

Relationship between Machiavellianism and relational energy: based on trait activation theory

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Abstract

Purpose – This study draws on the trait activation theory to investigate the relationship between Machiavellianism and relational energy, considering the mediating role of facades of conformity and the moderating role of leader–member exchange ambivalence.

Design/methodology/approach – We collected survey data from 275 employees in central China at three time points. We conducted confirmatory factor analysis and bootstrapping to test the hypotheses using Mplus7.0 and the PROCESS macro.

Findings – We found that facades of conformity mediated the relationship between Machiavellianism and relational energy. Moreover, the indirect effect of Machiavellianism on relational energy via facades of conformity was more significant when leader–member exchange ambivalence is higher.

Originality/value – This study provides empirical evidence of how and when Machiavellians acquire relational energy from leaders.

Keywords Machiavellianism, Relational energy, Facades of conformity, Leader-member exchange ambivalence

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Machiavellianism is a prominent personality trait within the Dark Triad, capturing an individual's inclination toward “distrust of others, amoral manipulation, desire for control, and desire for status” (Dahling *et al.*, 2009). The literature in this area has concentrated on identifying the harmful, unethical outcomes of Machiavellianism. Two meta-analyses have consistently found that Machiavellians (hereafter Machs) tend to engage in unethical and counterproductive behaviors, thus impeding organizational success (Kish-Gephart *et al.*, 2010; O'Boyle *et al.*, 2013). However, research has recently begun to explore the “bright side” of Machiavellianism (Jones and Mueller, 2021), suggesting that Machs typically possess strong personal goals and the ethical flexibility to employ various measures to achieve them. Kuyumcu and Dahling (2014) demonstrated a positive relationship between Machiavellianism and task performance. Furthermore, Machiavellianism has been shown to yield greater long-term performance benefits than other personality traits (Satornino *et al.*, 2023). Indeed, Machs are more likely than individuals with other personality traits to achieve career success and even become leaders in the workplace. Nevertheless, the specific situations in which Machs may perform better than non-Machs remain unclear.

In this paper, we argue that a key reason for Machs' success in the workplace lies in their ability to excel at establishing and maintaining positive relationships with their leaders, thereby gaining relational energy. As the important agents in the workplace, leaders play a



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significant role in shaping their subordinates' experiences, including through promotions and salary adjustments, therefore, subordinates are committed to maintaining strong relational connections with their leaders (Bavik *et al.*, 2018). Building upon previous research, we propose that the impression management motivation of Machs plays a distinct role in cultivating relationships with their leaders (Blickle *et al.*, 2020). Specifically, Machs display a high level of adaptability and have a long-term orientation (Satornino *et al.*, 2023). They employ a tactical approach when communicating with leaders, strategically selecting the information to disclose, thus making a positive impression, and carefully shaping their expressions to optimize their personal goals and interests (Uppal, 2021). In addition, Machs use manipulation and potentially deceptive tactics to create a positive impression (Blickle *et al.*, 2020). One significant tactic utilized in the workplace is facades of conformity, where employees falsely represent themselves as aligned with organizational values (Hewlin *et al.*, 2017). By adopting this strategy, Machs seems to be capable of avoiding conflicts and maintaining good relationships with their leaders thus conserving relational energy.

To shed light on the specific situations in which Machiavellianism may be further activated, we sought to identify trait-relevant situational cues using trait activation theory (TAT). TAT proposes that individuals with certain personality traits are more inclined to exhibit specific attitudes and behaviors in particular situations (Tett and Burnett, 2003). In complex organizational situations, the leader-member exchange (LMX) plays a crucial role in influencing employees' behavior (Kacmar *et al.*, 2004). High-quality LMX can enhance trust, job satisfaction, commitment, and motivation (Martin *et al.*, 2016). However, recent research has emphasized that LMX quality is not univalent, i.e. absolutely high or low, instead, LMX appears to fluctuate between subjective and coexisting positive and negative thoughts towards the leader-follower relationship (i.e. LMX ambivalence) (Lee *et al.*, 2019). LMX ambivalence increases Machs' perceived uncertainty about interpersonal relationships (Melwani and Rothman, 2022), this is particularly relevant for Machs who possess a stronger desire for control and seek to influence the dynamics of interpersonal relationships. Machs tend to monitor others and flexibly change their interpersonal strategies in social situations (Czibor *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, this unstable, fluctuating LMX relationship most likely releases flexibility and external control desire in Machs during interpersonal interactions, allowing them to use manipulative strategies for their benefit without moral restraints.

