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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Do Chinese employees avoid seeking social support when coping with work stress?

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Abstract

Organisational psychology literature is abounded with empirical evidence of the mitigating effect that social support seeking (SSS) behaviour has on stress. However, it is unclear if this phenomenon is present in a collectivist context where workers might be hesitant to seek social support when under stress. A total of 123 employees from China completed a longitudinal survey over 4 weeks assessing their appraisals of an ongoing work stressor, coping strategies, and stress level. Path-analysis, hierarchical regression and means comparison determined the degree of fit of two theoretical perspectives (stress-buffer and main effects) to Chinese employee's SSS behaviour, and its frequency of use against other coping strategies. Results showed that SSS was not elicited by primary and secondary appraisals, but instead may be better explained by employees' collectivistic aspirations. Implications of the results were addressed in relation to stress management strategies and human resource support initiatives. Future research directions were also discussed.

Keywords: China; main effect; social support seeking; stress-buffer effect; work stress

Introduction

Despite the ongoing coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid19) pandemic, US trade restrictions on China, and global economic downturn, China remains one of the leading Asian countries that is still recording growth in foreign direct investment (FDI). For example, in 2020, it was the largest recipient of FDI growing by 6%; about $149 billion (RegistrationChina, 2021; UNCTAD, 2021). As more Western multinational enterprises (MNEs) set up operations or expand on existing operations in China (as well as in many other high collectivistic Asian countries), there is a need to better appreciate the local's mindsets in order to effectively manage the challenges that many of these MNEs are facing today, such as how to compete successfully with rising local companies, and how to attract and retain local talents (Froese, Sutherland, Lee, Liu, & Pan, 2019). Therefore, Western or foreign MNEs need to understand the host country's cultural values and beliefs that influence local talent's behavioural and thought processes in order to successfully recruit, manage and retain them (Froese et al., 2019). Given the increasingly stressful work environment brought about by the global pandemic and economic downturn, providing effective assistance to employees' well-being becomes a priority to many organisations. In 2020, a total of 1,040,480 foreign companies were registered in China (RegistrationChina, 2021); for these foreign companies, and those in other high collectivistic Asian country such as Korea, Japan, Indonesia, Malaysia, or Vietnam, it is very challenging to be effective in assisting its indigenous employees to manage the trail and tribulations of an ever-stressful work environment. A clear understanding of the local ways of coping with stress is therefore crucial.

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The negative impact of work stress on wellbeing is well-documented over the past few decades. Excessive work stress leads to mental distress (e.g., anxiety, anhedonia), physical illnesses (e.g., pain, sleep and eating disorders), psychosomatic diseases, and burnout (Lu, Sun, Hong, Fan, Kong, & Li, 2015; Marine, Ruotsalainen, Verbeek, Mariné, & Serra, 2006) all of which have negative consequences for the organisation. Previous research has identified several effective strategies that employees may use to mitigate these negative outcomes, notably the seeking of social support (Heerde & Hemphill, 2018; Taylor, Sherman, Kim, Jarcho, Takagi, & Dunagan, 2004). Social support was found to reduce stress, alleviate mental and physical health problems, and aid in recovery (Gariépy, Honkaniemi, & Quesnel-Vallée, 2016; Kim, Sherman, Ko, & Taylor, 2006). However, with increasing cultural diversification of the workforce, our understanding of work stress and coping strategies warrant closer scrutiny. One of the most debated and often misunderstood coping strategies used by Asians or high collectivistic individuals (e.g., China, Japan, Korea, Malaysia) is social support seeking (SSS). The present paper will examine SSS's efficacy in mitigating stress experiences in a collectivistic culture (i.e., China). Two models are developed for this purpose: the stress-buffer effect (SB) model and the main effect (ME) model. Both models are tested using multivariate and path analysis statistics to reveal the unique roles of SSS in high collectivistic context and reconcile some of the inconsistent results reported in past empirical studies of this topic. Findings from this study will have significant human resources and organisational health implications for foreign multinational enterprises (MNEs) operating in high collectivistic countries such as China.

Literature review

Kaplan, Cassel, and Gore (1977: 147) defined social support as 'the degree to which a person's basic social needs are gratified through interaction with others'. It is classified into perceived social support (PS), received social support (RS) and SSS (Rodriguez & Cohen, 1998). PS refers to one's perception of availability of social support from significant others; while RS is the actual receiving of social support. SSS is the act of eliciting social support from significant others (Kim, Sherman, & Taylor, 2008), or a coping behaviour of proactively seeking support (Heerde & Hemphill, 2018). SSS is found in many coping scales; for example, Vitaliano, Russo, Carr, Maiuro, and Becker (1985) Ways of Coping Checklist, and Carver (1997) COPE Inventory. Table 1 shows a summary of definitions of key constructs from prior studies and Table 2 shows a summary of literature examining the relationship between SSS and Work Stress

SSS has received less attention than PS and RS (Rife, Kerns, & Updegraff, 2016) particularly in the domain of work stress and coping. The findings from the few studies on SSS were inconclusive (Britt, Crane, Hodson, & Adler, 2015; González-Morales, Rodríguez, & Peiró, 2010; Patterson, 2003) (Refer to Table 2). While Patterson (2003) found SSS effective in reducing US police officers' stress, González-Morales, Rodríguez, and Peiró (2010) investigation of Spanish teachers found that SSS increased burnout for men, with no significant effect for women. Britt et al., (2015) examined various coping strategies amongst Australian and U.S. soldiers during their military training and found no significant moderating effect of SSS on stress-symptom relationships. It is noteworthy that much empirical evidence on SSS are based in Western individualistic cultural contexts (Kim, Sherman, & Taylor, 2008). With increased preference for team-based work structures by multinational corporations, SSS in a work stress context needs further cross-cultural examination.

This study aims to explain prior studies' findings (Refer to Table 2) whereby SSS led to higher work stress amongst Asian Americans (e.g., Kim et al., 2006) but lower work stress amongst European Americans. Specifically, SSS has been found to induce stress amongst collectivists (i.e., East Asians), resulting in their reluctance to seek support during a stressful encounter (e.g., Kim et al., 2006; Kim, Sherman, & Taylor, 2008; Mojaverian & Kim, 2013; Taylor et al., 2004; Taylor, Welch, Kim, & Sherman, 2007); their findings may be biased by a specific

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Table 1. Definitions of constructs from previous studies

