

The Relationship between the Quality of Workplace Relationships and Employees' Level of Stress By

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Abstract—During the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been dramatic changes in employees' working environment. And the workplace relationships and employees' stress levels have never been more important. At the same time, organizations need to respond to these changes in time to enhance employees' job performance. This paper aims to investigate the relationship between workplace relationships and employees' stress levels. And the effects of employees' level of stress and external help on their job performance within workplace. Therefore, the research established an integrated model to study the influence of stress levels on employees' job performance and emphasized on the influence of organizational support and social support on employees' job performance. This study conducted a questionnaire survey and received effective responses from 406 participants, and analyzed the data by using the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). According to the findings, high-quality of workplace relationships will lower employees' stress levels. In addition, the results also showed that the increased stress will have negative outcomes on job performance, and organizational support and social support will enhance employees' job performance within workplace. Finally, based on the research results, this dissertation puts forward some suggestions for organizations to help employees cope with stress.

Keywords—workplace relationship, stress levels, job performance, organizational support, social support

I. INTRODUCTION

A. The Impacts of the Pandemic on Individuals

In recent years, the coronavirus disease COVID-19 has caused a profound and long-lasting influence on the human beings' both psychical and mental health (Connor *et al.*, 2021). According to this research, the pandemic would affect population's mental health in the aspects of suicidal ideation, depression, defeat and anxiety. In addition, it pointed out that young generations and those with pre-existing mental health issues would be more affected by the pandemic and had worse health outcomes. Furthermore, states would have different policies and quarantine strategies according to the specific situation of the epidemic.

According to Brodeur (2021), government interventions such as the implementation of lockdowns during the COVID-19 may cause severe psychological problems. The study pointed out that although lockdowns would be beneficial to control the spread of the virus, it would cause substantial impacts on human-beings such as the issues of intensity and loneliness.

Moreover, Zhou and Kan (2021) investigated the changes within individuals in the aspects of labor earning, working time and different stress levels during the lockdown periods by analyzing the longitudinal data from the UKHLS covid study. The study found that the pandemic and its relevant lockdown implementations would have unequal and diverse

impacts on individuals' income levels and their psychological well-beings according to their gender, race and education level. Therefore, it can be concluded that the COVID-19 would have varying impacts on individuals' daily routine from physical and mental health to income level and working hours.

The impacts of the pandemic on individuals' personal and work lives inspired people to explore employees' psychological health under this particular situation. At the same time, organizations need to conduct reasonable measures to provide support for employees to help employees maintain positive well-beings during this difficult period.

As the severe outcomes that the pandemic would bring in the aspects of both individuals' well-beings and work lives, the COVID-19 has raised individuals' awareness of the significance to pursue a positive and healthy working environment. According to Kelloway and Day (2005), working was a crucial factor for individuals' healthy issues and an underlying healthy resource that would protect individuals from psychological issues and help them recover from mental issues. In addition, the study pointed out that unhealthy working environments would cause serious economic and social expense. Hence, it is important for business to define and develop a benign workplace environment.

B. Workplace Relationships

Sarangi and Nayak (2016) proposed that workplace played a vital role in employees' daily lives and organizations' success. Moreover, it highlighted employees needed to be feel supported and connected by both leaders and colleagues. According to Njenga and his colleagues (2015) found out that the negative relationship between employees and their supervisors and communications between coworkers were major factors to poor working environment. Moreover, it was a crucial motivator to employees' job commitment and enabled employees to achieve goals for organizations.

Hai and Rabenu (2018) demonstrated that employees were supposed to cultivate positive and healthy workplace relationships to adapt themselves to the dynamic and unpredictable challenges in the present working environment. On the other side, Tran and his colleagues (2018) argued that employees' workplace relationships were closely related with their welfare and job performance. The pandemic in recent years has brought more attention to this issue. According to Long *et al.* (2022), the COVID-19 pandemic would cause severe outcomes for individuals' working lives. Moreover, the study argued that the pandemic would have impacts on employees' workplace relationships and it highlighted the importance of maintaining interactions

within workplace.

From previous researches, due to the dramatic impacts of the pandemic in workplace, it is a huge challenge for organizations to understand the importance of workplace relationships and figure out how workplace relationships will affect employees' well-beings.

C. Stress

In the study of Adeyemo and Ogunyemi (2015), stress was an undesired feature in individual's life. Moreover, according to Ballesteros and Whitlock (2009), it was a developmental requirement for population's survival and it had been considered as a risky factor contributing to poor well-beings and early death. Besides, it would have impacts on majority of physiological issues or diseases like depression or other serious illness.

In addition to its profound influence on people's physical and mental health, stress is a factor worth investigating in the workplace. According to Dar and his colleagues (2011) argued stress within organizations was a common phenomenon and may cause potential economic costs. The findings of the study showed that stress within workplace would cause subjective outcomes. For instance, employees would feel their value were underestimated and employees would fail to achieve work-life balance. The study also mentioned that stress in workplace was closely related with employees' job performance. The results stated that high level of job stress would result in psychological block, poor concentration and lower skills in decision-making process.

Existing research has recognized that employees' wellness played a critical role in the aspects of individual themselves, their families and the organizations they work for (Tetrick & Winslow, 2015). In this study, they argued stress management played a key part in the current working environment, moreover, stress management has gradually become an essential component of wellness programs within organizations.

On the other side, in a previous study, researchers stated that the influence of stress was not all negative, it would be beneficial for the contemporary world since it motivated individuals accomplish goals, make changes and improve self-performance (Cohen & Helquist, 2012). This study demonstrated the potential benefits that stress may bring in the workplace.

From discussed above, it can be seen that the existing researches have not reached a consensus on the impact of stress on employees' job performance. Moreover, it is also doubtful whether the previous conclusion about the impact of stress in workplace is still valid under the current COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, it is paramount to learn more about stress during this difficult period and understand how to manage the stress effectively. This paper will make an in-depth study of the impacts of the stress on employees' job performance under the epidemic situation.

