Guanxi: A Systematic Review of Interpersonal Relationships within Modern Workplace

Bijun Xie[1,2], Min Li[3], Yanxi Sang[1], Sue Lin Ngan[1*]

[1]*Graduate School of Business, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia*

[2]*Business and Management Department, College of Modern Economics & Management of JUFE, China*

[3]*School of Business Administration, Jiangxi University of Finance and Economics, China*

*Corresponding Author.

Abstract:

Guanxi, a concept central to Chinese interpersonal relationships, extends into organisational settings, influencing various aspects of workplace interactions. While prior research has concentrated on supervisor-subordinate relationships, the complexity of modern workplaces necessitates a broader examination of all interpersonal connections. Understanding workplace Guanxi is vital for organisations operating in or with Chinese-speaking regions. This systematic review synthesizes research on Guanxi between 2019 and October 2024 across different workplace Guanxi. It examines how emerging technologies, such as big data analytics, offer novel avenues for investigating Guanxi's complexities and provide innovative insights into its role in modern organisational contexts. This research aims to achieve two objectives. The first is to conduct a comprehensive review of existing studies related to workplace Guanxi. By examining the factors that contribute to the formation and maintenance of Guanxi, as well as the outcomes that are influenced by these relationships, we aim to enrich the theoretical landscape and inform practical strategies for managing interpersonal relationships in diverse organisational contexts. The second goal focuses on identifying shortcomings in the current research and recommending directions for further exploration. By presenting a thorough framework for analysing Guanxi, this study enhances both academic understanding and practical approaches within cross-cultural management.

Keywords: Guanxi, Interpersonal Relationships, Systematic Literature Review

INTRODUCTION

With the progression of globalization, China's growing influence in the global economy is transforming international business landscapes and posing new challenges for multinational corporations, particularly in human resource management. As China transitions from a planned economy to a market-oriented system, Western HRM practices have been increasingly integrated into Chinese workplaces. However, this integration has encountered significant cultural obstacles, especially in understanding and applying the concept of Guanxi, a core element of Chinese culture [1]. Guanxi, a fundamental cultural value in China, emphasizes mutual social obligations within an individual's network of relationships [2]. Understanding Chinese business culture, where interpersonal relationships take precedence over corporate systems, requires an appreciation of Guanxi. In organisations, employees tend to prioritize interpersonal connections and value integration within the collective, leading to greater communication. Guanxi, deeply embedded in Chinese culture, promotes mutual benefits, fosters harmony, and reinforces loyalty[2], carrying both cultural and institutional importance[3]. It is a dynamic process of individuals establishing relationships over time to carry out their work[4]. Workplace Guanxi, referring to relationships developed within an organisation, is a significant institutional dynamic that merits investigation. It differs fundamentally from Western concepts such as workplace exchange, friendship, and social capital.

While workplace Guanxi shares similarities with Western concepts like workplace exchange, workplace friendship, and social capital—particularly in social exchange and reciprocity norms[5] —it differs in its cultural implications, operationalization, and focus[6]. Workplace Guanxi emphasizes the cultivation of interpersonal relationships through both work-related and non-work-related social interactions, whereas workplace exchange is predominantly work-related[7]. Moreover, in workplace Guanxi, interpersonal connections are given higher importance than work tasks, whereas in workplace exchange, the focus is predominantly on work tasks over relationships[5]. Unlike workplace friendship, which focuses more on emotional support, workplace Guanxi places greater importance on instrumental personal connections and reciprocal exchanges[8,9]. Additionally, although both workplace Guanxi and social capital emphasize the importance of networks and reciprocity, social capital focuses on structural and institutional ties, while workplace Guanxi concentrates on the emotional connections and obligations between individuals[2].

Understanding Guanxi is essential due to its potential to enhance or hinder organisational performance. Strong Guanxi is linked to favourable work outcomes, including enhanced knowledge sharing[10] and greater organisational commitment[11]. However, it can also present challenges, including favouritism [12] and perceived unfairness[13,14], which may disrupt merit-based systems. As China's economy shifts toward a market-oriented model, attitudes toward the fairness of Guanxi practices have changed, with increasing disapproval as they are seen to conflict with the efficiency-driven goals of a market economy[15]. This evolving public perception has significant implications for how Guanxi is viewed and utilized in the workplace.

This study utilizes a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to organize and integrate current research on Guanxi. The SLR method is a structured approach that minimizes discretionary choices, enhancing replicability[16]. This review highlights gaps in the existing knowledge of Guanxi, presents key findings, and discusses the implications of studies published between 2019 and October 2024. This study presents a thorough synthesis of the fragmented research on workplace Guanxi, contributing to a deeper understanding of its impact at the individual level within organisations. The process of conducting a literature review is essential for managing the diversity of knowledge within academic disciplines[17]. Furthermore, this review addresses an under-explored area: Guanxi at the individual level, as prior research has primarily focused on organisational-level Guanxi (e.g., an organisation's relationships with governments or other organisations)[18]. Workplace Guanxi at the individual level is a critical form of social capital in Chinese workplaces[19,20]. Interpersonal relationships among employees form the foundation for broader organisational ties and can enhance organisational resources, contributing to firm profitability [13].

By focusing on individual-level Guanxi, this review contributes to the literature on how Guanxi operates within organisations and influences employee behaviour and performance. Practically, the insights from this SLR are valuable for managers and organisations operating in China. Understanding the drivers and outcomes of workplace Guanxi will enable organisations to leverage its positive aspects while mitigating potential negative consequences. This is particularly relevant for multinational corporations navigating the complex social terrain of Chinese business environments.

The study begins by outlining the research methods, including data collection, selection, and identification. It then provides an overview of the years, regions, methods, theoretical foundations, antecedents, mediators, moderators, and outcome variables in existing literature, establishing a conceptual framework for Guanxi in the workplace. Following this, the paper examines the results derived from the framework and analyses potential directions for future research. The conclusion then summarizes the key findings and addresses the study's limitations.

METHODOLOGY

The Review Protocol – ROSES

This review employed the RepOrting Standards for Systematics Evidence Syntheses (ROSES) methodology as a guiding framework. ROSES is a systematic review protocol that encourages researchers to provide the right information in the right amount of detail[21]. ROSES plays a crucial role in helping review researchers ensure the inclusion of all essential methodological details in their studies. Additionally, it provides editors and peer reviewers with a framework to assess the credibility and dependability of systematic reviews. For this study, the ROSES reporting protocol was adopted due to several advantages: (1) its emphasis on comprehensive and high-standard reporting through tools such as checklists, summaries, and flow diagrams; and (2) its flexibility to encompass a wide range of methods and topics across diverse review areas. Furthermore, ROSES is not confined to specific disciplines, making it applicable and adaptable to fields with comparable levels of methodological and topical complexity[21].