Construct	Operational Definition	Definitions	Studies
Primary Appraisal	The appraisal of a work stressor's threat level.	'Through primary appraisal a person judges whether an encounter is irrelevant, benign-positive, or stressful.'	Folkman and Lazarus (1985: 152)
		'In primary appraisal, the person evaluates whether he or she has anything at stake in this encounter.'	Folkman, Lazarus, Gruen, and DeLongis (1986: 572)
		(Primary appraisal ratings) 'reflect why an event is appraised as stressful.'	Goh, Sawang, and Oei (2010: 8)
Secondary Appraisal	An assessment of the amount of coping strategies available to manage the stressor.	"In secondary appraisal the person evaluates coping resources and options"	Folkman and Lazarus (1985: 152)
		"In secondary appraisal the person evaluates what, if anything, can be done to overcome or prevent harm or to improve the prospects for benefit.'	Folkman et al., (1986: 572)
		(Secondary appraisal ratings) 'reflect how the participant would actually cope with the identified stressful event.'	Goh, Sawang, and Oei (2010: 8)
Social Support Seeking	The act of eliciting support or assistance from contacts e.g., friend, families, colleagues.	'seeking … of help through appraisals, tangible assistance, informational support, or emotional support'	Kim, Sherman, and Taylor (2008: 519)
		'behaviour initiated by an individual that facilitates engagement with sources of social support'	Heerde and Hemphill (2018: 45)
Problem Focused Coping	The resolution of the cause of one's psycho-physiological stress experiences (i.e., stressor).	"doing something to change for the better the problem causing the distress'	Folkman and Lazarus (1985: 152)
		'dealing with the problem that is causing the distress'	Folkman et al., (1986: 572)
Emotion Focused Coping	The mitigation of one's psycho-physiological experiences of stress without directly dealing with the stressor.	"the regulation of distressingEmotions'	Folkman and Lazarus (1985: 152)
		'regulating emotion'	Folkman et al., (1986: 572)

Table 2. Summary of literature examining Social Support Seeking and Work Stress

Studies	Context	Relationship examined
Britt et al., (2015)	Australian and U.S. soldiers during military training	SSS->WS (0)
González-Morales, Rodríguez, and Peiró (2010)	Teachers in primary and high schools in Spain.	SSS->B (+)
Kim et al., (2006)	Asian American and European American undergraduate students in a U.S. university.	SSS->WS (+) for the Asian American sub-sample. SSS-> WS (–) for the European American sub-sample.
Mojaverian and Kim (2013)	Asian American and European American undergraduate students in a U.S. university.	SSS-> WS (+) for the Asian American sub-sample. SSS-> WS (–) for the European American sub-sample.
Patterson (2003)	Police officers in the U.S.	SSS->WS (–)
Taylor et al., (2007)	Asian American and European American undergraduate students in a U.S. university.	SSS-> WS (+) for the Asian American sub-sample. SSS-> WS (0) for the European American sub-sample.

Notes: SSS, Social Support; WS, work stress; B, Burnout +, positive, –, negative; 0, non-significant, all applied quantitative method.

theoretical approach being adopted (i.e., stress-buffer effect). Two distinct theoretical perspectives are therefore tested here: the stress-buffer effect (SB) and the main effect (ME). The SB perspective posits that social support buffers a stressor's impact on stress experience; while the ME perspective views social support as a direct determinant of well-being through the enrichment of interpersonal relationships (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Shavitt, Cho, Johnson, Jiang, Holbrook, & Stavrakantonaki, 2016). Under the SB perspective, a stressor becomes less threatening when social support is perceived as available, or when one receives support to manage the stressor (e.g., Rodriguez and Cohen, 1998). Therefore, when an encounter is appraised as threatening (i.e., stressor), SSS is activated as a coping response to mitigate the stress experience after the encounter.

Unlike the SB perspective, the ME perspective does not posit social support-seeking behaviour as a coping response to mitigate stress experience. Rather, the beneficial effect of social support comes from the 'regular positive experiences' of being supported by one's social network (Cohen & Wills, 1985: 311). Therefore, seeking social support is a manifestation of one's highly cohesive and socially well-integrated group environment, and is engaged to enhance interpersonal experience and relationship, self-worth, stability and a sense of control in one's life (Heerde & Hemphill, 2018; Rodriguez & Cohen, 1998). Social support's direct association with wellbeing has been well-established empirically; for example, in Sherman, Cheng, Fingerman, and Schnyer (2016) study, higher social support was linked to greater cortical thickness and amygdala volume which influence psychological wellbeing. Sawang, Oei, Goh, Wilman, Markhum, and Ranawake (2011) study of 1314 Asian employee's coping of work stressors from Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore and Sri Lanka revealed that seeking social support was significantly associated with reduced stress levels. Therefore, social support under a collectivistic environment may be polygonal with the capacity to mitigate stress experiences and improve well-being.

Given the notable qualitative difference between SB and ME perspectives, the present study hypothesises that previous findings of collectivists' lesser use of SSS than individualists (e.g., Kim et al., 2006; Kim, Sherman, & Taylor, 2008; Mojaverian & Kim, 2013; Taylor et al., 2004) have failed

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to capture a complete picture of SSS's functions within collectivistic context. This is because of the exclusive reliance on SB perspective as the theoretical basis of their investigations. For instance, Mojaverian and Kim (2013) found that Asian Americans have a lower tendency than European Americans to seek social support in stressful situations. Similarly, Taylor et al., (2004) found that Koreans, Asians and Asian Americans report lower use of SSS compared to European Americans. However, both studies failed to test for whether Asian Americans would seek social support in *non-stressful* situations because of their exclusive reliance on the SB perspective to understand SSS behaviours. From the ME perspective, social support may be sought in *non-stressful* situations for direct beneficial implications on well-being through the 'regular positive experiences' of receiving social support (Cohen & Wills, 1985: 311). Thus, these studies failed to validate the plausibility of ME as an explanation of SSS behaviour amongst collectivists.

The present study seeks to fill this theoretical gap by testing both the SB and ME perspectives. The ME perspective has garnered increasing attention over the years as Miller, Akiyama, and Kapadia (2017) observed that collectivists' high level of support for in-group members was driven by a desire to meet their collective obligations and maintain harmonious relationships. Rhee, Zhao, Jun, and Kim (2017) also argued that in a collectivistic workplace, SSS can be activated to foster culturally-valued aspirations akin to organisational citizenship behaviours (e.g., nurturing relational/group harmony, integrating self-identity into the group's identity, and satisfying group-aspiration over self-aspiration). This aspect of SSS (ME perspective) is largely overlooked by previous research; there is a dearth of work stress research on SSS using both SB and ME perspectives. A search on PsychINFO and PsycARTICLES yielded only one study by Patterson (2003) on general life stress and work stress of 233 U.S. police officers. Consistent with Jou and Fukada (1997) observation of SSS under a general stress context, Patterson found SB and ME to be distinct from each other yet equally valid in explaining SSS behaviour. Specifically, only the SB perspective adequately described the individualistic US employees, while the ME perspective did not fit the US workplace stress context. However, Patterson's research was cross-sectional and situated in a Western individualistic culture (i.e., Caucasian Americans at 72%, Asian Americans at 1.7%); thus, his findings might not be relevant to collectivistic employees.