D. Organization Support

Due to the rapid change of economy, organization has been forced to keep themselves adopted to various kinds of resources. Unquestionably, organizations need skilled and committed labor force to grab attractive and unlimited potential opportunities. Such employees would perform better in both internal and external working environment

(Kaur and Aneet, 2017). The research investigated the relationship between organizational support and employees' work commitment in organizations. According to Allen *et al.* (2008), organizational support was identified as how much the organizations value and respect their employees' feelings and contributions and how much the organizations care about employees' welfare.

According to Eisenberger *et al.* (1986), organizational support was developed by satisfying employees' emotional needs, showing willingness to reward employees for their additional efforts and giving them indispensable help to motivate employees perform better. The study established that high level of organizational support would strengthen employees' contributions to the organizations and realize the achievement of organizations' goals. Additionally, it was argued that organizational support would create an obligation in employees' minds of enhancing working commitment to repay organizations.

Moreover, according to Hui *et al.* (2022), organizational support had been considered to be the most critical factor which affected employees' job satisfaction. It proposed that managers needed to improve the level of organizational support and upgrade the working environment to improve the level of employees' job satisfaction.

All these previous literatures have highlighted the importance of organizational support and its impacts on employees' working behaviors. However, the relationship between organizational support and employees' job performance has rarely been investigated directly. As the diverse outcomes that organizational support may cause within organizations, there is a further problem needs to be addressed with how organizational support would affect employees' job performance.

E. Social Support

For decades, numerous researches have established that social support is an essential factor for individuals to maintain both physical and psychological well-beings. According to Ozbay and his colleagues (2007), poor social support would result in harmful outcomes while positive social support would protect individuals from potential mental illness. Moreover, the study also pointed out that high-quality social support would be beneficial for individuals to mitigate the stress and largely lower medical morbidity.

In addition, in the words of Langford and his co-workers (2008), they found out that social support was mainly identified into four aspects included emotional, informational, appraisal and instrumental. The study also demonstrated the importance of social support for individuals' physical well-beings. Furthermore, the study complemented that social support would also have influence in the aspects of personal abilities, sense of stability, positive emotions and reduced depression and anxiety.

Besides the effects on individuals' physical and psychological health, in a more recent study, Jolly *et al.* (2020) argued that social support could bring positive impacts on employees and their working organizations. According to the study, social support would be beneficial for employees' positive emotions and reactions, employees' job performance and the remission of job stress.

Several attempts have been made to investigate the importance of social support for people's physical and mental well-beings and also demonstrated that it played a critical role in workplace as well. However, few studies have examined whether social support could affect employees' job performance and the specific relationship between the two factors.

From discussed above, it can be seen the importance of organizational support and social support to individual employees and the success of organizations. However, the current pandemic has brought huge impacts on employees' working lives and the smooth operation of the organizations. Therefore, this paper will explore the influence of these two kinds of support on employees' job performance together with the investigation of workplace relationships and their stress levels.

In conclusion, this dissertation seeks to figure out the relationship between workplace relationships and employees' stress levels. Furthermore, the purpose of this paper is to unravel whether organizational support and social support can help employees relieve stress and lead to better job performance within organizations. Compared with existing studies from domestic and abroad, the main contributions of this paper are: firstly, the paper chose the employees under the current epidemic as main research objects which supplemented the deficiency of previous studies. Secondly, it expanded based on previous literatures and would have a better understanding of how stress would affect job performance and whether external help could lead to better job performance. Thirdly, this thesis provided some practical constructive advice and strategies for organizations to help their employees cope with stress and perform better within workplace.

The rest of the paper is arranged in the following way. In section two, this thesis provides a literature review about the relevant variables. Then, the methodology and data description will be introduced in section three. In section four, the paper analyses the results of the data, and finally comes to a conclusion of the whole research and propose some constructive suggestions for organizations to help employees relieve the stress and preform effectively.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. The Quality of Workplace Relationships

Numerous researches (Ferris *et al.*, 2009; Tran *et al.*, 2018; Liden and Graen, 2017) were carried out to study the workplace relationships and try to understand how the quality of relations at workplace affects employees' well-beings and job performance.

1) Definition of workplace relationships and potential outcomes

Ferris and his colleagues (2009) defined workplace relationships as the information exchange process between employees and organizations. In their study, it was also argued that workplace relationships would have impacts on employees' job satisfaction and organizational citizenship behaviors. Similarly, Tran *et al.* (2018) demonstrated that higher levels of interaction quality in workplace would lead to better information exchange, as a result, employees would feel less uncertain about their jobs and objectives. This paper

also examined that positive workplace relationships would affect employees working attitudes and job performance by analyzing results from a questionnaire survey using a Structural Equation Modeling approach (SEM).

2) Relationships between supervisors and subordinates

Additionally, Tran *et al.* (2018) suggested that the relationships between supervisors and subordinates would make a dramatic influence on the quality of workplace relationships and employees' interactions in workplace. Moreover, employees could rely on their leaders directly by maintaining positive relationships between leads and subordinates, thus they could have an exchange process of specialized abilities and available materials. According to Liden and Graen (2017), they argued that managers were supposed to promote effective communication between leaders and their own direct subordinates to build mutual trust and internal motivation within working organizations. Hence, high-quality superior and subordinate relationships would contribute to higher level of trust and respect between each other, enhancing employees' sense of responsibility and providing encouragement in workplace.

Likewise, Gaur and Ebrahimi (2013) focused on investigating relationships between leaders and subordinates in workplace. They found out healthy boss-subordinate relationships could bring positive results on employees' job behaviors. These behaviors included frequent discussion about work-related problems, active engagement in decision-making process and high availability for leaders when required, which would influence work performance directly. This study argued that effective managers needed to include managing their relationships with leaders on a daily basis. Thus, they needed to apply themselves to developing relationships which met the critical needs for both parties.

The studies mentioned above mainly focused on finding out how the quality of workplace relationships affects employees' work behaviors and job performance and they emphasized on the relationships between leaders and subordinates. Therefore, these studies have some limitations as they focused on one specific type of relations at workplace.