The research questions for the review were developed according to the SLR criteria. Three primary steps in the search strategy—identification of keywords, article screening, and eligibility assessment—were outlined[22]. The selected articles were then reviewed by experts for quality evaluation. Finally, the authors detailed the process of data collection, analysis, and result validation.

Formulation of the Research Question

The research questions for this review were formulated using the PICo framework, which consists of three key components: Population (P), Interest (I), and Context (Co). This framework facilitates the synthesis of findings from related studies[22]. The three main criteria include employees (Population), the antecedents and consequences of Guanxi (Interest), and the workplace (Context). To provide a thorough overview of the existing literature, the following four

research questions were developed:

(1) What are the similarities and differences observed in the Guanxi literature across time, regions, research methods, and topics?
(2) Which theories, frameworks, or models have been utilized in studies exploring Guanxi within the workplace?
(3) What are the main antecedents and consequences of Guanxi in the workplace?
(4) What knowledge gaps exist in the current literature on workplace Guanxi?

Systematic Searching Strategies

The three systematic processes—identification, screening, and eligibility—outlined by Shaffril et al.[23] were utilized to gather relevant articles. By applying these steps, the authors were able to systematically identify and integrate studies, ensuring a well-structured and transparent SLR process.

Identification

Identification involves searching for synonyms, related terms, or variations of the main keywords used in the study. The goal is to expand the search potential within selected databases to identify more relevant articles. To ensure coverage of recent publications, keyword searches were performed across four major databases: Scopus, Web of Science, Emerald Insight, and Taylor & Francis. Variations and related terms for the primary keyword "Guanxi" were explored. The identification process included reviewing synonyms from online thesauruses, such as thesaurus.com, keywords from previous studies, and terms recommended by Scopus and experts. Keywords examined included colleague, coworker, Guanxi, relationship, network, reciprocity, Renqing, Favor, Ganqing, and face. These terms were combined and processed using search functions like field code functions, wildcards, truncation, and Boolean operators in Scopus and Web of Science (see Table 1).

Table 1 Search string employed in the selected databases

Database	String
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY ((coworker* OR colleague*) AND (guanxi* OR relationship* OR network* OR reciprocity* OR renqing* OR ganqing* OR face* OR favor *))
Web of Science	TS = ((coworker* OR colleague*) AND (guanxi* OR relationship* OR network* OR renqing*OR reciprocity*OR ganqing* OR face* OR favor *))

Along with database searches, manual searching was also carried out to broaden the literature list. Thomas et al. [24] argue that combining manual and database searches significantly enhances the quality of systematic reviews. In this study, 'handpicking' was applied to databases such as Emerald and Taylor & Francis. Guanxi behaviour happens at different levels in business, such as inter-firm, government-firm Guanxi and interpersonal Guanxi, and Guanxi between organisations and individuals, Guanxi within the buyer-supplier relationship in marketing literature. Therefore, it is important to highlight that this study focuses solely on personal relationships within the workplace. As a result of the search efforts, a total of 38,456 potential articles were retrieved from the selected databases.

Screening

The second step, screening, involved determining whether articles should be included or excluded from the study, based on a set of predefined criteria. This process was carried out using both database assistance and manual screening by the authors. Between 2000 and 2008, publications on workplace Guanxi were scarce. However, from 2009 to 2018, there was a gradual yet uneven increase in the number of publications. Since 2019, there has been a remarkable surge in the number of publications on workplace Guanxi. This suggests that the field of workplace Guanxi has become a area of focus in recent years, with a substantial body of research being conducted and published. In accordance with the concept of 'research field maturity'[25], this review restricted the screening process to articles published between 2019 and October 2024. This timeframe was chosen because the number of studies within this period was sufficient to perform a thorough review. Following this, conference papers, book chapters, review articles, short surveys, books, and conference reviews were excluded according to predefined criteria. To avoid any confusion, only English-language articles were included. Since the focus of the systematic literature review (SLR) was on interpersonal Guanxi within organisational contexts, the selection of social science research as a criterion was intended to improve the chances of identifying studies relevant to coworker Guanxi. Consequently, 33,722 articles were excluded during this stage for not fulfilling the inclusion criteria, leaving 4,734 articles for further assessment. The details of the inclusion and exclusion criteria can be found in Table 2.

Table 2 Criteria for inclusion and exclusion

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Timeline	2019–2024	<2019
Document type	Journal	Conference paper, review, short survey, conference review, reports, dissertations, textbooks, and book chapters. Letters, editorials, and comments.
Language	English	Non-English
Subject area	Social Science	Medical, public health, environmental science, engineering, geography, other non-social science studies

Eligibility

Eligibility is a crucial manual step that helps researchers address gaps left by the database search process[26]. The remaining papers were manually reviewed by the authors to determine whether they met the inclusion criteria, based on the title, abstract, or full content. During the title screening phase, 11 articles were excluded. In the abstract screening phase, 20 articles were removed, and an additional 8 articles were excluded after the authors examined the full text. In total, 39 articles were discarded at this stage because they did not focus on Guanxi at the individual level and were science-based (referring to non-social science studies). The final set for the quality appraisal stage consisted of 52 articles (see Figure. 1).
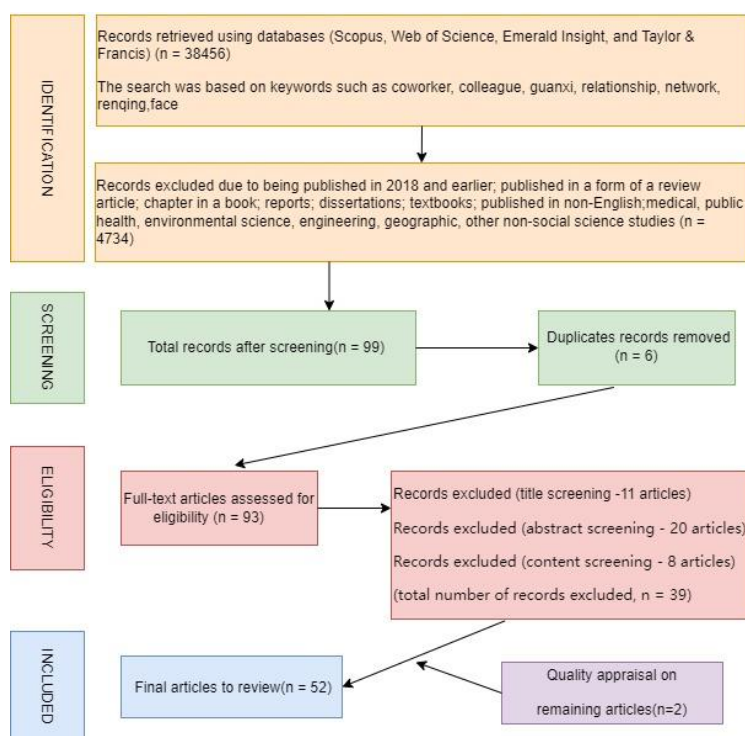
Figure. 1 Flow diagram of the searching process

Quality Appraisal

To ensure the methodology and analysis of the selected studies were thoroughly assessed, the Mixed-Method Appraisal Tool (MMAT)[27] was employed. MMAT provided guidance on the justification for using a mixed-method approach to address the research questions, evaluated the effectiveness of various research designs in answering those questions, examined the integration of qualitative and quantitative methods, and assessed the capacity to address divergences and differences between research designs.