Given that Machs are ultimately motivated by self-interest, they crave energy from their leaders. Relational energy is conceptualized as the increment in vitality, stamina, and work energy that results from a series of interpersonal interactions (Owens *et al.*, 2016). Higher levels of relational energy mean possessing more resources and opportunities, which positively impacts employee productivity (Baker, 2019). Relational energy implies a consequence of the interaction (i.e. increased motivation to work), not just the consequence of cognition. It can be generated from the bottom up and controlled by the subordinate (Owens *et al.*, 2016), which aligns with the Machiavellianism trait of control. Therefore, for Machs, the acquisition of relational energy becomes the ultimate goal when employing the facades of conformity strategy. Specifically, LMX ambivalence further activates Machs' desire to maintain control. They are highly motivated to maintain a balanced and stable relationship with their leaders to obtain relational energy and the facades of conformity strategy is an important way to achieve this goal.

In conclusion, this study investigates why Machs are more likely to adopt the facades of conformity tactic to maintain relational energy with their leaders. It further explains how LMX ambivalence influences the relationship between Machs and relational energy. The theoretical model can be seen in Figure 1.

We make three main contributions. First, we reveal the specific mediating mechanisms employed by employees with Machiavellian personalities when dealing with their relationships with leaders. The trait of Machiavellian, as an inherent individual inclination, plays a role in determining the extent to which employees will employ the

“facades of conformity” strategy. The deeper theoretical implication is that the same situational cues may only elicit behavioral responses from Machs, which coincides with Dahling *et al.*'s (2009) suggestion that Machs are more inclined to adopt impression management strategies. Our findings shed light on the process of energy maintenance through the specific utilization of the “facades of conformity” strategy.

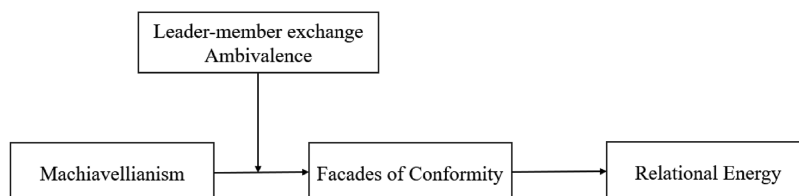
Second, we introduce TAT to examine the moderating role of LMX ambivalence. This boundary condition aligns with the logic of the trait*situation → behavior/performance, more specifically, LMX ambivalence functions as a “demand” that activates the Mach trait expression of “keeping up appearances of friendliness” with leaders, this reveals situations where Machs may outwardly appear friendly but maintain a sense of estrangement internally. Identifying this crucial cue is valuable for delineating the boundary conditions of employees’ psychological resources in sustaining relational energy. This understanding can assist companies in proactively mitigating risks and preventing the potentially detrimental effects of Machiavellianism.

Third, this study enriches the existing literature on relational energy from the perspective of subordinates. Previous studies have primarily examined how various leadership styles unilaterally impact subordinates’ relational energy (Baker, 2019). In contrast, our study prompts the recognition that relational energy is fundamentally bidirectional, highlighting that subordinates can actively contribute to an increase in relational energy by considering how to cultivate positive interactions with their leaders (Owens *et al.*, 2016).