3) Relationships between co-workers

Sahoo (2016) analyzed another type of interpersonal relationship and he demonstrated that poor relationships with co-workers were a vital cause of employees' work stress. In this study, it also argued that stressed employees tended to be unhealthy and less productive in workplace than those who were not stressed. Besides, Teasdale (2006) indicated that individuals would have greater pressure if their working was too demanding. Normally, this would make employees to be more productive and satisfied with work. However, after reaching the point of diminishing returns, the increase of workload would have negative impacts. For instance, employees' psychological health would be affected and their working efficiency would be largely reduced. Likewise, Jia and Shoham (2012) also conducted a research about relations between coworkers in workplace and the paper found out that positive co-worker relationships would provide a source data for employees to exchange their emotional support as employees would help them understand the inner working environment.

4) *The impacts on employees' well-beings or psychological health*

According to Vaughn, Drake and Haydock (2016) suggested that the quality of workplace relationships would significantly influence employees' mental health and the results showed that participants who had positive workplace relationships reported much higher level of psychological well-beings (i.e., anxiety, depression and fulfillment) than those had poor quality of workplace relationships. This study conducted an online self-reported surveys and chose employed undergraduates as their main study participants.

Additionally, in the words of Maulik (2017), stress would be occurred when employees working under unsatisfactory working environments or feeling there was a lack of support from their colleagues and superiors. In a more recent research, Saleh *et al.* (2020) suggested that negative relations between employees would lead to serious psychological issues and employees were more likely to have negative emotions. In their study, they pointed out that poor workplace relationships tended to cause stress within workplace. However, this study was conducted in the particular working industry of emergency department and failed to explore the specific relationship between workplace relationships and employees' stress levels.

By reviewing previous literatures, the significance of maintaining positive workplace relationships was highlighted. Moreover, it can be concluded that the quality of workplace relationships within organizations will affect employees' physical and psychological wellbeings. However, although the existing studies demonstrated the influence on employees' mental health, none of them have investigated the specific relationship between relations at workplace and employees' stress levels. And by referring to the findings of Sahoo (2016) and Saleh *et al.* (2020), the following hypothesis is proposed.

Hypothesis 1: The quality of workplace relationships has a significant and negative effect on employees' level of stress.

B. Stress and Employees' Mental Health

1) Definition of stress

According to Christian and Obiageli (2019) defined stress as how our bodies responded and made readjustments to the changing demands within this dynamic world. The study also argued that it could be considered as a status of strain experienced by people when they met particular demands, restrictions or potential opportunities.

2) The effects of stress on employees' physical and mental health

A study argued that work played a central role in many people's lives and stress experienced at work would lead to adverse outcomes for employees' well-beings (Bradley and Sutherland, 1994). Many previous studies had examined varieties of stressors and tried to figure out their impacts. For instance, Cohen and his colleagues (1998) argued that harsh reprimand and unemployment would lead to chronic stress. In a more recent study, Sahoo (2016) mentioned that stress occurred when demands made on employees failed to match the resources available or could not satisfy their needs and motivation. It also suggested that stress would affect employees both physically and mentally, moreover, different

levels of stress would result in problems of varying severity. For example, high level of stress may increase heart rate, headaches and employees would become more irritated.

Likewise, in a paper about stress management, it suggested that stress experienced at work was caused by the failure of coping with demanding circumstance and it was different from diverse people and conditions (Mahakud *et al.*, 2018). It suggested that stress was a common phenomenon for individuals, however, the level of stress varied from individuals' interpersonal factors. Similar to the findings of previous literatures mentioned above, this study also suggested that stressed people would experience more health problems. Additionally, the paper mentioned that stress could be minimized by offering effective help and this would be helpful for individuals to build a positive and flourishing social life. This viewpoint provides an inspiration that valid support should be provided for employees to help them cope with stress. And this paper will discuss this issue in later paragraphs.

From previous literatures, it can be concluded that earlier studies investigated and highlighted the effects of stress on employees' physical and psychological well-beings and some researchers pointed out that organizations need to provide appropriate support. However, few studies have investigated how the employees' mental health would affect their job performance at workplace.

3) The effects of employees' mental health on their job performance

To overcome the limitation mentioned above, in a recent study, Kundi (2020) demonstrated that employees' mental health was one of the most significant factors for employees' job performance and the success for organizations. Similarly, several studies suggested that employees' well-beings would lead to different outcomes for both individuals and organizations. For instance, healthy well-beings would increase employees' working productivity (Hewett *et al.*, 2018), enhance employees' working engagement (Tisu *et al.*, 2020) and improve the level of consumers' satisfaction (Sharma *et al.*, 2016).

Furthermore, DiMaria and her colleagues (2020) conducted a research to figure out the role of employees' psychological well-beings in their job performance and found that happy employees would be more productive than those less happy or unhappy employees. The study argued that promoting employees' happiness was not only for employees themselves but also for the improvement of working efficiency and development of economic performance within working organizations. Additionally, Rostami (2019) argued that high level of workload and psychological issues could dramatically lower the quality of job performance. In a more recent research, Pourteimour and his colleagues (2021) studied employees' mental workload had largely increased during the pandemic period. Moreover, this study argued that the level of employees' mental workload was closely related to their job performance.

These studies mentioned above stressed the importance of employees' psychological well-beings to individuals' well-beings and the success of organizations. However, previous literatures either studied the relationship between the level of employees' stress and their mental health or investigated the relationship between employees' psychological well-beings

and their job performance within workplace. None of the existing studies have investigated the immediate relationship between employees' level of stress and their job performance. A clear understanding of the relationship between these two variables would help organizations pay attention to employees' mental health and stress levels, and takes measures to improve employees' job performance. Hence, it is worth studying the relationship between employees' stress levels and job performance. Based on the previous literatures, it can be speculated that stress was closely associated with employees' job performance in workplace. Consequently, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 2: The employees' level of stress has a significant and negative effect on their job performance.

C. Organizational Support and Social Support

1) Definition of organizational support

In the last few decades, many studies have stressed the significance of organizational support to both employees and organizations. According to Kurtessis *et al.* (2017), they identified organizational support as to what extent the organizations valued employees' contributions and cared about their well-beings.