With the support of two co-authors, the corresponding author evaluated the methodological and analytical rigor of each article. Each article was thoroughly examined, focusing on its methodology section and the analysis conducted. Using MMAT as a guide, the authors carefully reviewed the articles. Each study was assessed according to five criteria, with

three possible responses: "yes," "no," and "don't know/can't tell." Articles that met at least three criteria were included in the review. All decisions were made through mutual agreement, and any disagreements were resolved through discussion among the authors. In total, 52 articles were included in the review.

Data Extraction and Analyses

The remaining papers were analysed for themes by reviewing the titles, abstracts, and full contents of the publications. An integrative review approach was employed in this study, incorporating multiple study designs, including quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. The researchers then reviewed the abstracts, findings, results, and analyses of the 52 articles. A thematic analysis was conducted to identify patterns, trends, and groupings. Generating themes, the first stage of thematic analysis, involved detecting trends within the abstracted data from all the reviewed publications. Microsoft Word and Excel were used to document the abstracted data. Similar or relevant data were grouped, forming seven primary categories. The next step was to assign appropriate names to these themes, with adjustments made where contradictions were identified. The final seven themes were presented to experts, who confirmed their relevance and appropriateness for this study.

RESULTS

Background of the Selected Articles

The literature review involved analysing articles that met the criteria of researching and presenting findings related to workplace Guanxi, its measurements, antecedents, and consequences. These papers were published across 33 different journals, primarily within the fields of management, organisational behaviour, psychology, cross-cultural studies, and human resource management. The highest number of studies appeared in journals such as Frontiers in Psychology (n=6), Leadership & Organisation Development Journal (n=4), Psychology Research and Behaviour Management (n=3), Journal of Knowledge Management (n=3), and International Journal of Human Resource Management (n=3).

Years and Regions

To conduct this thorough review, 52 studies that were published from January 2019 to October 2024 were chosen. Of these, 12 studies were published in 2024, while the remaining 40 were from previous years. Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of the selected studies from 2019 to October 2024. All studies included in the review focused on workplace settings or employees working within organisations. In terms of geographic distribution, 2 studies were conducted in the United States, 2 in Thailand, 2 in Hong Kong, 1 in Macao, 1 in Taiwan, and the remainder in Mainland China. A majority of the research has been conducted in Mainland China, emphasizing the extensive scholarly attention to the country's organisational dynamics. Among the specified regions within China, the Southern region stands out with the highest number of studies. This prevalence likely correlates with the region's robust economic development and pronounced outward-looking economic characteristics, which offer ground for organisational and management studies. In contrast, studies focusing on the Northern, Central, and Northeastern regions of China are relatively scarce, indicating an area for future research expansion. Internationally, the USA and Thailand each contribute 2 studies to the body of research, highlighting the academic community's interest in cross-cultural and comparative management studies. These studies extend the discourse beyond China, enriching the global perspective on management practices.
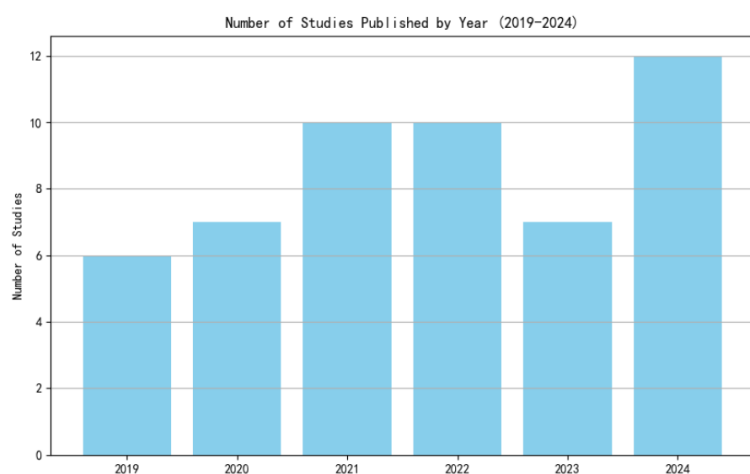

Figure 2 Publication years of selected studies

Research Methods Used in the Articles

Quantitative research emerges as the predominant approach, constituting 86.5% of the total studies (45 out of 52). This dominant trend indicates a clear preference for methodologies that facilitate large-scale data collection and statistical analysis, such as surveys, questionnaires, and experimental research. Qualitative research, accounts for 7.7% of the total (4 out of 52). Mixed methods research, integrating both quantitative and qualitative elements to provide a supplementary perspective for understanding Guanxi, is employed in 5.8% of the studies (3 out of 52). See Figure 3 for the research methods used in the selected studies.
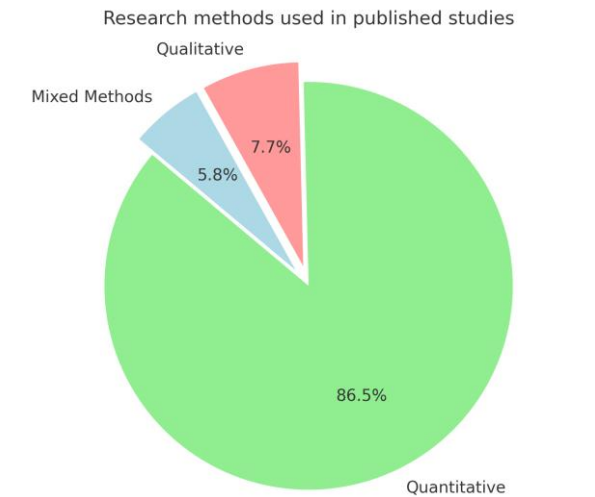

Research methods used in published studies

Figure 3 Research methods used in selected studies

Theories Used in the Articles

Social Exchange Theory, Conservation of Resources theory, and Social Cognitive Theory are the three frameworks most utilized by researchers to elucidate workplace Guanxi (Table 3). 21 studies explore Guanxi as a key mechanism within the framework of Social Exchange Theory, emphasizing its growing significance in the social exchange process[28]. Conservation of Resources theory was initially developed to explain why individuals strive to maintain and protect their resources. Introduced into the study of workplace Guanxi, the theory hypothesizes that an individual's investment in Guanxi networks affects psychological and behavioural outcomes. Social Cognitive Theory focuses on how human behaviour is influenced by factors like learning through observation, belief in one's abilities (self-efficacy), and the execution of behaviours [29]. In the context of workplace Guanxi, it helps to understand how individuals learn to cultivate and navigate relational networks through social modeling and self-reflective mechanisms.