Theoretical background and hypotheses development

Trait activation theory

TAT suggests that personality traits are activated when situations provide individuals with trait-relevant cues. These are categorized according to the types of trait-relevant functional situational features they indicate, namely demands, distracters, constraints, releasers, facilitators, and discretionary cues (Tett *et al.*, 2021). Demands are cues that can activate traits, leading to positive work behaviors. In contrast, distracters are cues that reduce job performance. Constraints invalidate certain traits and reduce job performance, whereas releasers counteract the effects of constraints and unleash behavioral tendencies shown by these traits. Facilitators are cues that enhance the salience or potency of trait-relevant cues already present. Lastly, discretionary cues are the trait effects untethered to valued outcomes (Tett and Burnett, 2003; Tett *et al.*, 2021). Recent research has shown that the Mach activation of is particularly relevant to situational cues and can even determine the direction of Machs’ activation (Thoroughgood *et al.*, 2022). De Hoogh *et al.* (2021) suggested that Machs do not always show abusive supervision, but a low rule climate or a high instrumental climate offers relevant cues for Mach trait expression and subsequently elicits negative effects. Thoroughgood *et al.* (2022) found that Machs’ engagement in social undermining is likely to be simultaneously influenced by countervailing situational forces, anticipated change would strengthen the positive relationship between Machiavellianism and undermining, while perceptions of coworkers’ exchange quality would attenuate it.



Source(s): Figure created by authors

Figure 1.
Theoretical model

Machs desire to take the lead in interpersonal interactions and to minimize the power of others (Czibor *et al.*, 2017). However, the reality of the situation and the state to which Machs aspire are not always inconsistent. LMX ambivalence, a typical social-level feature prevalent in organizations, provides an opportunity to release Machs' implicit tendencies. It can activate their interpersonal control desire, leading them to adopt a non-impulsive, strategic approach to maintaining relationships with their leaders. Thoroughgood *et al.* (2022) also confirmed that Machs have a unique ability to analyze their relationships with others from a strategic and transactional perspective, focusing on profitable transactions and building functional relationships. Therefore, a higher level of LMX ambivalence releases the Machiavellianism trait, strengthening the relationship between Machiavellianism and facades of conformity.

Machiavellianism and facades of conformity

Dahling *et al.* (2009) proposed that Machiavellianism is a personality trait characterized by both bright and dark sides, summarizing four key dimensions. These dimensions include the following (1) distrust of others—individuals are skeptical of the motives and behaviors of others; (2) amoral manipulation—individuals disregard the interests of others and abandon their moral standards to achieve certain goals; (3) desire for control—individuals like to control relationships and weaken the influence of others; and (4) desire for status—individuals pursue external goals such as status and money without focusing on internal goals such as individual development. Miller *et al.* (2015) further expounded on Machiavellianism, contending that the trait involves purposeful monitoring and manipulating others through impression management. Additionally, Machs exhibit moral flexibility in decision-making, disregarding ethical standards and prioritizing personal benefits and values. On the bright side, Machs possess steadfast personal goals and demonstrate flexibility in adopting diverse approaches to achieve these goals. On the dark side, Machs display strong utilitarian tendencies, resorting to unethical and deceptive means to attain their objectives.

Facade of conformity involve the creation of false statements by organizational members to make it appear as if they embrace organizational values (Hewlin, 2003, 2009). Fundamentally, it represents a strategic display of valuable skills and attributes rather than a genuine shift in the individual's internal values. Regarding attitudes, Machs tend to view others skeptically, leading to difficulty in establishing genuine and trusting relationships (Dahling *et al.*, 2009). This skepticism acts as a prerequisite for adopting facades of conformity. In terms of motivation, Machs possess a strong desire for control and status, they recognize the importance of leaders as key organizational agents who have a significant role in determining factors such as salary, promotion, opportunities, and resource allocation (Bavik *et al.*, 2018). Despite their internal lack of trust in leaders, Machs prioritize maintaining relationships with them because of their desire for status and their need for impression management. Consequently, they are more inclined to adopt insincere tactics resembling facades of conformity to establish a relationship with the leader. In terms of ability, Machs are good at amoral manipulation, often disregarding ethical standards and employing tactics that serve their self-interest. Hurley (2005) found that Machs can be social chameleons and subtly manipulate others to their advantage. To conclude, Machs have a long-term orientation and avoid overt forms of counterproductive behaviors, instead prioritizing strategic approaches. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1. Machiavellianism is positively related to facades of conformity.