2) The impacts of organizational support on individuals during the pandemic

Furthermore, Sinclair and his colleagues (2020) pointed out COVID-19 has completely changed employees' way of work and blended it with individuals' personal lives unprecedentedly. For instance, the boundaries between work and life were blurred as employees may need to work at home and look after children in the same time due to the pandemic. In addition,

Chatzittofis and his colleagues (2020) conducted a study to investigate the influence that organizational support would have on employees' mental health during this pandemic. The research indicated that organizational support would lower the intensity of self-assessed stress and reduce employees' depression. Besides, the research showed it was vital for organizations to value employees' health and safety and show support during this different time.

3) The impacts of organizational support on employees' psychological health

Moreover, to further study the psychological influence of organizational support on employees, Özdemir (2022) had a research about investigating the relationship between organizational support and employees' happiness at work. And the paper examined that organizational support would have a moderate influence on employees' happiness in workplace. Furthermore, this study found out employees who receive higher quality of organizational support were more likely to have better psychological states and lower level of stress.

These researches mentioned above all discussed organizational support played a crucial role in employees' lives especially during the difficult time like pandemic and would affect their psychological health. However, none of them had mentioned whether organizational support would affect employees' job performance or working behaviors at workplace.

4) The impacts of organizational support on employees' job performance

Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) conducted a research by reviewing how employees feel their working organizations concerned about them and how the organizations value their contributions within workplace. The study found out that organizational support would make employees feel they had the responsibility to help the organization, satisfy their emotional needs and enhance their working behaviors at workplace. It can be seen that organizational support was a critical component in individuals' working and personal life and it would affect both their psychological well-beings and job performance at workplace.

5) Definition of social support

According to Pearson (1986), social support was identified as an information exchange process in three aspects. Firstly, it included the information that individuals cared for, for example, the individuals' well-beings and educational resource. Secondly, it covered the information that individuals valued like recognition and respect from others. Thirdly, the information of which social network that individuals belonged to was also included. For instance, individuals with same group membership would have a common language and mutual responsibilities.

6) The impacts of social support on employees' physical health

Reblin and Uchino (2008) examined the relationship between social support and individuals' physical health. The study showed that social support would directly affect physical health outcomes involved potential inflammation and health behaviors mechanisms. In addition, this paper demonstrated that it was promising that social support would influence the quality of individuals' lives with chronic disease although the long-term effects on physical health was remained to be determined. One key point worth mentioning in the study of Chatzittofis and his colleagues (2020) is that it demonstrated that social support by colleagues or family members and a healthy working climate would have positive impacts on employees' wellbeings.

The studies mentioned above demonstrated that social support would have impacts on individuals' physical health and they highlighted the significance of social support in individuals' workplace and personal lives. However, the research objects for these studies were ambiguous and extensive, and they failed to cover the aspect of individuals' psychological wellbeings.

7) The impacts of social support on employees' psychological health

Hence, in order to overcome this limitation, Ozbay *et al.* (2007) pointed out that social support was an essential component to maintain both physical and psychological health and it could enhance resilience to stress. The study showed that poor social support may result in negative outcomes and high level of social support would have a protective effect for mental illness. This research examined the effects that social support would have on individuals' physical and psychological well-beings while it did not study the effects on employees' work behaviors at workplace.

8) The impacts of social support on employees' working behaviors

To supplement the point mentioned above, Chou (2015) found out social support would have influence on employees' working productivity, working engagement and their abilities when making decisions indirectly. In addition, according to Giao and his colleagues (2020), social support played a significant role in the effectiveness of employees' job performance. Moreover, this study pointed out that organizations needed to create positive working atmosphere which was beneficial for employees' psychological well-beings. And organizations should establish reasonable policies to promote social support among co-workers and supervisors to help employees improve working behaviors. Moreover, this literature not only mentioned the impacts of social support on employees' job performance but also suggested that high-quality of social support may help employees relieve stress within organizations. And this paper will actually investigate whether social support would help employees cope with stress and how the social support affect employees' job performance.

From previous literatures, it can be concluded that organizational support and social support both played a critical role in individuals' lives and would have impacts on their both physical and mental health. Moreover, it showed that these two kinds of support would bring impacts on employees' working behaviors and personal life especially during the difficult times like pandemic. However, none of the existing studies have examined how organizational support and social support could affect the process when stress had impacts on employees' job performance. From the discussion above, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 3: External help has a significant and negative moderate effect on stress at job performance.

From the explanation above, the conceptual model for this research is presented as follows:

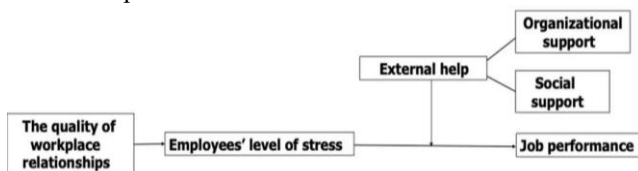


Fig. 1. The conceptual model.

III. METHODOLOGY

In order to examine the research model and hypotheses presented, this research adopted the quantitative research method. In addition, to gather enough data, this research conducted large sample questionnaire surveys. The following parts will present the measure, sample and data collection and data analysis technique. The measure is to use the observable explicit variable to measure the latent variables. The sample and data collection are to collect sufficient and reliable data for further exploration. The data analysis technique is to process and analyze the collected data to obtain the relationship between the variables.