Collectivism and social support seeking

Collectivism is characterised by diffuse, mutual obligations with expectations based on ascribed statuses (Schwartz, 1992). Interdependence and maintenance of a close and harmonious relationship are highly valued, alongside a strong motivation to adapt to in-group's goals while constraining personal goals (Lavee & Ben-Ari, 2008). In contrast, individualism is fundamentally contractual, characterised by narrow primary groups and negotiated social relations with specific expectations focusing on achieving personal status (Schwartz, 1992). Self-mastery and independence are revered with an emphasis on promoting individual goals (Lavee & Ben-Ari, 2008). Collectivistic and individualistic orientations (e.g., values, beliefs, rules) coexist in all cultures. East Asian countries (e.g., China, Japan, Korea) are traditionally collectivistic because they embrace proportionately higher collectivistic and lower individualistic orientations than their western counterparts (e.g., America, Germany) (Felfe, Yan, & Six, 2008; Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002).

One might presume that a collectivist draws on more social support than an individualist since the former places a greater emphasis on group cohesion, interdependence and mutual obligations. However, studies based solely on the SB perspective, where social support-seeking is posited as a coping response to mitigate stressful circumstances, have found that collectivists tend to seek less social support in response to stress compared to individualists (e.g., Kim et al., 2006; Kim, Sherman, & Taylor, 2008; Mojaverian & Kim, 2013; Mortenson, 2009; Mortenson, Burleson, Feng, & Liu, 2009; Taylor et al., 2004). It is important to note that these studies have not yet tested for the ME perspective where social support-seeking could occur not merely as a response to

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stressful circumstances but also as means to enhance interpersonal relationships at work. In Taylor et al., (2004) study, European Americans used more social support than Asian immigrants and American-born Asians when coping with stress. Asian immigrants were less likely to elicit support from family members than American-born Asians because it was deemed inappropriate in highly collectivistic societies (Taylor et al., 2004). Mortenson et al., (2009) also found that European Americans considered SSS more appropriate as compared to those in a Chinese sample. Biron (2013), in his study of support's impact on workplace wellbeing and sick leaves, noted that Chinese employees' tendency to worry about their SSS behaviour's impact on peers prevented them from seeking social support. Here, collectivist might not engage in SSS during stressful encounters because of his/her beliefs of the virtue of sacrifice and endurance to adversities, fear of causing relational disharmony, and the potential threat to a sense of personal competency (Au, Shardlow, Teng, Tsien, & Chan, 2013; Kuo, 2011). Engaging in SSS behaviour might even be stress-inducing which would explain the abovementioned results.

The present study hypothesises that SSS amongst collectivists, despite its potential to induce rather than reduce stress, remains viable from a cultural perspective (ME perspective) as it enhances group harmony. This perspective is supported by previous research; Chen, Kim, Mojaverian, and Morling (2012) found that collectivists are motivated to offer social support to achieve a closer bond with recipients and greater relational interdependence. Miller, Akiyama, and Kapadia (2017) found that Indians and the Japanese (collectivists) were more likely to engage in SSS with siblings and viewed such behaviour less negatively as compared to their individualistic American counterparts. In Lu, Kao, Siu, and Lu (2010) study of 380 employees from Beijing, Hong Kong and Taipei, SSS was beneficial to the quality of performance and peer relationships. Finally, Yeh, Inman, Kim, and Okubo (2006: 137) argued that 'help-seeking is embedded' in collectivistic cultures as it is important in upholding the values of interdependence, built group cohesion and cultivated group identity. Thus, it could be that SSS behaviour in a collectivist culture is driven by relational aspirations (ME perspective) rather than simply being a stress coping response (SB perspective). This would explain the seemingly contradictory findings regarding the use of SSS amongst collectivists- where the studies based on the SB perspective shows their reluctance to use SSS during stressful encounters, while studies using the ME perspective have shown collectivists employing SSS to enhance relationships.

The polygonal nature of collectivists' SSS behaviour can be traced to their unique relational and interpersonal protocol that enables SSS to also cultivate and maintain collective affiliations (Alston, 1989; Park & Chesla, 2007; Yum, 1988). For example, 'Amaeru' is a Japanese phenomenon about a person's SSS behaviour that obligates others to indulge in or be patient with him/her (Bower, 2004). 'Amaeru' goes beyond problem resolution because the performer of 'Amaeru' is often capable of resolving the problem him/herself (Behrens, 2004). Rather, it is about establishing strong and secure relationships with in-group members that heighten one's sense of group obligation and loyalty. Chinese 'Guan Xi', and Korean 'Inhwa' (Alston, 1989) are similar collective affiliations marked by strong interdependency or group membership that provides security and easier access to fulfilling physiological needs (Alston, 1989; Chung & Cho, 2006; Pye, 1982). When cultivating 'Guan Xi' or 'Inhwa', one engages SSS to elicit help from an in-group member to strengthen interpersonal ties and mutual obligation. This behavioural tendency has been reported by Chen, Chen, and Huang (2013) where the Chinese would solicit help from non-family 'Guan Xi' more than from family 'Guan xi' in most adversities (e.g., work stressors) except in crises. For the Chinese and other east Asian collectivistic communities, SSS is an important relationship building and maintaining behaviour that operates on adversity.

East Asians' strong collective affiliation which leads to the blurring of self *vs.* group identities can further facilitate SSS behaviour during stressor encounters. This is evinced by the unique vocabulary in collectivist societies which often have no equivalent counterparts in an individualist's vocabulary. For example, the Korean vernacular 'Uri' for self-reference is a sense of socially

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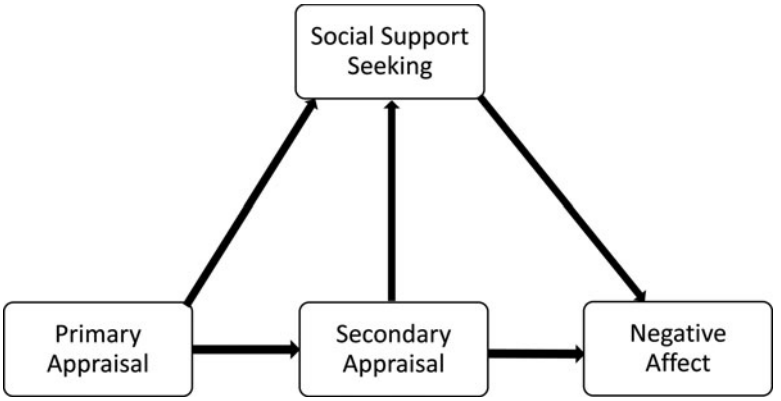


Figure 1. Stress-Buffer effect of China Employees' SSS (SB model).

diffused yet unified, and homogenous selfhood (Hoffman, 1993). In 'Uri', what belongs to the 'Self/Individual' belongs to the 'Collective/Group' such that 'oneness' is attained. Shim, Kim, and Martin (2008) observed that when dining in Korea, it was normal to not have one's own plate but instead everyone reached into a common pot/plate and ate from there. Such practice is common in other East Asian/collectivistic societies which embodies the concurrent existence of personal and group ownerships where 'my' becomes 'our'.

