chinese context.

In line with findings of other scholars (Gillet et al., 2012; Kuvaas, 2009; Yoo, 2015; Zhang et al., 2021) who drew on self-determination theory, the result presents the significant impact of perceived supervisor autonomy support on autonomous motivation within the hotel context, which has not been empirically reported in the literature of tourism and hospitality. As employee job satisfaction is a key for a hotel's competitive advantages, the study's results provide two critical ways for employee job satisfaction improvement. On the one hand, consistent with De Backer et al., (2021), Chang et al. (2015), and Moreau & Mageau (2012), the study's result indicates that employee who perceived supervisor autonomy support have the higher level of job satisfaction, and the study contextualises this result into the hotel industry. On the other hand, the study resonates with the research of Gillet et al. (2016),

Hewagama et al. (2019), and Vujčić (2017) to demonstrate that autonomously motivated employees are satisfied with their work in IHCs, as feeling work's significance and meaning contributes to developing a positive attitude.

Consonant with Hewagama et al. (2019), Hon et al. (2021), and Wang (2016) which confirm the mediating role of autonomous motivation within the hospitality research, the study's result notes that both Sr-Se guanxi and perceived supervisor autonomy support lead to employee job satisfaction improvement after employees experience autonomous motivation at IHCs in the Chinese context. Further, the mediating role of perceived supervisor autonomy support confirmed indicates that Sr-Se guanxi can improve employee job satisfaction and autonomous motivation, if employees perceive supervisor autonomy support within IHCs' operations. This result also supports the validity of segmentation approach for the mediating analysis in the research field of tourism and hospitality (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021). The theoretical and practical implications are listed below.

5.1 Theoretical implications

This study makes several contributions to the literature and theories. The first contribution of study is to enrich social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) through integrating the two theories in the model. On the one hand, social exchange theory is devoid of specificity in explaining the outcomes of guanxi, in particular in the hotel industry (Ren & Chadee, 2020); On the other hand, although self-determination theory is widely used to provide theoretical explanations for autonomous motivation, there is little empirical attention to how it is impacted by a construct representing the dyadic relationship. Therefore, the study verifies the direct relationship between Sr-Se guanxi and autonomous motivation, and their relationship mediated by perceived supervisor

autonomy support, to initially provide a clear and comprehensive explanation on how and why the two constructs are related in the hotel industry. Compared to the work of Wang (2016), which indicates that dyadic leader-follower relationships contribute to work motivation from the perspective of work-related interaction, this study assesses the specific type of motivation (autonomous motivation) and is from the perspective of non-work-related interaction to enrich the relevant research. In addition, previous researchers (e.g., Guan & Frenkel, 2020; Wang et al., 2020) present that Sr-Se guanxi makes individuals feel motivation to achieve a positive outcome, however, the relationship between the two constructs is still vague and devoid of empirical evidence. In this regard, the study's empirical result fills this research gap.

Secondly, the study deepens the research on perceived supervisor autonomy support. Previous research primarily focuses on the consequences of perceived supervisor autonomy support (De Backer et al., 2021; Chang et al., 2015; Gillet et al., 2012; Yoo, 2015). However, the investigation into the antecedents developing perceived supervisor autonomy support remains rare. In response to that call, the study is among initial attempts to assess Sr-Se guanxi as a driver of perceived supervisor autonomy support, and verifies the positive relationship between them and the mediating role of perceived supervisor autonomy support.

Lastly, the study extends the hospitality research through exploring how IHCs' operations are influenced within a cultural-relational context. Even though numerous researchers (e.g., Li et al., 2018; Lv et al., 2022; Mejia et al., 2020; Ren & Chadee, 2020; Wang et al., 2020; Yang & Lau, 2015) have explored the significance of guanxi in the Chinese hotels, very limited empirical attention is paid to foreign-owned hospitality organisations, such as IHCs. Extant literature reports that international hotels' operations weaken the role of Sr-Se guanxi (Ren & Chadee, 2020), which may make managers and researchers from international hotels or foreign-owned organisations underestimate the significance of Sr-Se guanxi (Lv et al., 2022). However, this study contextualises Sr-Se guanxi into IHCs to reveal that Sr-Se