A. Measures

This research constructed a 42-item measurement scale to measure the underlying variables referring to previous

literatures. Firstly, the quality of workplace relationships within organizations was measured by the 17-item scale from Sias (2005) and Tran *et al.* (2008) to measure the level of information sharing and trust issues. Secondly, a 10-item scale of The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) was adopted to examine participants' level of stress. Thirdly, to measure the organization support, a 5-item scale questions were referred to the research of Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002). Fourthly, a 5-item scale was used to measure the social support and the questions were referred to the study of Chou (2015). Fifthly, a 5-item scale which was applied by Tran *et al.* (2018) was adopted to examine the job performance. The measure of quality of workplace relationships, organizational support, social support and job performance adopted the five-point Likert Scale (1=strongly disagree, 2=agree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree) to evaluate the level of participants' agreements. For the measurement of participants' stress levels, the questionnaire also used five-point scale (1=never, 2=almost never, 3=sometimes, 4=fairly often, 5=very often) to evaluate the frequency of participants for conducting different specific things. The selected measurement variables are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Observable variables

Variables	Observable variables	Questions
The quality of workplace relationships (QOWR)	Trust	Q5–Q13
	Information sharing	Q14–Q21
Employees' level of stress (ELOS)	Ambiguity	Q24–28
	Conflict	Q28–Q33
External help (ETH)	Organizational support	Q34–Q38
	Social support	Q39–Q43
Job Performance (JPF)	Work achievement	Q44–Q46
	Work attitude	Q47–Q48

B. Sample and Data Collection

One of the most significant issues is the quantity of participants to use for the research sample during the sampling process. According to Andrade (2020), a larger sample than necessary would be more representative for the population and provided results more accurately. Nevertheless, the increase in accuracy would be reduced investing more expense and efforts to involve more participants when the sample size had reached specific point. Therefore, it is crucial for the study to determine the sample size.

Green (1991) proposed that a principle applied to most general situations for determining the sample size. According to his research, sample size = 50+ (8* the quantity of measurement items). In this study, there were 42 measurement items in total to examine all the relevant variables. Therefore, based on previous theory, the ideal sample size for this study would be 386 effective responses. Given the possibility of invalid samples, this study distributed 450 copies, so the reliability of the research would be guaranteed. We distributed online questionnaires to employees located in Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Shanghai, Beijing, Liaoning, Anhui, Fujian and other places. They all come

from different industries such as finance, manufacturing, education, etc.

Another key point was to control the effect of irrelevant variables on the research. Firstly, the distribution of the questionnaire ensured the proportion of male and female in the sample was close to 1:1 to control the influence of gender. Secondly, to control the influence of age, the research examined participants from different age groups. Thirdly, the questionnaires were distributed to participants from diverse working industries so that the influence of job types will be controlled. Finally, employees with different lengths of service were invited to participate in this research to control the impact of working experience.

Before participants taking part in the questionnaire survey, an informed consent form and participant information were provided to ensure that participants understand why this research is being done and what contents the research involved. Moreover, it was highlighted that the participation for the survey is voluntary and participants are free to withdraw anytime without explanation. The researchers' contact information and work address were clearly identified in case the participants have further questions.

1) Ethical requirements

To meet and ensure the ethical requirements, an introduction was involved in the very beginning of the questionnaire survey. The foreword explained the brief background and the intention of the study. It was clearly clarified that the participants' confidential information would be strictly protected and it would be only available for the researcher. Due to the anonymity of the questionnaire, participants could feel free to state their actual situations regarding to the relevant variables studied in this paper.

This study conducted online questionnaire surveys and received 436 anonymous responses in total through varying social platforms. It took approximately one month to complete data collection from March to April 2020. However, 30 questionnaire responses were eliminated from the data analysis due to the uncomplete information of participants. Hence, the usable response received for the questionnaire was 406 copies and the effective response rate for this study was 93.12%. To better measure all the latent variables, the questionnaire was adjusted many times.

C. Data Analysis Technique

At present, the quantitative research in social science mostly adopts the linear regression analysis method, that is to test the direction and magnitude of the influence of some independent variables on the dependent variable on the basis of controlling some variables. When conceptualizing an abstract variable (such as level of stress), researchers often need to synthesize multiple indicators into one factor through factor analysis and then put it into a regression model for analysis to reduce multicollinearity. Judging from the existing research results, the operation of this method is relatively simple and the results are easy to interpret. However, the limitations of linear regression analysis are also apparent. First, multiple causal analysis is not possible for multiple linear regression models. Therefore, a variable as both dependent and independent variables cannot be tested through a simple regression model. Second, when performing a factor analysis every time, some information

will be lost. If the correlation between the alternatives is not strong enough, the resulting factor will be far from the variable that the research intended to actually measure. In this case, the validity of the study may be compromised if there are extracted factors in the regression model. Again, regression analysis requires independent variables to be independent of each other, but in fact this condition is difficult to meet in social science research. On this basis, this paper intends to use Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) for analysis.

The Structural Equation Model (SEM) is adopted to analyze the relationship of multiple dependent variables. In addition, this model has an advantage of testing whether the moderating variable of external help has an impact on the process of stress on job performance. Hence, this research mainly adopted the Structural Equation Model (SEM) to analyze the relationship of multiple variables. There are six steps in total to conduct the structural equation model. Firstly, the conceptual model needs to be built. Based on the previous review, the conceptual model for this research was developed and illustrated in Fig. 2.

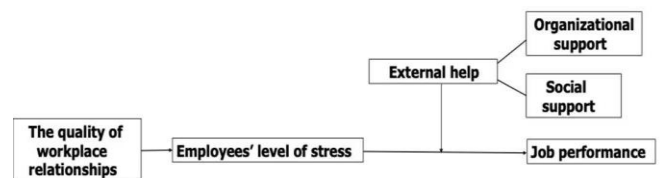


Fig. 2. The conceptual model.

Secondly, according to the conceptual model and the requirements of SEM, four hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 1: The quality of workplace relationships has a negative and significant effect on employees' level of stress.

Hypothesis 2: The employees' level of stress has a negative and significant effect on employees' job performance.

Hypothesis 3: External help has a positive and significant effect on employees' job performance.

Hypothesis 4: The intersection of employees' level of stress and external help has a significant effect on their job performance.

The hypothesis 3 and hypothesis 4 would be used together to determine whether external help has a moderating effect. By proposing these hypotheses, this paper could figure out the relationships among different variables and the moderate effect of external help.

After the structural model had been constructed, the measurement model needed to be built. All the variables in this paper were latent variables, as a result, the data could not be measured directly. Therefore, observable variables were chosen to reflect those latent variables.

The chosen manipulate variables are showed in the questionnaire.