Table 3 Theories and models used in the reviewed articles

Theories And Models	References	N
Social Exchange Theory	Zhong, Zhang, & Xu (2022); Charoensukmongkol (2021); Cai et al. (2021); ud din Khan et al., (2023); Yang & Zhang (2022); Guan & Frenkel (2021); Ju, et al. (2023); Yang, Shen, & Ma (2022); Fan et al. (2023); Hou, Ge, & Wang (2023); Liu Xiayi, Yang & Wan, (2024); Zhang et al. (2024); Zeng et al. (2024) etc.	21
Conservation of Resources Theory	Zhong, Zhang, & Xu (2022); Charoensukmongkol (2022); Zhang et al., (2022); Han et al. (2023); Cheng et al. (2023); Lv et al. (2022); Guan, & Frenkel (2019); O'Neil, McMillan, & Garavan (2024)	8
Social Cognitive Theory	Zhang, Liu, & Xiao (2022); Cai et al. (2021); He et al. (2020); Cai et al. (2021).	4
Attribution Theory	Liu Xiayi, Yang & Wan (2024); Yang, Shen, & Ma (2022)	2
Job Demands-Resources Theory	Charoensukmongkol (2022)	1

Dominance Complementarity Theory	Wang (2021); Hung (2021)	1
Stimulus–Organism–Response Framework	Zhang et al. (2020)	1
Dynamic View of Culture	Kang, Ling, & Barclay (2023)	1
Institutional Logics Theory	Chen (2020)	1
Boundary Theory	Yang (2020)	1
Affective Events Theory	Yang (2020)	1
Social Classification Theory	Charoensukmongkol (2021)	1
Structural Holes Theory	Liu, & Zhu (2021)	1
Role-Based Followership Theory	Cao et al., (2022)	1
Emotion As Social Information Model	Zhang et al. (2022)	1
Trust Theory	Cao et al., (2022)	1
Social Comparison Theory	Li et al., (2021)	1
Social Identity Theory	Lv et al., (2022)	1
Machiavellian Literature and Social Interaction Theory of Aggression	Feng et al., (2023)	1
Relational Process Model of Humour	Tan, Wang, & Lu (2021)	1
Need-To-Belong Theory	Wang et al. (2022)	1
Structural Theory of Action	Xie, & Li (2021)	1
Self-Determination Theory	Zhang et al., (2024)	1
Challenge–Hindrance Stressor Framework	Chen et al., (2024)	1
Social Identity Theory	Lv et al. (2022)	1
Social embeddedness model of thriving	Guan, & Frenkel (2021)	1
Similarity-Attraction Theory	Cai et al., (2021)	1
Social Equity Theory	Fan et al., (2023)	1
Emotional Uncertainty Theory	Hou, Ge, & Wang (2023)	1
Psychological Ownership Theory	Hou, Ge, & Wang (2023)	1
Leader-Member Exchange	Zhang, & Min (2023)	1
Strengths Theory	Ding, & Yu (2020)	1
Resource Dependence Theory	Yang et al. (2020)	1
Transaction Cost Theory	Yang et al., (2020)	1
Human Capital Theory	Ren, Yang, & Wood (2019)	1
Person-Environment Interaction Theory	Zhang, Liang, & Zhang (2019)	1

Terms and Definitions

Most studies of the reviewed articles define Guanxi as a social relationship network, emphasizing the interactions and connections between individuals, which are undeniably significant in social interactions[30,31,32]. Guanxi is recognized as a concept specific to Chinese culture, closely associated with Confucian thought[33,34,35]. Its importance as a key concept in Chinese culture primarily reflected in interpersonal relationships and mutual obligations[1,19]. Reciprocity is a key principle, where individuals assist each other with the expectation of future returns [36,37]. While there is consensus that Guanxi involves reciprocal relationships, perspectives on its nature and scope have varied. Some studies focus on its instrumental aspect, viewing Guanxi as social capital for accessing resources[35,37,38], while others emphasize its emotional dimension, centring on feelings and personal connections[10,39, 40,41]. Guanxi is widely understood to extend beyond professional and work-related relationships, encompassing personal interactions as well[36,42,43,44]. Its scope

has evolved from hierarchical workplace relationships like supervisor-subordinate Guanxi to include a broader social network, such as Guanxi among coworkers, team members, or peers[34].

Some studies view Guanxi as a single construct, while others recognize its various dimensions. Rooted in Confucian philosophy, Guanxi includes multiple relational elements, such as Ganqing, Renqing[45], Mianzi[2], and Xinren (trust)[46]. These components are the core of Guanxi theory[34,44]. Chen et al.[47]propose that Guanxi can be understood through three primary dimensions. The first, Affective Attachment, refers to the emotional bond, mutual understanding, and care shared between individuals. The second, Personal-life Inclusion, highlights the extent to which both subordinates and supervisors engage with each other outside the work environment. Lastly, Deference to the Supervisor involves the subordinate's respect, loyalty, and willingness to comply with their supervisor's expectations. Yang[35] identifies affection, trust, and reciprocity as essential components of workplace Guanxi. These dimensions represent distinct but interconnected aspects of Guanxi, highlighting its multidimensional nature as a culture-specific phenomenon. This diversity and complexity underscore the need for further research to explore the various facets of Guanxi, both theoretically and empirically, to better understand its role and impact in different social and organisational contexts.

A review of 52 articles reveals that 30 examine the supervisor-subordinate Guanxi (SSG). The relationship between supervisors and subordinates is recognized as the most crucial hierarchical connection within Chinese workplaces[48]. In China, Guanxi with supervisors is considered an essential job resource[49] and influences the distribution of work-related resources [1]. Various terms are used to describe this relationship, including SSG, leader-member Guanxi, Guanxi closeness between manager and worker, and horizontal leader Guanxi. Among these, SSG is the most prevalent. While these terms highlight different facets of the supervisor-subordinate dynamic, they collectively enhance the understanding of Guanxi. SSG highlights the importance of the personal bond between a supervisor and their subordinate, which is primarily built through interactions outside of work[50,51]. In contrast, leader-member Guanxi and leader-follower Guanxi focus on the leader's role [52,53], while Guanxi closeness highlights emotional connections [53,54]. Horizontal leader Guanxi refers to relationships with other organisational leaders outside the direct supervisor-subordinate context, involving cross-departmental connections[13]. Research is increasingly exploring workplace Guanxi among employees beyond the supervisor-subordinate framework. Four articles categorize Guanxi, suggesting it includes SSG—characterized by tolerance and respect—and co-worker Guanxi, which pertains to daily collaboration[31,55] or Guanxi among team members [50].