Collectivistic employee's tendency to perceive personal work stressor as shared or owned by team/unit has been supported by empirical evidence such as Yang et al., (2012) investigation of 6509 managers across 24 countries. Collectivistic managers reported being less distressed from heavy workloads and inadequate resources than their individualistic counterparts. This was attributed to collectivists' heavy reliance on workplace relationships - namely, a desire for cohesive and supportive work environments and a sense of 'shared destiny'- when managing stressors. Mazzola, Schonfeld, and Spector (2011) review of 37 qualitative studies of occupational stress across cultures showed that Chinese employees did not perceive lack of personal control as stressful due to their collectivistic values of interconnectedness and solidarity with co-workers as a personal work stressor could be shared or owned by peers. Hence, a collectivistic employee will hesitate to engage SSS when primed to regard the work stressor as strictly a personal issue/challenge. However, when the work stressor is construed as a group/shared threat, SSS becomes a viable and desirable option.

Research methodology and hypotheses

The relevance of SSS to highly collectivistic China employees during a work stressor encounter was tested over a 4-week period (Refer to Figures 1 and 2). Specifically, this study will test two SSS theoretical models to elucidate the unique nature of SSS behaviour in high collectivistic cultures (e.g., China, Japan, Korea). Therefore, employees from China have been recruited for this study since the country's unifying culture has traditionally been highly collectivistic. Furthermore, the East and Southeast Asian Regions have experienced ongoing growth in FDI over the past few decades. In 2019, Asia was the world's largest FDI recipient accounting more than half of global FDI with China being a key driver of this growth (UNCTAD, 2021). Asia is expected to remain the leading region for FDI in the future (Dollar, 2021; UNCTAD, 2021).

The two SSS theoretical models were adapted from Goh, Sawang, and Oei (2010) revised transactional process of stress and coping (RTM). RTM outlines the stress and coping process beginning with Primary Appraisal (PA) which appraises a stressor's threat level. Secondary

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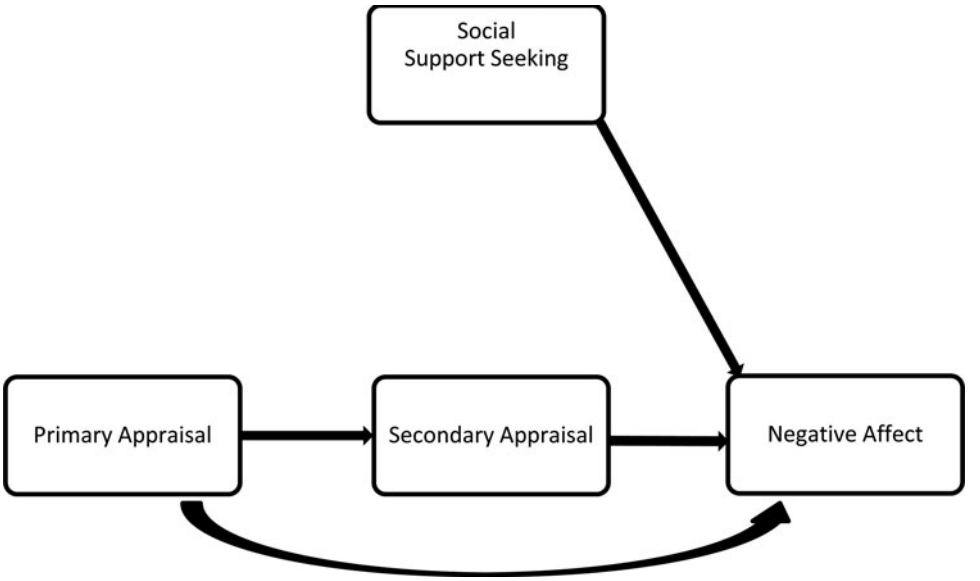


Figure 2. Main Effect of China Employees' SSS (ME model).

Appraisal (SA) is engaged next to assess the availability of coping strategies to manage the stressor. If PA is high (stressor deemed as threatening) and SA is low (limited coping options), high stress experience ensues. This will activate coping responses which in turn determine one's eventual level of stress experience (Goh, Sawang, & Oei, 2010). In this study, work stressor is a work-related threat that one has little control over. PA assesses one's appraised level of threat from a specific work stressor, while SA reflects one's appraised level of personal control over this work stressor. Stress experience is measured by the level of negative affect (e.g., sadness, anxiety, anger) incurred from the work stressor.

There are essentially three categories of coping response; SSS, problem-focused coping (PFC) and emotion-focused coping (EFC) (Carver, 1997; Vitaliano et al., 1985). EFC mitigates the psycho-physiological experiences of stress (e.g., feeling of anxiety) without directly dealing with the stressor; it is self-focused. PFC resolves the cause of the psycho-physiological stress experiences (e.g., a difficult task); it is stressor-focused. Past research into collectivists' stress coping habits such as 'Expressive Suppression' and 'Forbearing Adversities' have consistently reported their preference for EFC over PFC (e.g., Gan, Wen, Wang, Rodriguez, Gong, & Xie, 2014; Soto, Perez, Kim, Lee, & Minnick, 2011; Szabo, English, Zhijia, Jose, Ward, & Jianhong, 2017; Tu & Yang, 2016; Yeh et al., 2006). However, in workplace contexts, strong preference for PFC has also been observed (Dijkstra & Homan, 2016). Since collectivists place the needs of the group above those of the self, it is expected that in a workplace context, team-focused PFC will be preferred over EFC by China employees. In the present paper, PFC assesses the frequency of coping strategies engaged to manage the work stressor. EFC measures the frequency of using coping strategies to manage one's negative emotions incurred from the work stressor. Finally, SSS measures the frequency of seeking help and support from peers during a work stressor encounter. The other variables of interest are collectivism (COL) and individualism (IND). They reflect socio-cultural values/beliefs associated with the traditionally East/West dichotomy such that Eastern cultures (e.g., China) possess higher COL than IND, and Western cultures (e.g., UK) have higher IND than COL. We posit that apart from PFC and EFC, collectivists' SSS behaviour may also be a significant coping strategy as it can enhance group cohesiveness and a sense of 'shared destiny', especially if the work stressor is construed as a group/shared threat. Furthermore, work stressor presents to collectivistic employee

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an opportunity to cultivate relationships. Hence, it is proposed that collectivist's SSS behaviour is primarily motivated by the desire to build or maintain relationships rather than the mitigation of stress experience from the work stressor. Therefore, a collectivist's engagement of SSS behaviour may be independent of the work stressor encounter. Testing of the above contention requires the following series of analytical approaches:

1) Path analysis of the SB and ME models to demonstrate that SSS behaviour is not activated by stressor encounter. Specifically, SSS did not mediate the impact from stressor encounter (measured by PA and SA) to stress experience (measured by Negative Affect), thereby rendering the ME model a better fit than SB model.
2) Hierarchical regression analysis of SSS's impact on Negative Affect, controlling for PA and SA, will further show SSS's relevance in the ME model. SSS is a significant factor, independent of the stressor appraisal factors PA and SA.
3) Hierarchical Regression analysis of SSS's impact on Negative Affects will show that SSS behaviour is stress inducing. Yet, SSS as a strategy for non-stressor related purposes (e.g. relationship building) renders it viable to collectivistic employees. T-tests on whether their engagement of SSS, is significantly more frequent than PFC and/or EFC, over a 4 weeks period, will shed light on the above contention. It is expected that SSS will not be the least frequently utilised strategy amongst the collectivistic employees.