Once the variables were determined and the responses for questionnaires were collected as mentioned above, the reliability and validity of the data would be analyzed to ensure the authenticity and reliability of the data. Then, exploratory factor analysis would be adopted to all factors together for a preliminary evaluation of dimensionality, convergence and discriminant validity. Accordingly, the model would be modified and adjusted according to the

preliminary results of exploratory factor analysis. Finally, Mplus would be used to measure and calculate the modified model and test the hypothesis to get the final conclusion.

IV. RESULTS

A. Demographic Characteristics

The questionnaire got answers of 436 respondents, however, out of these responses, the data for 30 copies were uncomplete and invalid. Table 2 illustrated the demographic data of 406 participants. It can be seen that the male to female ratio was close to 1:1 and the majority of participants were in the age group of 25–35 years old. Besides, over half of respondents worked as full-time job and the groups of part-time job and intern were also included in the question. Furthermore, respondents' working hours in their own working areas varies mostly from one to five years. The remaining three groups with different working experience shared equal proportions. It can be concluded that the experimental subjects have basically met the requirements of eliminating the influence of irrelevant variables.

Table 2. Demographic characteristics

Characteristics	Number (N = 406)	Percentage
Gender Male	201	49.51%
Female	205	50.49%
Age From 18 to 25	162	39.90%
From 26 to 35	84	20.69%
From 36 to 45	80	19.70%
From 46 to 55	60	14.78%
Over 55	20	4.93%
kind of employment full-time job	233	57.39%
part-time job	97	23.89%
intern	76	18.72%
Working experience Under 1 year	86	21.18%
From 1 to 5 year	170	41.87%
From 6 to 10 year	89	21.92%
over 10 years	61	15.02%

B. Reliability and Validity

Firstly, the research conducted the test of reliability and validity. It can be seen that Table 3 illustrated the descriptive statistics included the mean and standard deviation. In addition, the numbers of items for four variables were also listed in the table. Specifically, the Cronbach's alphas of the variables were greater than 0.8. In the findings of data collection, the research found out that the corrected item-total correlations of all the items were larger than 0.3 which means the reliability of the data meets the measurement requirements.

Table 3. Reliability and validity

Variables	Numbers of items	Cronbach's alpha	Mean	Standard deviation
The Quality of Workplace Relationships (QOWR)	17	0.927	3.77	1.246
Employees' Level of Stress (ELOS)	10	0.821	3.83	1.238
Job Performance (JPF)	5	0.919	3.76	1.234
External Help (ETH)	10	0.873	3.81	1.243

Then, this research conducted Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) to find the quantity of factors which influence the observed variables. Also, EFA could help to figure out the correlation between all the factors and observed variables, which was aimed to figure out the internal connection of the relatively large number of variables. In addition, the most important function of EFA was to screen out the most suitable variables for measurement, so as to reduce the variables which were selected to be the measurement indicators to construct the path analysis. According to Hair and his colleagues (1998), they found that the factor loading could be regarded as practical significance when it was greater than 0.5. Furthermore, the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) should be larger than 0.5 so that the research had construct validity. With these criteria above and the result of EFA, this research finally chose the following items: the quality of workplace relationships (Q5, Q8, Q10, Q11, Q18), employees' level of stress (Q24, Q25, Q26, Q27, Q28), external help (Q34, Q35, Q38, Q40, Q42), job performance (Q44, Q45, Q46, Q47, Q48). According to the analysis above, the final total number of items of the test for this research hypotheses was 20, hence, the effective sample size should be more than $210(50+8 \times 20)$. Moreover, the research got 406 effective responses and these responses identified constructs of the research. Finally, the research examined the final selected variables again. The results pointed out that the construct perfectly meet the demand of design and each item was mostly loaded on the construct the research designated.

The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) was 0.984, which fully met the research requirements.

The approximate chi-square value of Bartlett's sphericity test was 4055.358, the degree of freedom was 190, and the P value was 0.000, which was less than 0.01, and passed the significance test with a significance level of 1%. This research use principal component analysis to extracted factors, and the cumulative variables contribution rate reached 70%, which meant that four factors were explained by 70% of the data variability, and indicating that the original data could be fully reflected. Then, this research used Kaiser's eigenvalue with a greater-than-one criterion to identify the four factors that were extracted.

C. Convergent Validity and Discriminant Validity

As can be seen from the table below, this paper conducted Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) analysis for a total of 4 factors and 20 analysis items. This paper collected 406 effective samples, which was 10 times more than the number

of analysis items. Therefore, the quantity of sample for this research was adequate. In confirmatory factor analysis, Average Variance Extraction (AVE) and Composite Reliability (CR) were usually used to test the convergent validity of measurement scales. According to Fornell and Larcker (1981), in most cases, when the AVEs were bigger than 0.5 and the CR values were greater than 0.7, the construct convergent validity was high.

Table 4. Convergent validity and discriminant validity

	AVE		JPF	ETH
	QOWR	ELOS		
	0.918	0.691		
		0.832	0.816	
QOWR	0.921	0.699	0.815	0.833
ELOS		0.804	0.837	
JPF	0.908	0.664		
ETH		0.806	0.824	
	0.919	0.694		
		0.824	0.822	

Table 4 clearly illustrates that the estimates, AVEs and CR values of all factors. The estimates and AVEs were all greater than 0.5, and CR values were all greater than 0.7. The figures confirmed the convergent validity of all constructs, and also meant the reliability for each factor and each item of the research model met the standard. Besides, Fornell and Larcker (1981) pointed out that the model had a good discriminant validity when the AVEs of all the factors which were used as measurement factors was bigger than the squares of the correlation estimate of that factor with other ones. Additionally, Table 3 also states that all factors met the above requirements.

D. Structural Equation Modeling and Hypothesis Testing

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) is based on the covariance matrix of variables and uses maximum likelihood estimate to analyze the relationship between variables and tests the overall fit for the structural model. It can be seen that Table 5 shows the thresholds that the model fit indices of SEM need to meet, and all the model fit indices of SEM were met the acceptance requirement. Therefore, the results obtained by SEM were credible.