Some studies use specific and abstract concepts like asymmetrical Guanxi perceptions, Guanxi harmony, and Guanxi beliefs. Asymmetrical Guanxi perceptions highlight the mismatch in relationship quality between parties, potentially leading to conflicts and misunderstandings that affect interpersonal relationships and workplace effectiveness[55]. Guanxi harmony emphasizes the importance of maintaining a harmonious relationship through acceptance and respect for social order in Chinese culture, shaping an individual's social integration[56]. Guanxi beliefs encompass an individual's values and beliefs about forming and maintaining relationships, influencing their behaviour and social interactions [41]. These emerging concepts focus on psychological aspects, such as beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions, which reveal individual differences in relationship cognition and values, contrasting with traditional definitions of Guanxi that emphasize specific interactions and the shared cultural aspects of relationships.

Scales Measuring Workplace Guanxi

An analysis of 52 articles found that the scale created by Law et al.[57]was employed in 23 studies, highlighting its broad use in evaluating workplace Guanxi. This scale is applicable in Chinese work contexts[7], featuring sample items like "I will invite leaders to lunch/dinner" and "I actively share my personal thoughts and needs with my supervisor." The scale, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.894, demonstrates excellent internal consistency. This high reliability affirms its effectiveness in capturing the subtle dynamics of informal social interactions that are characteristic of SSG. Additionally, scales by Yang and Lau[7] specifically, measure peer relationships. Scales from Chen and Peng[58], Li and Yu [30], and Yen et al.[44] assess mixed types of Guanxi, showcasing versatility across various relationship contexts. Furthermore, some studies employed multidimensional composite scales to evaluate various dimensions of Guanxi, such as affect, obligation, and face[46, 59, 60, 61,62]. Table 4 lists the scales used in these studies. Among them, 10 gathered data from both leaders and subordinates, enhancing data reliability and offering a comprehensive understanding of Guanxi dynamics by incorporating perspectives from both parties.

Table 4. Scales used to quantify workplace Guanxi

Scale	Research using the particular scale
Law et al., (2000)	Chen (2020);Yang, & Zhang (2022);Wang (2021);Hung (2021); Caoet al., (2022);Guan & Frenkel (2021); Hanet al. (2023); Caiet al., (2021);Yang, Shen, & Ma (2022); Fan et al., (2023); Hou, Ge & Wang (2023); Zhang & Min(2023); Ding & Yu (2020); Tan, Wang, & Lu (2021); Wang et al., (2022); He et al.(2020); Lv et al., (2022); Li et al., (2021); Li Liu & Qingguo Zhai (2024); Guan & Frenkel (2019); Wang et al., (2019); Liu Xiayi, Yang & Wan (2024); Zeng et al.,(2024)
Chen et al. (2009)	Zhong, Zhang, & Xu (2022); Kang, Ling, & Barclay (2023); Ren, Yang, & Wood (2019); Zhang &Gill (2019); Feng et al., (2023); Zhang et al., (2024)
Chen and Peng (2008)	Cheng et al., (2023); He, & Yun (2022); Ju et al., (2023)
Yang and Lau (2015)	Charoensukmongkol (2021); Charoensukmongkol (2022); Li Liu & Qingguo Zhai (2024); Zhang, Liu, & Xiao (2022)
Yen, Barnes and Wang（2011）	Yang (2020); Liu & Zhu (2021); Zhang et al., (2020). Yang et al., (2024); Tan, Guan, & Sheng (2024)
Wong et al. (2003)	Zhang, Liang, & Zhang (2019); ud din Khan et al., (2023).
Cheung et al. (2009)	Cai et al. (2021)
Sun et al. (2019) Swift Guanxi Questionnaire - Guanxi Harmony Dimension	Zhang, et al., (2022)
Taormina and Gao's (2010) Guanxi Favor Factor	Xian et al., (2019)
Wang and Kim (2013)	Feng et al., (2023)
Ang and Leong (2000)	Chen et al. (2024)
Qian et al. (2007)	Yang et al. (2024)
Yang et al. (2020)	Yang et al. (2024)
Ren and Chadee (2020)	Zhang et al. (2024)
Chen and Bedford (2022) Guanxi Quality Scale	Li & Yu (2024)

Antecedents of Workplace Guanxi

Earlier studies have identified 33 possible antecedents of workplace Guanxi. To aid in analysis and comparison, we organize these antecedents into four primary categories: Leadership and Behaviours, Personal Traits, Psychological State, and Capabilities, Workplace Atmosphere, Cultural Values, and Social Technology. From the SLR, we have constructed a conceptual model illustrating both the antecedents and consequences of workplace Guanxi (Fig. 4). This model provides a comprehensive overview of the numerous antecedents and outcomes identified in the 52 studies reviewed, capturing the broad range of factors discussed.

Research increasingly examines various antecedents of Guanxi, particularly the influence of leadership styles on Guanxi within organisations. Participative leadership promotes employee involvement in decision-making, fostering trust and respect between supervisors and subordinates [61]. Coaching leadership enhances employee growth through personalized feedback, strengthening supervisor-subordinate Guanxi[62, 63, 64]. Servant and humble leadership cultivate closer