To test both the SB and ME models in the China sample across two-time frames, the following hypotheses are generated.

Hypothesis 1 (H1): SSS significantly increases negative affect at Time 2 (NA2).
Hypothesis 2 (H2): SSS is an insignificant mediator of the relationship from stressor appraisals (PA and SA) to negative affect at Time 2 (NA2).
Hypothesis 3 (H3): SSS and stressor appraisals (PA and SA) independently and significantly predict negative affect at Time 2 (NA2).
Hypothesis 4 (H4): SSS significantly predicts negative affect at Time 2 (NA2) after controlling for PA and SA.
Hypothesis 5 (H5): SSS and PFC are utilised significantly more than EFC strategies.

If the SB perspective were true in a Chinese collectivistic work context, then PA and SA would independently elicit SSS during a work stressor encounter. These appraisals will impact on stress experience allowing for SSS to perform the role of a mediator (Refer to Figure 1 and testing of Hypothesis 2).

If the ME perspective were true in a Chinese collectivistic work context, then SSS is hypothesised to exert a direct/independent impact on stress experience and does not mediate the impact of PA and SA on negative affect (Refer to Figure 2 and testing of Hypothesis 3).

Since our study also posits that SSS could be engaged by China employees for relational purposes in addition to resolving their work stressor, PA and SA's influence on SSS will therefore be insignificant and that SSS will remain significantly predictive of negative affect at Time 2 (NA2) after controlling for PA and SA (Refer to Hypothesis 4).

In this study, it is also hypothesised that SSS and PFC will be utilised significantly more than EFC strategies (Hypothesis 5) as it is expected that in a collectivistic workplace context, team-focused PFC and SSS will be preferred over EFC by China employees. Lastly, along with testing the fit of SB and ME models in a Chinese sample, hierarchical regression will be conducted to determine the frequencies of uses of various coping strategies. Finally, we also hypothesise that higher SSS would lead to higher negative affect at Time 2 (NA2) (Refer to Hypothesis 1).

It is anticipated that results from testing of the SB and ME models on China employees will resolve the inconsistent findings from past research about the efficacy of high collectivistic

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individual's SSS response to stress. Findings from this study will provide a blueprint to foreign multinational enterprises (MNEs) in China and other high collectivistic cultures on how to better train and support local employees in an effective and cultural appropriate way. This will in turn promote organisational health and performance. The vicissitudes of ongoing pandemic, and emerging geopolitical tensions have gravely impacted on the global economy. Consequently, our work environment has witnessed a number of unprecedented challenges (e.g., new work arrangements, longer and more intense and unpredictable working hours) that employees ultimately have to bear in the form of psycho-physiological distresses. With the growing expansion of Western MNEs in high collectivistic Asian countries such as China, sound understanding of the host's unique cultural practices and successful management of local employee's wellbeing become critical organisational objectives. The present study of China employee's SSS behaviour under work stress will offer a glimpse into the working mindset of this high collectivistic culture group, and empirically show the significance of SSS behaviour in a high collectivistic workplace.

Method

Participants

A total of 123 full time working adults (28 males, 95 females) were recruited via convenience sampling; they were enrolled in part-time courses at various universities. This longitudinal study required participants to be easily located across the two-time period of data collection. Participants were asked to self-reflect and record their stress-coping behaviours over a 4-week period. Therefore, conducting a survey study within a locality such as the university would facilitate easy access to participants and follow-ups. Mean age for males was 26.46 (SD = 3.36) and females was 26 (SD = 3.74). Participants identified themselves as Chinese locals from Beijing, China; majority of whom have tertiary education ($n = 100$), followed by secondary education ($n = 21$) with two missing data. The mean working hours per week was 39.96 (SD = 18.25). Participants were mostly junior staff ($n = 73$), followed by senior staff ($n = 48$) with two missing data. 93.5% of employees worked full-time ($n = 115$), while the rest worked part-time. Mean length of employment in their present job ($n = 122$) was 39.75 months ($SD = 36.17$).

Measures

Primary Appraisal (PA)

The 8-item PA scale (Dewe, 1991) measured respondents' appraisal of threat from their identified work stressor. Items included 'You feel that you will appear incompetent' and 'You feel that you will be seen as an unsupportive person'. The scale ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*applies a great deal*). Higher scores suggested higher levels of perceived threat. This measure possessed adequate internal consistency, $\alpha = .69$ (Dewe, 1991).

Secondary Appraisal (SA)

Troup and Dewe (2002) 35-item Multifaceted Control Scale assessed one's perceived level of control over the work stressor (i.e., SA). This 5-point scale (1: *not at all* to 5: *a great deal*) consisted of 4 sub scales; Predictability (e.g., was informed about things); Take Control (e.g., able to plan own time and pace of work); Self-control (e.g., able to remain calm); and General Control (e.g., able to decide how the task is done). High scores indicated higher perceived control over the work stressor. Each of the four subscales has good internal consistency, ranging from $\alpha = .87$ to $\alpha = .92$ (Troup & Dewe, 2002).

Negative affect (NA)

Negative affect is one of the most quintessential outcomes of a stressful encounter. NA was assessed by the Job-Related Affective Well-being Scale (Van Katwyk, Fox, Spector, & Kelloway, 2000). The 15-item NA scale (e.g., the stressful event made me feel miserable, the stressful event made me feel depressed) ranged from 1(never) to 5 (extremely often). High scores indicated

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higher levels of negative affect felt from the identified work stressor. NA subscale has good internal consistency at $\alpha = .91$ (Van Katwyk et al., 2000).

Coping strategies and Social Support Seeking (SSS)

Stress coping strategies and SS were measured using Brief COPE (Carver, 1997). There were 28 items measuring 14 coping strategies on a 4-point scale (0: *I've not been doing this at all*, to 3: *I've been doing this a lot*). The 4 subscales were grouped into two coping categories: problem-focused coping (e.g., active coping, planning, using instrumental support, and religion) and emotion-focused coping strategies (e.g., positive reframing, acceptance, humour, using emotional support, self-distraction, denial, venting, and self-blame) (Carver & Scheier, 1994; Holahan & Moos, 1987; Schnider, Elhai, & Gray, 2007). High scores indicated high frequency of use. Each subscale's coefficient alphas ranged from .50 to .90 (Carver, 1997).