LMX ambivalence as a trait activator

TAT defines relationships within organizations, including with peers, subordinates, and superiors, as social-level features. LMX ambivalence is the subjective experience of

employees holding both positive and negative thoughts about leader–member relationships (Lee *et al.*, 2019), it is particularly likely to emerge in highly dependent relationships. LMX ambivalence represents a strong opposition to Machs' natural desire for control (Treadway *et al.*, 2019), implying uncertainty in interpersonal interactions. To reduce this sense of uncertainty, Machs' desire for interpersonal control is easily activated. Thoroughgood *et al.* (2022) suggested that the lack of a sense of control tends to trigger employees to focus more narrowly on their own interests, engaging in behaviors aimed at maximizing self-protection rather than maintaining ethical standards. Therefore, LMX ambivalence successfully releases the thirst for interpersonal control among Machs, leading to a range of behaviors aimed at achieving it. Given the status and importance of leaders, Machs are more likely to maintain superficial friendliness in interpersonal relationships for their benefit, regardless of the unethical nature of the behavior.

In contrast, high LMX ambivalence activates flexibility and long-term orientation in Machs' interpersonal interactions, enabling them to adopt a strategic rather than an impulsive approach. Machs are adept at monitoring their social environments, focusing on their goals, and avoiding damage to valued exchange relationships may affect that their future success (Hershcovis *et al.*, 2012). They often seek out “functional friendships” with individuals who can serve a specific purpose for them and develop relationships with partners who can help them attain their goals for status and resources (Thoroughgood *et al.*, 2022). Consequently, in high LMX ambivalence situations, Machs become more sensitive to uncertainty, leading them to evaluate the pros and cons more cautiously. They tend to adopt a submissive appearance, creating an outwardly friendly climate that promotes a stable relationship with the leader, thereby advancing their interests.

Based on our predictions, we propose that the LMX ambivalence can be a “trait activator” that activates the releaser mechanisms to positively influence Machs' tendency for control. Machs believe that leaders can decide almost everything in the workplace (Colbert *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, the benefits of facades of conformity outweigh the costs, and they prefer to hide their true purpose through facades of conformity to manipulate the situation to their advantage (Hurley, 2005). Thus, we hypothesize as follows:

- H2. LMX ambivalence moderates the strength of the relationship between Machiavellianism and facades of conformity, such that the relationship is stronger when LMX ambivalence is high as opposed to low.

Facades of conformity and relational energy

The concept of relational energy finds its roots in interaction ritual chain theory (Collins, 2004), which posits that individuals are driven to seek experiences and social interactions that enhance their energy while avoiding interactions that deplete their energy. Thus, the definition of relational energy includes aspects of motivation, vigor, and stamina that result from positive interpersonal interactions (Owens *et al.*, 2016). According to this definition, relational energy in the context of the leader-member relationship does not solely depend on the leader emitting the energy. Indeed, members can also play an active role in generating relational energy. Essentially, this concept highlights the reciprocal nature of interpersonal interactions, where individuals can mutually benefit from the exchange of positive psychological resources from each other (Baker, 2019). Facades of conformity serve as a strategy for individuals to manage the impression they want to present to their leaders so that say, are perceived by their supervisors as likable and socially desirable (Tunley and Bolino, 2001). Research has also shown that individuals with strategies such as ingratiation, and self-promotion tend to receive affirmation and attention from their leaders, further fostering emotional commitment from employees (Gross *et al.*, 2021). In addition, facades of conformity also promote interpersonal communication, as leaders prefer employees whose

attitudes and values align with their own. This alignment induces positive emotions in leaders, fostering stronger social connections with employees (Hewlin *et al.*, 2017). Research has also shown that a benefit of facades of conformity is that by giving employees the impression of sharing the values of the team or the organization, employees gain access to external resources, including social and even financial support (Doblhofer *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3. Facades of conformity are positively related to relational energy.