relationships by addressing employees' personal needs and demonstrating leaders' vulnerability [65,66]. These leadership styles influence supervisor-subordinate dynamics, while humour and social media impact broader social networks. Personal traits like a leader's humour can reduce work stress and enhance intimacy and trust, positively affecting Guanxi[67,68]. Emotional factors are crucial in establishing and maintaining Guanxi[57,67,68]. Social media plays an important role in today's workplace, and this field is experiencing rapid growth. Future research can explore how technological advancements impact the construction and management of Guanxi [10,39]. Additionally, studies are beginning to address cultural influences on Guanxi, aiding in understanding its manifestation across different contexts such as an employee's adherence to traditional Confucian values[39], the influence of Taoism [54], and alignment with State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs)[15].
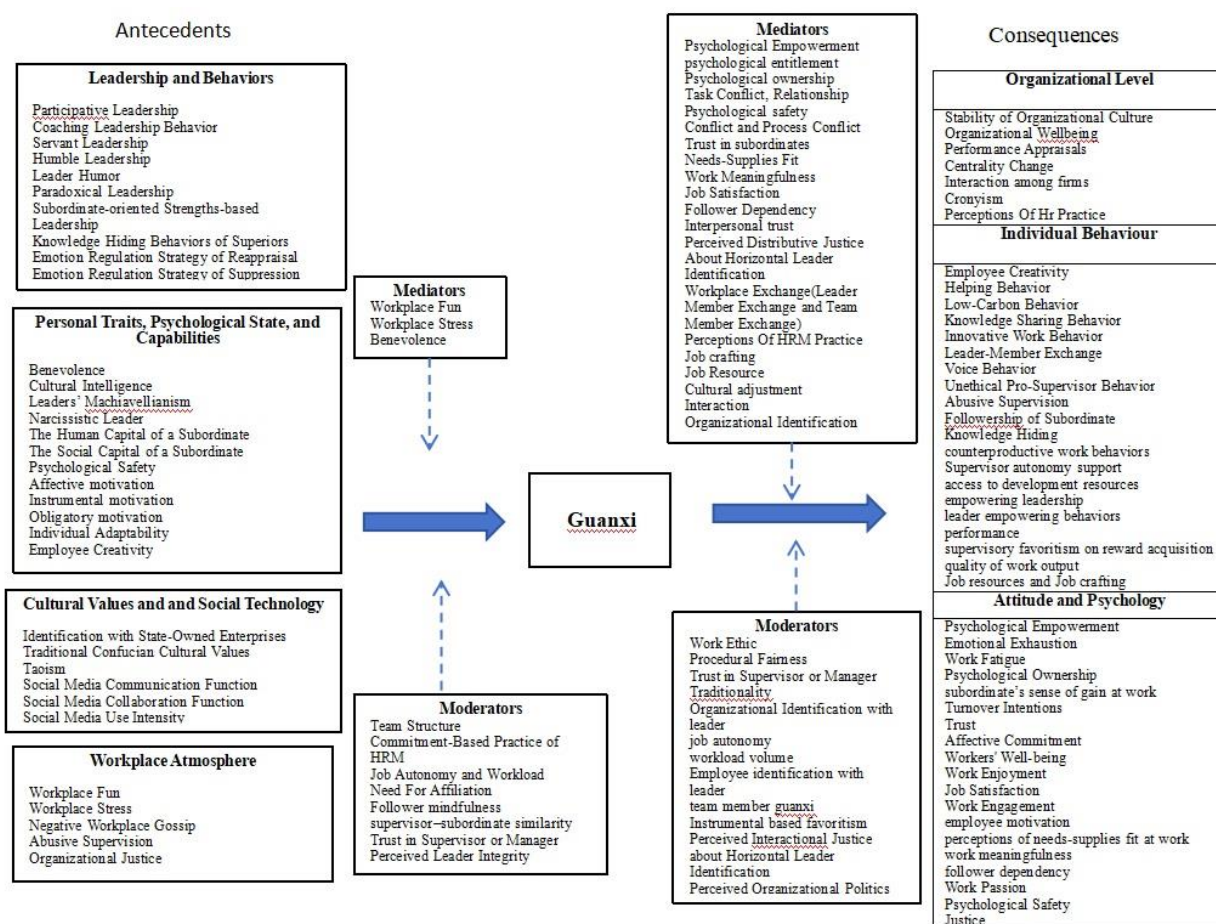

Figure 4. A conceptual framework for workplace Guanxi based on the SLR

Negative factors in the work environment, such as workplace stress[35] and harmful gossip[53], along with poor management behaviours like abusive supervision[68]· evasive hiding by project managers [49,57], narcissistic and Machiavellian leadership, and suppression strategies[56]· can undermine workplace Guanxi. These issues can erode trust, strain relationships, and disrupt team collaboration and the overall organisational atmosphere. Despite the extensive focus on the positive aspects of Guanxi in much of the existing literature, there is a notable scarcity of studies addressing its potential adverse effects in particular settings.

Some findings on Guanxi are inconsistent. For example, Yang[67]found a positive correlation between social media use intensity and various Guanxi dimensions among colleagues, such as affect, reciprocity, and trust. In contrast, Zhang[10] revealed that social media's communication function enhances affect and trust, while its collaboration function detracts from them. This inconsistency indicates that factors influencing Guanxi's formation and maintenance may vary depending on research context, sample characteristics, and cultural environments. Future research should delve deeper into how these factors interplay. Additionally, for factors showing insignificant effects in current studies—like knowledge hiding[52], cultural intelligence[69, 70], and subordinate human capital [71]—a further investigation into their underlying reasons is warranted, potentially through qualitative methods or cross-cultural studies.

The consequence of Workplace Guanxi

The impact of Guanxi manifests in diverse ways, influencing organisational effectiveness to individual behaviour and psychological states. Organisational outcomes involve aspects like culture, employee welfare, performance evaluations, perceptions of HR practices, and inter-company interactions, all shaped by individual employee behaviours influenced by Guanxi. At the individual level, outcomes primarily affect attitudes and psychology, with job performance and behaviour receiving the most focus. This includes job performance, task performance, contextual performance, and subordinate performance, which appeared in 8 studies. Innovative work behaviour has also been highlighted in various research[38,42,72,73,74]. Other notable areas include voice behaviour [67,75,76], leader-member exchange[6,77], knowledge sharing[10], and organisational citizenship behaviour [66]. Overall, Guanxi tends to positively influence these variables, indicating that strong Guanxi in the workplace correlates with favourable behaviours and outcomes, promoting cooperation, enhancing team cohesion, and improving job performance.

Research on SSG's impact in the workplace is extensive, focusing on aspects such as job performance[77], innovative behaviour[38], work meaningfulness[76], and positive outcomes like trust and empowering leadership[78,79], psychological ownership and empowerment[74]. In contrast, studies on c-worker Guanxi are limited. The effects of SSG and co-worker Guanxi on employee behaviour and attitudes differ. For outcome variables such as employee low-carbon behaviour, job satisfaction, affective commitment, and knowledge sharing, co-worker Guanxi seems to play a more active role[1,6,55,80]. The positive impact of the superior-subordinate relationship on these variables is not significant. This suggests that different types of Guanxi operate and affect outcomes differently within organisations, indicating that the role of Guanxi may depend on its specific type and the level of relationship hierarchy.

Guanxi also influences employees' psychological states and perceptions. For example, Guanxi enhances subordinates' affective commitment[37], psychological safety[80], and psychological ownership[72]. The relationship between Guanxi and psychological well-being is bidirectional and mutually reinforcing; positive psychological states enhance Guanxi quality, creating a virtuous cycle that benefits both individuals and organisations. By alleviating emotional exhaustion[81] and fostering job enjoyment[45], Guanxi enhances overall employee well-being[68], which is vital for sustained performance and commitment.