Table 5. The results of structural equation modeling

Model Fit Indices	Thresholds	SEM	References
CMIN/DF	<3	2.238	Byrne (2010)
RMSEA	<0.08	0.064	Bentler and Bonett (1980)
GFI	≥0.90	0.942	Tabachnick <i>et al.</i> (2012)
TLI	≥0.90	0.991	Bentler and Bonett (1980)
CFI	≥0.90	0.904	Bentler and Bonett (1980)

This paper mainly used the data of the formal questionnaire survey and used the software of SPSS and Mplus to demonstrate the impact mechanism empirically. And it included test reliability and validity, factor analysis,

and regression analysis to figure out the impacts between variables, and finally verified the research hypothesis proposed in this paper according to the results. The p-values of the correlations between the factors were significantly examined before drawing conclusions about the fitness of the model. If the p-value was less than 0.05 or 0.001, it meant that the estimated standardized path coefficients summarized were significant, so that the hypothesis could be accepted. As showed below, Table 6 illustrated the results of hypothesis testing. At the 0.001 level of confidence, all the path coefficients were positively and negatively significant, which meant the four hypotheses proposed in this paper (H1, H2, H3, H4) were all accepted. It was clearly proved in the results of this research that the quality of workplace relationships had a negative and significant impact on employees' level of stress.

The impact of employees' level of stress on job performance was negatively significant. Moreover, the results showed that the interaction term of employees' level of stress and external help had a significant negative effect on job performance, which meant the external help did have a significant moderation effect.

Table 6. The results of hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Path	Path coefficient	p-Value	Results
H1	ELOS ← QOWR	-0.971	***	Supported
H2	JPF ← ELOS	-0.905	***	Supported
H3	JPF ← ETH	-0.386	***	Supported
H4	JPF ← ELOS*ETH	-1.763	***	Supported

Note: * p-value < 0.10; ** p-value < 0.051

*** p-value < 0.001.

The table above stated that the path coefficient which represented the effect of QOWR on ELOS was -0.971, which means that employees with comfortable workplace relationships have lower level of stress. In Table 5, it was found that the effect of ELOS on JPF (path coefficient was -0.905) were more considerable than another predictor ETH (path coefficient was -0.386). The interaction term of ELOS and ETH had less effect (path coefficient was 0.763) on job performance compared with only ELOS, which means that workers with external help perform better than those without external help under the same pressure.

The following figure visually shows the results of SEM.

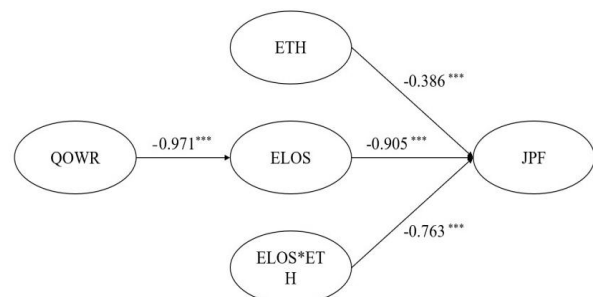


Fig. 3. The results of hypothesis testing.

V. DISCUSSION

A. *The Measurement Factors of Workplace Relationships*

As is shown from the results above, the quality of workplace relationships was indicated to be positively and significantly related to trust and information sharing. This hypothesis supports that the high-quality of workplace relationships is usually accompanied by high-quality trust and information sharing. These findings are consistent with the existing studies.

As for the positive correlation between trust and the quality of working relationship, the results of this paper were in line with the findings of Wong and Sohal (2002). In their research, they investigated that trust had a significant impact on overall relationship quality. One possible reason is that having a stable trust relationship with other employees will make employees feel safe in an uncertain work environment, so that they can get along better with other employees.

Moreover, the results supported a study of Sias (2006), which demonstrated that supervisor-subordinate relationship quality was positively correlated with the quantity and quality of information that employees receive from their immediate supervisors.

However, this paper only selects trust and information sharing for the influencing factors of work relationship quality, which is not enough to reflect all the influencing factors. And there may be an internal correlation between information sharing and trust, so the information reflected by the two selected variables may be duplicated. In the follow-up studies, more factors need to be selected to evaluate the quality of working relationships.

B. *Interpretation of Workplace Relationships and Stress*

This research also indicated that the quality of workplace relationships was negatively and significantly related to level of stress, which is the same with previous research findings. This result means that within high-quality workplace relationships, employees would receive more emotional support from colleagues and superiors conveniently and efficiently. Therefore, they tend to have lower stress levels. Likewise, the result supports the previous findings of Tran (2018), which pointed out that interactions with leaders and colleagues in positive work relationships would enhance employees' psychological attachment to the organization.

One possible reason for this is because sufficient information exchange with colleagues and supervisors can enable employees to better understand the working environment and working status. Moreover, employees would evaluate their own work more comprehensively, have a clearer vision of their career path and perform better when they meet uncertain situations. Because of the clear cognition at work, employees' anxiety would be largely reduced. As a result, they tended to have lower stress levels. In addition, this study found the mediating effect of social influence between employees' high-quality workplace relationships and work stress, and high-quality workplace relationships were considered to be an important driver of social impact. Therefore, high-quality working relationships will enhance the social impacts of employees, thereby reducing employee stress levels.

C. *Interpretation of Stress and Job Performance*

Moreover, the results pointed out employees' job performance dropped significantly as stress increased with or without outside help. These findings support the previous findings of Teasdale (2006), which indicated that excessive stress could lead to reduced productivity, job satisfaction, performance, mental health. And under excessive pressure, employees would have serious physical and mental health problems, also their work performance would be seriously affected.

In addition, the study also found that employees had more absenteeism and tardiness when faced with great job pressure. This result supports the previous study of Jamal (1984) that he argued that job stress would directly affect employees' job performance within workplace. Moreover, a close investigation of the two stressors: ambiguity and conflict may give more interpretation on this negative relationship.

Ambiguity and conflict have played a central role in numerous previous empirical researches. For instance, Van Sell and Schuler (1981) argued that a comprehensive understanding of ambiguity and role conflict would help organizations consolidate their positions in their specific fields and figure out the future development direction. Additionally, House & Rizzo (1972) related role conflict with performance and again relationships appeared to be negative. This research on stress and performance is reasonable and correct. Due to the source of stress, it is likely to hinder and negatively affect work performance.