guanxi plays significantly direct and indirect roles in promoting perceived supervisor autonomy support, autonomous motivation, and employee job satisfaction at IHCs within the Chinese context. In particular, to face with inconsistent and mixed findings on the relationship between Sr-Se guanxi and employee job satisfaction (Chueng et al., 2009; Lv et al., 2022; Mejia et al., 2020; Zhai et al., 2013), full mediating roles of autonomous motivation and perceived supervisor autonomy support confirmed in this study provide a new explanation on how Sr-Se guanxi contributes to employee job satisfaction in the hotel industry and IHCs' operations. Overall, the study is an attempt to extend the application of Chinese indigenous culture into multinational corporations' operations in China.

5.2 Practical implications

The study's results provide practical implications for IHCs' operators and employees. Firstly, the study provides a further understanding of guanxi behaviours in a context where western-based management system dominates. IHCs' operations are based on Western-cultural management systems in which developing high-quality guanxi and social interactions outside the work are not emphasised (Ren & Chadee, 2020). However, this study recommends that IHCs cannot underestimate the role of guanxi which has been deeply rooted into Chinese cultural norms. Specifically, employees of IHCs are encouraged to develop a high-quality guanxi with their supervisors through non-work-related social activities (e.g. having dinner together, visiting supervisors or sharing feelings), which in turn employees are autonomously motivated and satisfied with their work. Consequently, it promotes high-quality service to customers delivered and turnover rate reduced. Employees also need to be aware that enhancing job satisfaction through developing a high-quality Sr-Se guanxi may have a process of psychological change rather than an immediate effect; more specifically, employees would

feel supervisor autonomy support or internal locus of causality before their job satisfaction is promoted.

Secondly, when considering support that supervisors provide to their subordinates, it is suggested to concentrate on autonomy support. Supervisor autonomy support leads to a perceived internal locus of causality, while perceived general supervisor support incurring controlled motivation may hamper autonomous motivation and employee job satisfaction (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Kanat-Maymon & Reizer, 2017). Specifically, supervisors are recommended to give more choices, options, feedback, open dialogue, opportunities for thought exchange, and trust to their subordinates. However, social exchange indicates that supervisor autonomy support does not only depend on one-way effort; instead, this is the reciprocal result, because developing a positive guanxi is a significant driver of perceived supervisor autonomy support. Employees need to actively develop a positive guanxi with their supervisors to nurture mutual communication, affection and trust.

Lastly, a credible way for IHCs supporting the establishment of a positive Sr-Se guanxi tie is to develop mentorship programmes, which aim to cultivate mutual affection and trust. As guanxi is based on social exchanges, effectively implementing mentorship programmes need two-way interactions and input (Yang & Lau, 2015). Mentorship programmes encourage supervisors and subordinates to have social interactions after working time, to understand reciprocal working and life situations, to promote two-way communication, and to share mutual thoughts. According to mentorship programmes, supervisors and subordinates are expected to become emotionally-connected to and trusting in, one another (Chen et al., 2009). It is also urgent to develop mentorship programmes in IHCs within the Chinese context, as expatriates who are not familiar with Chinese indigenous culture are increasing (Ren & Chadee, 2020). In response to that call, it is suggested that mentorship programme should include cross-culture communication to help expatriates understand guanxi behaviours and adopt to Chinese

work environment so that expatriates' career, job attitude, and retention are not negatively influenced.

5.3 Limitations and directions for future research

This research has several limitations which provide directions for future research. First, the research was conducted in Chengdu and Chongqing, which are two of Chinese national central cities. To more comprehensively understand guanxi behaviours in IHCs within the Chinese context, it will be beneficial to conduct the research in other national central cities (e.g. Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, etc.) which are situated in the different economic regions of China. Second, this research collected data through self-report. Even though there were no significant common method biases, assessing longitudinal data is recommended for future research. Last, to further assess influences of Chinese culture on IHCs' operations, the future research is suggested to explore guanxi's antecedents which represent Chinese characteristics or cultural norms (e.g. collectivism, power distance, etc.), and to invite the participation of expatriate employees who may be not familiar with Chinese culture.

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