Integrating [Hypothesis 1](#) and [Hypothesis 3](#), Machs exhibit a long-term strategic orientation, leveraging their behavioral and attitudinal expressions to serve their interests. Simultaneously adept at impression management, they choose to moderate the expression of their implicit values that conflict with organizational values. This strategic creation of facades aims to prevent conflict with leaders, facilitate access to resources allocated by leaders, and maintain relational energy with leaders. It is important to note that values are deeply rooted and cannot be changed in the short term, whereas Machs' implicit value tendencies are self-interest and disregard for ethical standards, which are certainly contrary to the dominant values of the organization (Jonason *et al.*, 2015). Machs display conformity aimed at maintaining their self-image to fit in with the team/organization and, at the same time maintaining high relational energy with the leader. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H4. Facades of conformity mediate the relationship between Machiavellianism and relational energy.

The integrated model

Facades of conformity are a strategy for Machs to gain relational energy and are considered a tactical camouflage rather than a depletion of cognitive resources (Hewlin, 2009). Research has indicated that individuals who are better able to distinguish their personal and work identities are less likely to experience negative outcomes when engaging in facades of conformity (Hewlin, 2003). Rothman *et al.* (2017) argued that LMX ambivalence is more of a cognitive conflict than an emotional experience, suggesting that it prompts deep cognitive processing rather than shallow emotional catharsis among employees. Consequently, at high levels of LMX ambivalence, Machs' cognitive processes are stimulated. The most significant feature of the leader–follower relationship is the substantial investment made by employees (Walumbwa *et al.*, 2010). To yield returns on their invested resources, Machs tend to seek out strategies to gain stable relational energy and achieve their personal goals. Their tendency to seek to gain the trust and recognition of their leaders through facades of conformity is also consistent with the self-interest orientation and long-term orientation that characterizes the Machiavellianism personality. Thus, we propose the moderated mediation hypotheses as follows:

H5. LMX ambivalence moderates the relationship between Machiavellianism and relational energy via facades of conformity, such that the indirect mediation effect is stronger when LMX ambivalence is high as opposed to low.

Method

Samples and procedure

Data were collected from four companies in central China involved in the electronics manufacturing and pharmaceutical manufacturing industries. The participants were all engaged in front-line production and had to interact with their leaders at work regularly. Each employee was assigned a unique identification code, comprising an abbreviation of

their name and the last four digits of their phone number. They were informed that the study would consist of three offline surveys, each separated by one month. We followed [Brislin's \(1983\)](#) back-translation procedure and translated the original English questionnaire into Chinese. The Chinese questionnaire was pretested with a group of experienced employees, and based on their feedback, we revised the items to be more relevant to the Chinese context and to reduce ambiguity, thus minimizing the risk of common method bias ([Podsakoff et al., 2012](#)).

We also assured the participants that their responses would only be used for our research and that their answers would be completely confidential. At Time 1, a survey was distributed to all 578 employees, of whom 461 employees completed measures of Machiavellianism and LMX ambivalence, and provided demographic information, resulting in a response rate of 79.76%. One month later, at Time 2, 345 employees (response rate of 74.84%) returned their questionnaires, which included measures of facades of conformity. Finally, two months later at Time 3, 296 employees (response rate of 85.80%) provided data on relational energy. After removing the incomplete and unmatched questionnaires, the final 275 participants were 23.60% female (76.40% male) and had an average age of 36.90 years ($SD = 9.43$) ranging from 21 to 58.