In this study, 4 instrumental support and emotional support coping items made up the SSS variable (i.e., 'I've been trying to get advice or help from other people about what to do', 'I've been using emotional support from others', 'I've been getting comfort and understanding from someone', 'I've been getting help and advice from other people'). Problem-focused coping consisted of 4 items from active coping and planning coping strategies directed at the work stressor (e.g., 'I've been concentrating my efforts on doing something about the situation I'm in', 'I've been taking action to try to make the situation better'). Emotion-focused coping or non-task/problem-focused coping consisted of 20 items that were aimed at changing affective experience without acting on the stressor (e.g. 'I've been making jokes about it', 'I've been using alcohol or other drugs to make myself feel better').

Individualism and collectivism

The 57-item Schwartz's Values Survey (Schwartz, 1992) comprised of descriptive statements of each cultural orientation (e.g., 'belief in one's own worth', 'feeling that others care about me'). They were rated on a 9-point scale (−1: *Opposed to my values* to 7: *Of supreme importance*) with high score indicating high level of importance of the specific cultural item to the individual. An overall high score meant high level of specific cultural orientation. Collectivistic values included 15 items; family security, respect tradition, social order, clean, moderate, forgiving, honour one's elders, polite, protect public image, national security, obedient, wise, devout, reciprocate favours, and self-discipline. Individualistic values included 7 items: intellectual autonomy (creativity, broad mindedness, and curiosity) and affective autonomy (varied life, exciting life, pleasure, and enjoying life). Average internal consistency of the survey's indices has been found to be adequate in countries such as Australia ($\alpha = .67$), Israel ($\alpha = .71$), and Japan ($\alpha = .60$) (Schwartz, 1992). In this study, collectivism's $\alpha = .85$, and individualism's $\alpha = .71$.

Procedure

This study was conducted under APA ethical standards with approval from University Human Research Ethics Committee. Participant's informed consent was obtained before commencement and confidentiality was ensured. The survey was administered across 2-time frames of 4 weeks apart. The back-translated version (i.e., Chinese Language) of the survey was administrated by collaborators in China. At Time 1, participants wrote down an on-going work stressor (e.g., meeting deadlines, dealing with difficult clients or supervisors), followed by measures of PA and SA of the work stressor as well as their negative affect (NA1). Participants then recorded their coping of the work stressor for 4 weeks. De Lange, Taris, Kompier, Houtman, and Bongers (2003) noted that there was no standard on the time lag for the above activities, nevertheless the 4-week duration was successfully used to promote accuracy of recollection (e.g., Goh, Sawang, & Oei, 2010; Wang, Chan, Goh, Penfold, Harper, & Weltewitz, 2018). At Time 2, participants' negative affect (NA2), coping strategies and their cultural orientation were assessed.

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Table 3. Descriptive Statistics and Zero-order Correlations table

	PA	SA	SSS	PFC	EFC	NA1	NA2
PA	–						
SA	−.213*	–					
SSS	.161	−.114	–				
PFC	−.202*	.413**	.089	–			
EFC	.131	.239**	.277**	.217*	–		
NA1	.301**	−.214*	.513**	−.174	.384**	–	
NA2	.407**	−.155	.343**	−.222*	.364**	.704**	–
Mean	2.60	3.40	1.62	1.96	1.11	2.72	2.83
SD	.79	.49	.69	.53	.27	.59	.62
α	.84	.91	.87	.75	.67	.90	.89

Note. $n = 123$, PA, Primary Appraisal; SA, Secondary Appraisal; SSS, Social Support Seeking; PFC, Problem Focused Coping; EFC, Emotion-Focused Coping; NA1, Negative affect at Time 1; NA2, Negative affect at Time 2; SD, Standard Deviation. *$p < .05$, ** $p < .001$

Plan of data analysis

EQS (Version 6) path-analysis, SPSS hierarchical regression and paired sample *t* tests were employed. The sample size of 123 was adequate for path-analysis with maximum likelihood (Jackson, 2003; Kline, 2005). A-priori power analysis via G*power 3.1.9.2 also indicated that $n = 123$ was sufficient to yield a medium effect (Cohen's $f^2 = .15$) at power of .95 based on $\alpha = .01$ for regression analyses (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009).

This longitudinal study will test the complex mediation relationships between variables across two points in time. Hence, the likelihood of Common Method Variance (CMV) is minimal (Chang, van Witteloostuijn, & Eden, 2010; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012). The lack of CMV was supported by Harman's single factor test on all measurement's items with the first factor accounting 14. 239% of the variance, and correlations between variables (Refer to Table 3) were all below .9 (Chang, van Witteloostuijn, & Eden, 2010; Pavlou, Liang, & Xue, 2007; Rodríguez-Ardura & Meseguer-Artola, 2020).

Results

Data screening yielded no multivariate outlier exceeding the critical χ^2 of 14.40 for $df = 5$ (at $\alpha = .001$). No violation of normality, linearity, multicollinearity and homoscedasticity was observed. Table 3 showed the descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations of variables. As this was an exploratory investigation, all variables' Cronbach alphas were within acceptable range from .67 to .91. (Hafiz & Shaari, 2013; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Paired sample *t*-tests showed that Chinese participants ($n = 123$) had significantly higher collectivism ($M = 4.34$, SD = .93) than individualism ($M = 3.81$, SD = 1.05) with a mean difference of .53 at 95% CI [.67, .38], $t\ (122) = 7.21$, $p < .001$. Their stress levels (i.e., negative affect) between Time 1 (NA1-$M = 2.82$, $SD = .62$) and Time 2 (NA2-$M = 2.73$, $SD = .59$) were not significantly different at $t\ (119) = -2.25$, $p > .01$ indicating an ongoing stress experience from Time1 to Time 2.