The potential negative effects of Guanxi highlight the complexity of its role within organisations, including knowledge hiding[48], cronyism[51], and favouritism toward superiors[82,83]. Research indicates that Guanxi can disrupt organisational culture stability[18] and diminish fairness and efficiency[14,84]. The impact of Guanxi is not always linear. The relationship between SSG and affective commitment follows a non-linear pattern, implying that the positive effects of SSG may weaken once a certain point is reached[37]. Thus, the excessive cultivation of Guanxi may lead to diminishing returns or even negative consequences.

Mediators

The mediators involved in Guanxi research can be divided into three categories, namely: (1) individual psychological traits, (2) leadership and team dynamics, (3) organisational and cultural factors.

(1) Individual Psychological Traits

This category includes mediators that are rooted in the individual's psychological state and personal attributes. Prominent among these are psychological empowerment, psychological ownership, and psychological safety. This suggests that employees' internal states significantly influence the development and outcomes of workplace Guanxi. For instance, psychological empowerment has been identified as a mediator between supervisor-subordinate Guanxi and innovative work behaviour, as well as work engagement[73]. He et al.[80] examined psychological safety as a mediator between SSG and employees' knowledge hiding behaviours, suggesting that a secure psychological environment encourages knowledge sharing rather than withholding.

(2) Leadership and Team Dynamics

Mediators in this category highlight the impact of leadership behaviours and team interactions on workplace Guanxi. Trust in subordinates, leader-member exchange, and team-member exchange are key mediators that reflect the quality of relationships within the team. The role of the leader in fostering trust and facilitating positive exchanges is crucial for the development of a strong team dynamic, which in turn can enhance or mitigate the effects of Guanxi on various outcomes such as empowerment leadership and knowledge sharing. For example, Liu and Zhai propose that the quality of

leader-member and team-member exchanges serve as mediators in understanding how Guanxi influences knowledge sharing behaviours[6]. Cao et al highlight that trust in subordinates acts as a mediator between SSG and empowering leadership, underscoring the importance of trust within the leader-follower relationship[78].

(3) Organisational and Cultural Factors

Although organisational-level mediators are few, the consideration of HR practices suggests that the policies and practices within an organisation play a significant role in shaping employees' perceptions and interactions with their workplace. This suggests that the way HR practices are perceived by employees can have a significant impact on their behaviour and attitudes within the context of workplace Guanxi[1].

Moderators

Moderators are commonly employed to clarify how independent variables affect the strength and direction of outcome variables[83,85]. Of 52 articles the moderators identified can be categorized into (1) Individual Differences, (2) Organisational and Leadership Factors, and (3) Job and Team Dynamics.

(1) Individual Differences

This category includes variables that reflect individual personality traits, psychological states, and behavioural tendencies. These factors can significantly influence how individuals perceive and engage with their work environment, thereby affecting the quality of Guanxi they form with colleagues and supervisors. Research indicates that follower mindfulness acts as a moderator in the relationship between paradoxical leadership and SSG. This suggests that increased mindfulness in followers strengthens the positive influence of paradoxical leadership on SSG[82]. Similarly, job self-efficacy serves as a moderator in the connection between SSG and counterproductive work behaviours. This suggests that employees with greater job self-efficacy may experience a diminished relationship between Guanxi and counterproductive actions[85,86].

(2) Organisational and Leadership Factors

This category encompasses variables related to organisational structure, culture, leadership styles, and human resource management practices. These factors operate at the organisational level and influence employee relationships. For example, commitment-based HRM practices have been shown to strengthen the relationship between coaching leadership behaviour and SSG, highlighting the role of HR practices in fostering positive workplace relationships[62]. Additionally, perceived leader integrity acts as a moderator in the connection between humble leadership and SSG, indicating that when leaders demonstrate high integrity, the positive impact of humble leadership on Guanxi is amplified[64].

(3) Job and Team Dynamics

This category includes variables related to job characteristics and team dynamics, which directly affect employees' daily work experiences and interactions with colleagues and leaders. Supervisor-subordinate similarity and team member Guanxi are significant moderators in this category. Research has shown that similarity between supervisors and subordinates can enhance the positive effects of employee creativity on SSG, indicating that when employees perceive their supervisors as similar to themselves, their creative efforts are more likely to be rewarded with stronger Guanxi[41]. It has been discovered that team member Guanxi moderates the serial mediation effect of leaders' Machiavellianism on team voice and Organisational Citizenship Behaviours, through the intermediary roles of leader-direct supervisor Guanxi and abusive supervision. This suggests that the strength of Guanxi among team members can impact how leadership styles influence team results[50].

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Term and definition

Guanxi, a core concept in Chinese culture, encompasses dimensions such as affection, trust, Renqing, Mianzi, and reciprocity. However, the existing literature lacks a thorough exploration of these aspects, with only a few studies conducting in-depth analyses[39,46,61,66,87]. A comprehensive examination of the interconnected dimensions of Guanxi is essential[10,13,87]. Li and Yu[30]discovered that both Ganqing and Renqing strengthen the influence of individual adaptability on work engagement. However, while Xinren increased the effect size, it did not significantly mediate this relationship. Zhang[10] reported contradictory findings: Ganqing negatively affects knowledge sharing, while trust (Xinren) has a positive impact. Besides, the dimensions of trust, reciprocity, and social networks intertwine, shaping the nuances of interpersonal connections and business dealings[13]. The results highlight the need for future studies to explore

how various dimensions of Guanxi interact and impact both individual and organisational outcomes. For example, the interplay between trust and Renqing in influencing knowledge-sharing behaviours warrants further investigation. Understanding these interactions is crucial, as they inform not only individual behaviours but also organisational practices within the broader socio-economic context.

Previous studies have mainly concentrated on supervisor and subordinate relationships. But they are limited to the workplace. Emerging research has started to classify workplaces, such as SSG and Co-worker Guanxi, and revealed that they play distinct roles. It suggests that their mechanisms should be examined separately to understand their individual impacts more accurately. The primary distinction lies in co-worker relationships emphasizing equal social exchange, while superior-subordinate relationships focus on power dynamics and supervision. This cultural aspect allows co-workers to form deeper social connections, thus enhancing job satisfaction and affective commitment to the organisation. Furthermore, research on Guanxi classification deepens our understanding of how various levels of workplace relationships influence employees. Studies, such as those by Feng[50], have also explored both leader-direct supervisor Guanxi and team member Guanxi but have treated team member relationships as a moderating variable. This approach underscores the complexity of Guanxi, moving beyond traditional views that consider it a single, linear influence factor.