It is difficult for employees to perform better at work when they are not clear about their job role, job orientation and job responsibilities, or when the information they receive from different people is conflicting and inconsistent. When stress is measured by means of stressors, there is a negative correlation between stress and work performance. However, if direct measurement or other methods are used to measure stress levels, the relationship between stress and work performance is inconclusive. Additionally, Anderson (1976) found that there is a curvilinear relationship between stress and job performance, whereas McGrath's (1976) study indicated that it was a positive linear relationship. Regardless of which way stress levels are measured, current research is insufficient to draw a firm conclusion, so more empirical studies are needed to investigate the relationship between stress and job performance.

Besides, there are fewer stressors selected in this paper. In the follow-up researches, more stressors like overload and resource insufficiency are needed to be considered. Hence, the relationship between stress and job performance can be examined more comprehensively and accurately. Finally, from previous research (Teasdale, 2006, Anderson, 1976), the findings showed that the effects of stress on work performance was not necessarily a linear relationship, there might be a tipping point. Before the tipping point, appropriate stress will promote work efficiency. On the contrary, when stress exceeds the tipping point, excessive pressure will reduce the work efficiency. In future research, consideration needs to be given to how the tipping point is measured and to which factors the tipping point for different employees is related.

D. Interpretation of Organizational Support and Social Support

At last, the study demonstrated that organizational support and social support can reduce the negative influence of stress on work relationships. These results support the previous study of Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002), which indicated that organizational support would employees feel obligated to help the organization, meet their socio-emotional needs and improve their job performance in the workplace.

A logical explanation is that employees who believe they are advocated by the organization would perform more effectively at work than employees with less support. Thus, employees would have the knowledge that they can rely on the organization and have a sense of security, thereby working errors would be reduced and job performance will be improved. Another possible interpretation is that after the organization provides help, employees improve their trust in the company and colleagues and superiors and clarify their job orientation and job responsibilities. Therefore, employees would have higher-quality work relationships and better performance at workplace.

Besides, the results were also in lined with the findings of Chou (2015), which pointed out that social support could affect employee productivity, work engagement and their ability to make decisions indirectly. A possible explanation is that social support moderates the intrapersonal relationship between work and role performance. Hence, employees will be less responsive to work stress after receiving social support and have less impacts on work performance.

The research in this paper shows the importance of providing employees with more organizational and social support. Enterprise managers should pay attention to employees' working relationships, give employees enough channels to obtain and exchange information and increase employees' trust in colleagues and supervisors. In addition, managers in organizations also need to provide sufficient organizational help to avoid conflicts of different information, as a result, employees can clearly define their job orientation and job responsibilities.

Furthermore, the society should also provide enough help to employees who face great pressure or serious work and life problems. Channels needed to be provided for employees to get help. Society needs to give reasonable suggestions to employees, so that employees know how to defuse and regulate stress. Consequently, they would focus more on work and have better work performance within organizations.

The mentioned above are the feasible suggestions for enterprises and society based on the results of this paper. However, this paper still has some limitations. For example, indicators used to measure stress levels: stressors may not be comprehensive enough, resulting in the relationship between stress and work performance to be not applicable to all stressors. In addition, this paper only draws the conclusion that external help will alleviate the impact of stress on job performance. However, the paper does not reach a firm conclusion on how external help has an effect. These limitations are the direction of improvement in the future of this article.

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper examined the relationship between workplace relationships and employees' stress levels. And this thesis also investigated the relationship between employees' level of stress and their job performance. The paper explored the factors that would influence job performance within workplace. Since the importance of workplace relationships for both employees and organizations, and the crucial role of organizational support and social support played within workplace, this thesis constructed an integrated model. The purpose of this model was to figure out whether organizational support and social support can help employees deal with stress and lead to better job performance. The findings showed that the higher level of trust and information sharing, the higher quality of the workplace relationships. Furthermore, the higher quality of workplace relationships, the lower levels of stress for employees.

As mentioned above, employees would have better information sharing experience when their workplace relationships are healthy and positive. As a result, employees would receive emotional support from both co-workers and supervisors, therefore, employees are likely to have lower stress within workplace. Then, the results showed that the lower stress levels, the better job performance for employees. From what discussed above, excessive stress would cause serious physical and mental health issues. Hence, employees' job performance will have dramatic reduction.

Finally, the paper demonstrated that organizational support and social support can effectively promote employees' job performance within organizations. Evidence showed that organizational support would help employees satisfy their emotional needs and feel a sense of responsibility for their working organization. Thus, employees' sense of mission and security will be strengthened and their job performance will be improved dramatically. For the social support, it will adjust the intra-personal relationship and employees will experience less stress after receiving social support. Therefore, the results suggest that these two types of support can help employees maintain high productivity and effective job performance under stressful circumstances.

This thesis contributes to the existing research in two aspects. Firstly, the research was carried out under the general background of pandemic, it expands and advances the previous research. Secondly, the paper clarifies how stress would affect employees' job performance and the significance of organizational support and social support for employees to cope with stress and lead to better job performance.

The findings of this dissertation will provide constructive suggestions and implications for organizations and individuals to help employees perform better under the COVID-19 pandemic. During this difficult period, both individuals and organizations need to spontaneously cultivate positive workplace relationships. For employees, they need to establish deep trust with their both colleagues and supervisors, and facilitate the information sharing process within organizations. For organizations, they are expected to ensure the effectiveness of information exchange channels to assure the adequate communication with employees. For instance, organizations can establish

effective feedback systems and provide regular psychological guidance. By improving the quality of workplace relationships, employees' stress level will be significantly reduced.

In spite of the limitation mentioned above in the discussion section, future researchers can expand this line of study by increasing the measurement variables of employees' stress levels and job performance. This method enables individuals to have a more comprehensive understanding of these two concepts. The other limitation of this research is that the sample size is not adequate enough. Larger-scale of research participants will be needed in future studies to improve the generalizability of the results.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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