Testing hypotheses 1–4 using path analysis and hierarchical regression

Chi-squared test (χ^2), standardised root mean square residual (SRMR), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), goodness of fit index (GFI), comparative fit index (CFI), normed fit index (NFI), and non-normed fit index (NNFI) were used in path analysis to determine model

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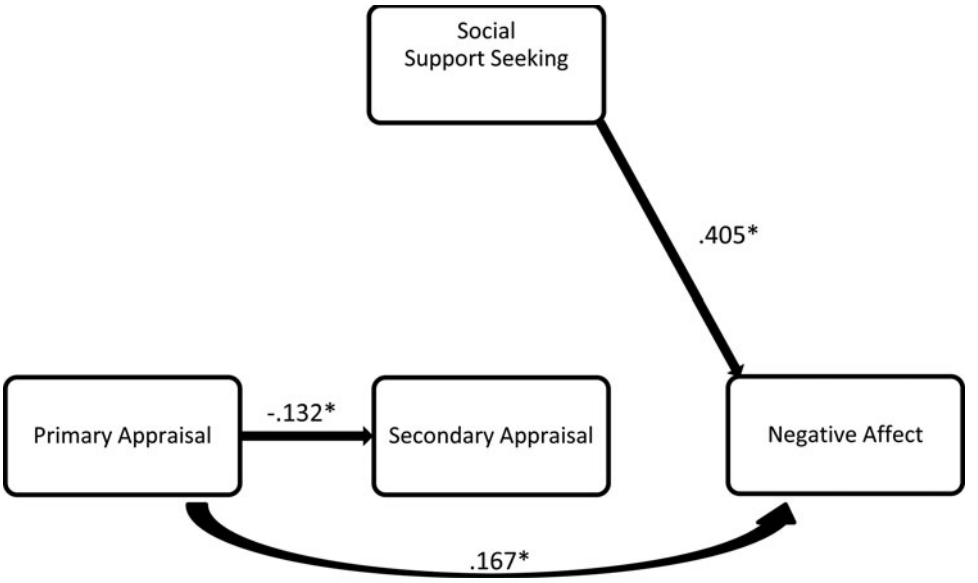


Figure 3. Revised Main Effect model of China Employees' SSS, *$p < .05$.

fit. Initial results showed ME and SB test-models had poor fit with 3 insignificant paths: SA→ NA2, PA → SSS, and SA →SSS. A revised model without these insignificant paths were tested. Good fit was observed at χ^2 (3) = 6.40, $p = .10$, GFI = .98, CFI = .93, NFI = .89, NNFI = .87, SRMR = .08, RMSEA = .09; with all paths at $p < .05$. This revised model was consistent with the ME perspective; it showed SSS independently predicted NA2 (Refer to Figure 3-Revised ME Model). These results also support hypothesis (H_2) that SSS is an insignificant mediator of the relationship from stressor appraisals (PA and SA) to negative affect at Time 2 (NA2).

Hierarchical Regression (refer to Table 4) indicated that PA and SA significantly predicted NA2, accounting for 11% of NA2's variance at stage 1, $R^2 = .114$, Adjusted $R^2 = .099$, F (2, 120) = 7.720, $p = .001$. Closer examination revealed that only PA significantly predicted NA2 in a positive direction at β = .267, $p = .003$, 95% CI [.07, .33] which was consistent with the Revised ME model. When SSS was entered, there was a significant 21.1% change in the variability of ST, $\Delta R^2 = .211$, $p < .001$. PA and SA were rendered insignificant while SSS retained significant prediction of NA2 in the positive direction, β = .397, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.27, .53]. The combined PA, SA and SSS explained 32.5% of NA2's variance at Step 2, $R^2 = .325$, Adjusted $R^2 = .308$, F (1, 119) = 19.138, $p < .001$. Hypotheses (H1) that SSS significantly predicts negative affect (NA2) and (H4) that SSS significantly predicts negative (NA2) affect after controlling for PA and SA are supported; while hypothesis (H3) that SSS and stressor appraisals (PA and SA) independently and significantly predict negative affect (NS2) is partially supported.

Testing hypothesis 5 using paired sample t-tests

PFC ($M = 1.96$, SD = .53) was engaged significantly more than SSS ($M = 1.62$, SD = .69) with mean difference of .33 at 95% CI [.18, .48], t (122) = 4.45, $p < .001$, and EFC ($M = 1.11$, SD = .27) with mean difference of .42 at 95% CI [.28, .56], t (118) = 17.15, $p < .001$. SSS was utilised significantly more than EFC with mean difference of .09 at 95% CI [.02, .16], t (118) = 8.71, $p < .001$. These results support hypothesis (H5) that SS and PFC were utilised significantly more than EFC.

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Table 4. Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Primary Appraisal, Secondary Appraisal and Social Support Seeking Predicting Negative Affect

Variables	β	*t*	sr^2	*R*	R^2	ΔR^2
Step 1				.338**	.114	.114
Primary Appraisal (PA)	.267*	3.039	.068			
Secondary Appraisal (SA)	−.157	−1.786	.023			
Step 2				.570**	.325	.211
Primary Appraisal (PA)	.200	2.572	.038			
Social Support Seeking (SSS)	.468**	6.108	.212			

Note. $n = 123$; $^{*}p \leqslant .01$; $^{**}p \leqslant .001$

Discussion

While both SB and ME models were tested on highly collectivistic Chinese employees, the results indicated that only the ME model fit these employees' engagement of SSS (Refer to Figure 3). This is because the study has found SSS to be stress-inducing (H1 was supported), and that PA and SA did not trigger their SSS behaviour as a coping response to the identified work stressor. Thus, taken together, the stress-buffer effect of SSS (SB model) could not fit the Chinese sample (H2 was supported) as the SB perspective posits social support-seeking (SSS) as a coping response to mitigate stressful experience. The above finding was confirmed by hierarchical regression; SSS significantly predicted negative affect after impacts of PA and SA on negative affect were accounted for (H4 was supported). Negative affect was predicted by PA but not by SA which rendered H3 partially supported. Overall, the findings suggested that when a work stressor was appraised as personally threatening (high PA) with limited personal control (low SA), SSS was not considered as an option to mitigate the stress. Thus, the SB perspective was not supported.

While the SB perspective did not fit the Chinese sample -as SSS was neither triggered by PA or SA, and furthermore induced stress, the ME perspective offered a better fit. This was supported by the finding that Chinese employees did not show an overall reluctance to engage in SS to manage work stressors as SSS remained relevant to them throughout the 4 weeks (Refer to Figure 3 and Table 4). While it was expected that there would be a significantly higher usage of PFC over EFC and SSS due to Chinese employees' emphasis on satisfying 'collective/organisational' over 'self/personal' aspirations, it was interesting that SSS was engaged to a significantly larger extent than EFC (H5 was supported) across the 4-week work stress experience. Thus, the above results taken together strongly suggested that ME was a better fit for the Chinese sample than the SB perspective as these employees' engagement of SSS was motivated by factors other than their threat and control appraisals (i.e., high PA and low SA) and that they continued engaging in SSS despite it being stress-inducing.