Measures

All measures were rated on a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Machiavellianism (T1)

Machiavellianism was measured by [Jones and Paulhus' \(2014\)](#) nine-item scale. A sample item is "I like to use clever manipulation to get my way" ($\alpha = 0.93$).

LMX ambivalence (T1)

LMX ambivalence was measured using a seven-item scale developed by [Lee et al. \(2019\)](#). A sample item is "I have ambivalent thoughts, sometimes I think I have a very good relationship with my leaders, and sometimes I don't" ($\alpha = 0.96$).

Facades of conformity (T2)

Facades of conformity were measured using a six-item scale by [Hewlin \(2009\)](#). A sample item is "I pretend that my values are the same as my organization's values" ($\alpha = 0.92$).

Relational energy (T3)

We used [Owens et al.'s \(2016\)](#) five-item measure to assess relational energy at Time 3. A sample item is "I feel invigorated when I interact with my leader" ($\alpha = 0.94$).

Control variables (T1)

We included several demographic characters as control variables, such as age, gender, education, occupation, and tenure, which prior studies have found to be related to relational energy ([Owens et al., 2016](#); [Qu et al., 2023](#)).

Confirmatory factor analysis

To assess the discriminant validity, we conducted a CFA to test the hypothesized model. The four-factor structure yielded a good model fit ($\chi^2/df = 2.336$, CFI = 0.929, TLI = 0.921, RMSEA = 0.070, SRMR = 0.063). These fit indices were much better than those of the three-

factor model (i.e. Machiavellianism, facades of conformity + LMX ambivalence, relational energy), the two-factor model (i.e. Machiavellianism, facades of conformity + LMX ambivalence + relational energy), and the single-factor model.

Results

Analytical strategy

Hayes (2018) argued that conditional process analysis can simultaneously reduce estimation bias by testing mediation and moderation effects. Therefore, we used Model 7 of the PROCESS macro to test the entire moderated mediation model.

Descriptive statistics

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlations of the variables. The study variables possessed an acceptable degree of internal consistency. As expected, there was a positive correlation between Machiavellianism and facades of conformity ($r = 0.12, p < 0.05$) and a positive correlation between facades of conformity and relational energy at Time 3 ($r = 0.17, p < 0.01$).

Hypothesis test

The results for the overall model are presented in Table 2. Machiavellianism was positively associated with facades of conformity ($B = 0.18, p < 0.01$), supporting Hypothesis 1. Facades of conformity were positively associated with relational energy ($B = 0.21, p < 0.01$), supporting Hypothesis 3. Hypothesis 4 predicted that facades of conformity mediate the relationship between Machiavellianism and relational energy. The results of the mediation analysis supported Hypothesis 4, as the indirect effect of Machiavellianism on relational energy through facades of conformity was significant and the 95% confidence interval did not include zero (*indirect effect* = 0.03, 95% CI [0.01, 0.07]).

Hypothesis 2 predicted that LMX ambivalence moderated the relationship between Machiavellianism and facades of conformity. As shown in Table 2, the interaction term between Machiavellianism and LMX ambivalence significantly and positively predicted facades of conformity ($B = 0.18, SE = 0.07, p < 0.01$). We then used the Johnson–Neyman technique to analyze the moderated relationship and plot the band of significance for the effect of Machiavellianism on facades of conformity at various levels of LMX ambivalence. The Johnson–Neyman technique provided richer information about the moderating effect by depicting the 95% CI of the simple slope, compensating for the shortcomings of the traditional pick-a-point method (Gardner *et al.*, 2017). We identified regions of LMX ambivalence at which the relation of Machiavellianism and facades of conformity was significantly different from zero. We plotted the upper and lower limits of a 95% confidence interval (CI) for the moderating effect of LMX ambivalence. As illustrated in Figure 2, the effect of Machiavellianism on facades of conformity was positive and significant when the mean-centered value of LMX ambivalence reached -0.25 or higher, supporting Hypothesis 2.