Antecedents

Research into the antecedents of Guanxi is limited, with most studies concentrating on its outcomes rather than its formation[65,66]. There is little exploration of how Guanxi develops in the workplace[35]. Scholars should focus more on changing social trends to gain an updated understanding of Guanxi's evolution[39]. The influence of Confucian ethics on Guanxi and social interactions is also underexplored, necessitating more empirical research on the relationship between these ethical norms and Guanxi practices in contemporary China[87]. Additionally, the impact of traditional Confucian values on the formation and dissolution of Guanxi needs further investigation[39]. As Chinese culture evolves and globalizes, the meanings and implications of Guanxi are shifting[54]. The literature lacks a discussion on how Guanxi adapts to sociocultural changes[88]. With globalization and the internet exposing younger employees to diverse cultural values, their engagement with Western culture complicates their emphasis on Guanxi relationships [39]. The effects of new work methods like remote work and cross-time-zone collaboration on Guanxi remain poorly understood[55]. While social media offers new avenues for colleagues to build and maintain relationships, its implications are not fully examined. For instance, the specific impacts of social media on different types of Guanxi and their operational challenges require deeper investigation[10]. Future research could adopt a multi-level approach that incorporates team or organisational constructs to better understand social media's role in colleague relationships[67]. A more nuanced theoretical framework that considers individual characteristics, organisational context, and mechanisms influencing Guanxi is essential[77]. To capture the evolving nature of Guanxi, employing big data techniques for social network analysis can uncover hidden relational patterns and tie strengths, as demonstrated in recent empirical studies[89]. Additionally, AI-driven simulations can be utilized to model Guanxi networks and predict their impact on organisational outcomes[90].

Consequences

Existing studies have primarily examined the positive work-related outcomes of Guanxi, neglecting its negative effects[12]. Xu et al.[91] noted that Guanxi can lead to undesirable consequences such as nepotism, corruption, breaches of organisational procedures, and diminished trust in authority. While a few studies have addressed the "dark side" of Guanxi, empirical research on its adverse impacts remains limited, necessitating further investigation[50]. Additionally, research on its effects on employee psychological health is still scarce[81]. In Chinese workplaces, the blending of personal and professional relationships is significant, with Guanxi serving as an implicit psychological contract governing interactions[92,93]. The cultural context of Guanxi is crucial in shaping employee psychology.

Guanxi is seen as a static social structure[39], while other studies consider it a dynamic relationship driven by personal interests and needs[37]. There is a notable gap in research concerning the long-term impacts of forming, sustaining, and dissolving Guanxi[78], especially in how it evolves within rapidly changing social and economic environments. The process of maintaining Guanxi is dynamic, as individuals become part of an internal group through increased trust[34,83]. Yang[35]highlighted that the dynamic nature of Guanxi reflects a landscape where traditional values intersect with modern business practices, indicating a blend of old customs and contemporary demands. Future research should move beyond a static view of relationships to investigate dynamic changes influenced by individual and environmental factors[83]. The long-term impact of Guanxi on employee behaviour and attitudes, as well as its evolution over time[6,94], requires more investigation.

Mediator and moderators

Current research has inadequately addressed potential moderating and mediating variables, such as individual characteristics and organisational culture[75,95]. Future studies should explore a broader range of these variables[46,81], particularly how Guanxi interacts with factors like leadership behaviours and organisational support to influence employee behaviour and attitudes. Some studies are working to integrate organisational and individual factors to examine their impact on employee outcomes, including work quality[45], organisational citizenship behaviour[66], subordinate abusive behaviour[50], the following behaviour [69], job performance[64], organisational justice[15,83], and turnover intention[13]. Further studies are required to explore how different moderating variables interact and collectively impact workplace relationships.

Method

Guanxi is seen as a key factor, but its impact varies across organisational and cultural contexts[77]. Most research focuses on Chinese employees, with limited studies on how Chinese expatriates can effectively build Guanxi in foreign cultural settings. This gap leaves the relationship dynamics between Chinese expatriates and Non-Chinese subordinates in international contexts under-explored [42]. Whether Guanxi is universally applicable requires further examination[69,77,79,96,97]. Cross-cultural comparisons could yield insights into these dynamics, revealing how cultural factors shape workplace interactions and their effects, including the experiences of Non-Chinese expatriates in China[61]. Future research could also explore Guanxi's role across diverse cultural backgrounds[51,70]. The evolving nature of Guanxi illustrates a combination of traditional values with modern business practices[86], emphasizing the necessity for deeper exploration into both its cultural specificity and its broader universal aspects[6,13,51,55,74,77].

Variations in industry, organisational size, and geographic location can influence the role and significance of Guanxi[97]. Its impact also differs among organisations with various ownership structures, including private, foreign, and joint ventures[15,84]. Future research should explore these dynamics across different ownership types to confirm the generalizability of findings. Some studies are limited to specific industries (such as banking, catering, manufacturing, construction, information, and finance) or professional groups, indicating a need for broader research across various occupational fields to establish the universality of Guanxi's influence[37,40]. Expanding the sample scope is recommended to enhance generalizability[6,46,74,81].

The reviewed studies primarily rely on quantitative analysis, lacking in-depth qualitative research. Many have utilized a cross-sectional approach, which may introduce common method bias and restrict causal relationship testing. Future research should incorporate longitudinal studies with time-separated data to enhance the validity and reliability of causal inferences[68]. Experimental or lag designs could also strengthen causal findings[18,57,77,79,98]. Most studies have used self-reported questionnaires, which may introduce common methods and social desirability biases where respondents exaggerate the importance of Guanxi. Utilizing system-generated objective data can improve data validity and mitigate biases[67]. Incorporating multi-source data, such as evaluations from peers and superiors, is recommended[63]. Existing research assesses Guanxi using the same information sources from subordinates[12,38,66,73] or supervisors[61], which may also result in common method biases. Future studies could benefit from using both subordinate and supervisor assessments of Guanxi[63,84].

CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER WORKS

This paper presents an in-depth examination of workplace Guanxi through a systematic literature review of 52 relevant studies published between 2019 and October 2024. The review categorizes the literature by publication year, geographical focus, theoretical frameworks, research methods, and findings. The antecedents of workplace Guanxi are organized into four key categories: Leadership and Behaviours, Personal Traits, Psychological State and Capabilities, Workplace Atmosphere, and Cultural Values and Social Technology. The paper highlights the most frequently studied constructs and explores the consequences of workplace Guanxi. Based on the findings, a conceptual framework for workplace Guanxi is proposed, along with a future research agenda focusing on measurement techniques, research methods, and underexplored determinants.

The study has several limitations. First, it focused exclusively on papers published in English, which means that potentially valuable studies in other languages may not have been considered. Second, despite conducting searches across four major abstracting databases and reviewing a large number of papers to ensure thoroughness, research on Guanxi may have been published in journals that were not indexed in these databases. To address this limitation, future research using similar methods

should explore additional databases and widen the search scope. Third, the relatively small sample size (n=52) can be viewed as another limitation. Nevertheless, we hope that the findings from this SLR and the proposed research agenda provide a helpful summary of the current literature and offer guidance for future studies.

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