The present study has demonstrated that SSS, viewed from the ME perspective, remained useful to the Chinese employees. It is worth noting that these employees' collectivistic-values score was significantly higher than their individualistic-values score. As such, their behaviours would likely to be driven by their collectivistic beliefs (e.g., respect/preserve tradition and time-honoured customs, honouring parents/elders, 'dutiful/meeting obligations, and being devout). It is plausible that these Chinese employees chose SSS to manage their work stressor collectively and in doing so, achieve congeniality. If collectivistic employees were unwilling to seek social support under stress as reported in previous studies (e.g., Kim et al., 2006; Kim, Sherman, & Taylor, 2008; Taylor et al., 2004), SSS would have been avoided by the present study's highly collectivistic Chinese employees resulting in a non-significant SSS impact on negative affect. However, SSS remained a significant predictor of these employees' negative affect, albeit stress inducing, and was engaged significantly more than the traditionally favoured EFC. Hence, these highly

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collectivistic Chinese employees' reason for using SSS could be more aligned with collectivistic values (e.g., fostering cohesive work group and relations) than stress mitigation. This is congruent with collectivists' tendency to subsume personal needs for group needs and experience more satisfaction in a congenial and supportive workplace than their individualistic counterparts (Biron, 2013; Hui & Yee, 1999; Shavitt et al., 2016; Szabo et al., 2017). These tendencies are manifestation of collectivistic values such as being devout (to one's belief), respect for traditions and dutiful in meeting obligation; some of which were assessed in this study. Yang et al., (2012) noted employees in collectivistic societies tended to overlap work and social domains. For example, companies' involvement in employee's life was commonplace (Yang et al., 2012). When Chinese teachers encountered various family stressors, schools would often intervene to offer support (Yu, Dong, Wang, & An, 2016). Collectivistic society's tendency to calibrate interpersonal relations according to traditional family hierarchy naturally result in clear protocol of addressing older acquaintance and colleagues as 'uncle' or 'aunty', 'older brother/sister, and treating work superior or teacher as father/elder figure. The present study has measured this value under the collectivistic item 'honouring parents and elders'. Such a relational custom is often expressed in Chinese axioms such as '一日为师，终生为父' (A day as a teacher, a lifetime as a father) and words such as '师父' (Shi-Fu) consisting of characters for 'teacher' and 'father', to denote the inherent father/son interaction in a teacher-student relationship. The above scenarios elucidate the Chinese propensity to overlap work relations with family relations as such communal/familial norms are prominent in collectivistic workplace. SSS's unique role in collectivistic societies becomes more apparent when compared with Patterson (2003) Western-based findings. Only the stress-buffer effect (SB) adequately described the individualistic US employees, while the main effect (ME) model did not fit the US workplace stress context. The present study's results were contrary to Patterson's findings because only ME perspective fitted the China work stress context. Highly collectivistic (Chinese) employees' SSS behaviour appeared to convey an attitude that was not centred solely on direct management of work stress experience, but more on fulfilling in-group/collectivistic aspirations. It is therefore worth investigating this alternative explanation, as well as other plausible explanations, in future research to unpack the complexities of SSS behaviour in the workplace.

Collectivists' tendency to incorporate colleagues and work into their social or communal domain would facilitate a stronger 'relational-interdependent self-construal' accompanied by greater level of self-disclosure, perceived closeness and commitment (Shavitt et al., 2016) in their workplace. Such an inclination renders an encountered threat as being owned or shared by everyone in the group (i.e., a group threat/responsibility). Therefore, the lack of personal control over a work stressor in a high collectivistic work environment might be less distressing as shown in SA's non-significant association with negative affect (Refer to Figure 3). Work stressor under a collectivistic environment favours a team approach resolution, it opens up an avenue for SSS to garner effort from team members. This is demonstrated in Chinese employees' significantly higher utilisation of SSS and PFC over the self-focused strategies of EFC. Lu et al., (2010) study supported the above observations where SSS behaviour of employees from Beijing, Hong Kong and Taipei directly enhanced task-based performance and working relationships. Furthermore, Shen (2009) study of 530 Chinese teachers showed that high engagement of PFC was associated with high social support, and high EFC with low social support.

Limitations and applications

Although this study presents a coherent rationale for collectivistic Chinese employees' engagement of SSS behaviour under the ME perspective, further investigation is needed across different contexts. For example, SSS in law enforcement and emergency services may not be perceived as burdening others or disharmonising relationships making the SB perspective more representative.

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Collectivists' emphasis on group- over self-aspirations may be less prominent in low-affiliation situations rendering SSS inappropriate and subsequently avoided. A highly individualistic environment may also override one's collectivistic tendencies.

Although China comprises of different regional ethnic cultures (e.g., Shanghai, Hainan, Guangzhou, Beijing, Shenyang, Xi'an), they share a unifying culture which allows members of these different regional ethnic groups to identify themselves as Chinese (Han). This unifying culture is manifested through shared written language, values, customs, relational protocol, belief system (Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism), and traditional practices. Given that the participants in this study have self-identified as Chinese, it is reasonable to view them as sufficiently homogenous and that the study's findings are likely generalisable to Han Chinese. Nevertheless, there is a need to test our findings (that were based on Beijing employees) on non-Han cultural groups within China (e.g., Zhuang, Hui, Manchu). The present study did not collect data on whether the participants were employed in either indigenous/domestic or foreign organizations, and whether they had worked with high individualistic-low collectivistic expatriates. These sample characteristics may be collected in future studies to further our understanding of the interplay of cultural attributes. Future studies can also employ qualitative methods to gain more contextual understanding of the perceived threats and stressors that females and males face at work. Finally, this study measured only negative affect because of its universal association with stress experience. SSS's capacity to elicit positive outcomes (e.g., happiness, increased motivation and hardiness) amongst collectivists requires further investigation.

Future stress-management interventions in collectivistic workplaces should reconsider how social support is delivered without creating more distress to the seeker. Employee's perception of SSS may be reframed as team-oriented to improve its appropriateness. Social support can be embedded within the work environment as an integral part of work experience where support is offered without being explicitly sought. Finally, managers can match types of support (stressor focused, emotion focused, organisational/team focused) and their delivery (proactively offered without employee asking, or reactively after employee has asked) with employees' cultural inclination to enhance outcomes. The above recommendations are highly relevant to foreign multinational enterprises in China and other collectivistic Asian countries especially during this period of economic uncertainties brought about by the pandemic and geopolitical tensions; a sound appreciation of the host's culture would contribute significantly to the successful recruitment, management and retention of local employees, and effective maintenance of their wellbeing.

Conclusion

Using both SB and ME perspectives to test Chinese employees' SSS behaviour over a 4-week period, SSS's viability as a coping strategy was supported. This was contrary to previous research's claims that collectivists avoided SSS. The present study did not find support for the Stress-Buffer (SB) perspective as SSS increased negative affect and did not mediate Primary Appraisal's (PA) and Secondary Appraisal's (SA) impacts on negative affect. The Main Effect (ME) perspective offered a more logical and informative explanation to Chinese employees' use of Social Support despite its failure to alleviate stress. SSS remained viable as a strategy to meet collective aspirations (e.g., enhance group cohesion and peer-relationships) via group effort in overcoming a work stressor. Future research should incorporate the ME perspective instead of relying on the SB approach alone to examine Chinese/collectivistic employees' SSS behaviour in order to arrive at a more holistic and accurate representation of SSS.

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