

## MASTER'S THESIS

### An in-depth examination of leader-member exchange in Chinese organizations using the LMX-Comm model

Chen, Haoyang

*Date of Award:*  
2020

[Link to publication](#)

#### General rights

Copyright and intellectual property rights for the publications made accessible in HKBU Scholars are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners. In addition to the restrictions prescribed by the Copyright Ordinance of Hong Kong, all users and readers must also observe the following terms of use:

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from HKBU Scholars for the purpose of private study or research
- Users cannot further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- To share publications in HKBU Scholars with others, users are welcome to freely distribute the permanent URL assigned to the publication

## ABSTRACT

Volumes of empirical studies have focused on leader-member exchange (LMX) theory since its inception. Few qualitative studies have investigated LMX behavior in the context of Chinese organizations. To address this gap in literature, an in-depth examination of LMX behaviors was conducted, adopting the four-dimensional LMX-Comm model. The study focused on the communication topics, tangible behaviors, and communication channels present in leader-member mutual interactions. Eleven small group interviews with three employees from organizations in ten cities were conducted. Through thematic analysis of the interview data, this study examined LMX behaviors and communication channels. Themes were investigated according to the four LMX dimensions: work communication exchange, social communication exchange, tangible work exchange, and tangible social exchange. Several work communication exchange themes emerged from the data, including performance discussion, and decision-making involvement. In the social communication dimension, topics related to family, friends, asset management, entertainment activities, and hobbies were identified. Tangible work exchange behaviors were found in leader-member interactions, such as mutual helping behavior and compensatory time-off for overtime work. Participating in social and entertainment activities, exchanging gifts and red envelopes, and helping one another with personal matters, were also identified as tangible social exchange themes. Negative topics in communication exchange, including gossips and complaints, emerged from the data. In addition to LMX, several one-way behaviors, such as helping subordinates to map out a career plan, also were identified, contributing to a clearer understanding of the leader-member relationship. Additionally, this study looked at the communication

channels used by the leader–member dyad. Social media and face-to-face communication were found to be the most frequently used communication channels. The findings of this study can be applied to leadership training and be used to guide future scale development and other quantitative studies surrounding the construct of LMX.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION</b>	1
Communication in Leadership	2
Leader-member Exchange	4
Overview of leader-member exchange theory	4
Communication in leader-member exchange	5
Four-dimensional LMX-Comm	5
Purposes of the Study	6
<b>CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW</b>	7
LMX Theory	7
Origin of LMX theory	7
Leader-member exchange theory prior to 2015	8
LMSX as a behaviorally-orientated LMX construct	11
LMX Reconceptualized as Communication Processes	12
Communication in LMX	12
Social exchange embedded in LMX	14
A new four-dimensional conceptualization of LMX	15
Leader-member Interactions	18
Work communication exchange	18
Social communication exchange	24
Tangible work exchange	27
Tangible social exchange	30
Communication Channels at the Workplace	33
Traditional communication channels at the workplace	34
Computer-mediated communication channels at the workplace	37
The Cultural Context of Chinese Organizations	40
Guanxi	41
Summary of Research Questions	43
<b>CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY</b>	44
Interviews	44
Interview Participants	46
Procedures	49

Overview of interview	49
Interview procedures	50
Follow-up questions	51
Coding procedures	52
<b>CHAPTER 4: RESULTS</b>	<b>56</b>
Four-dimensional LMX (RQ1)	56
Work Communication Exchange (RQ2)	56
a) Positive or neutral work communication exchange	58
b) Negative topics in work communication exchange	67
c) One-way work communication	72
Summary	78
Social Communication Exchange (RQ3)	80
a) Positive or neutral social communication exchange	82
b) Negative topics in social communication exchange	89
c) One-way social communication	92
Summary	93
Tangible Work Exchange (RQ4)	96
a) Tangible work exchange	97
b) One-way tangible work behaviors	104
Summary	109
Tangible Social Exchange (RQ5)	112
Tangible social exchange	113
Summary	124
Communication Channels (RQ6)	127
Email	131
Face-to-face	135
Phone call and WeChat call	141
Social media and instant message	143
Summary	148
<b>CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION</b>	<b>152</b>
Research Purposes	152
Summary of Main Findings	152
Leader-member Interaction Themes under Four Dimensions	154

Communication elements embedded in all four facets	155
LMX-Comm-based themes and LMSX compared	157
Negative Topics in Communication Exchange	158
One-way Behaviors as an Additional Phenomenon	161
Communication Channels	162
Face-to-face communication in traditional LMX studies	163
Social media and instant message as prevalent channels	164
Email not as popular a channel in Chinese organizations	165
Practical Implications	166
Importance of communication	166
Leadership training	166
Limitations	167
Covid-19 issues	167
Contextual factors not addressed	168
Level of exchange not illustrated	168
Reliability and validity of the themes not tested	171
Directions for Future Research	171
Scale development	171
LMX and related outcomes	171
Communication channels and LMX	172
Conclusion	172
<b>REFERENCES</b>	174
<b>APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS (ENGLISH)</b>	204
<b>APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS (CHINESE)</b>	212
<b>CURRICULUM VITAT</b>	218