Finally, we further analyzed the conditional indirect effect of Machiavellianism on relational energy via facades of conformity at different levels of the moderator (LMX ambivalence). The results are shown in Table 2. The conditional indirect effect of Machiavellianism on relational energy was significant at +1SD above the mean (*indirect effect* = 0.07, 95% CI [0.01, 0.15]) and became weaker and significant at the mean (*indirect effect* = 0.04, 95% CI [0.01, 0.08]). These results supported Hypothesis 5. Moreover, the index of moderated mediation of 95% bootstrap CI is significant and did not contain zero (index = 0.02, 95% CI [0.01, 0.05]).

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Age	36.90	9.43	–								
2. Gender	1.24	0.43	–0.14*	–							
3. Education	1.16	0.37	–0.27**	–0.10	–						
4. Occupation	1.12	0.35	0.04	–0.09	0.33***	–					
5. Tenure	2.82	1.31	0.44**	–0.15*	–0.08	0.17**	–				
6. Machiavellianism	4.33	1.29	0.01	–0.03	–0.01	–0.01	–0.08	(0.93)			
7. Facades of Conformity	3.81	1.40	0.07	0.01	–0.02	–0.04	0.18**	0.12*	(0.92)		
8. Relational Energy	5.07	1.26	0.01	0.03	–0.03	0.10	–0.10	–0.15*	0.17**	(0.94)	
9. LMX Ambivalence	4.82	1.16	0.03	–0.12	–0.01	0.05	–0.07	–0.15*	0.24**	0.70**	(0.96)

Note(s): *N* = 275. Gender was coded “1” for females and “2” for males. Education was coded “1” for junior college or below, “2” for undergraduate, and “3” for master’s degree or above. Occupation was coded “1” for ordinary staff, “2” for middle managers, and “3” for senior managers. Tenure was coded “1” for 1 year or under, “2” for 1–3 years, “3” for 3–5 years, and “4” for over 5 years **p* < 0.05; ***p* < 0.01

Source(s): Table created by authors

Outcome model: Facades of conformity				
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	
Constant	3.39	0.59	5.79**	
Machiavellianism	0.18	0.06	2.79*	
LMX Ambivalence	0.35	0.07	5.00**	
Machiavellianism × LMX ambivalence	0.15	0.06	2.60*	
Gender	0.21	0.19	1.07	
Education	0.07	0.24	0.28	
Occupation	-0.38	0.25	-1.56	
Tenure	0.28	0.07	4.07**	
Age	-0.01	0.01	-0.66	
Conditional direct effects of Machiavellianism on facades of conformity at $M \pm 1 SD$				
	Effect	<i>SE</i>	LL95% CI	UL95% CI
-1 <i>SD</i> (-1.16)	0.01	0.10	-0.19	0.20
<i>M</i> (0.00)	0.18	0.06	0.05	0.30
+1 <i>SD</i> (1.16)	0.34	0.08	0.18	0.51
Outcome model: Relational energy				
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	
Constant	4.13	0.57	7.23**	
Machiavellianism	-0.18	0.06	-3.22**	
Facades of Conformity	0.21	0.05	3.88**	
Gender	0.02	0.18	0.12	
Education	-0.23	0.22	-1.07	
Occupation	0.56	0.23	2.43*	
Tenure	-0.19	0.06	-2.95**	
Age	0.01	0.01	0.92	
Indirect mediation effect of Machiavellianism on relational energy				
	Effect	<i>SE</i>	LL95% CI	UL95% CI
	0.02	0.02	0.01	0.05
Conditional indirect effects of Machiavellianism on relational energy through facades of conformity at $M \pm 1 SD$				
	Effect	Boot <i>SE</i>	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI
-1 <i>SD</i> (-1.16)	0.01	0.02	-0.03	0.04
<i>M</i> (0.00)	0.04	0.02	0.01	0.08
+1 <i>SD</i> (1.16)	0.07	0.04	0.01	0.15
Index of moderated mediation				
	Index	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
	0.03	0.02	0.01	0.07

Table 2.

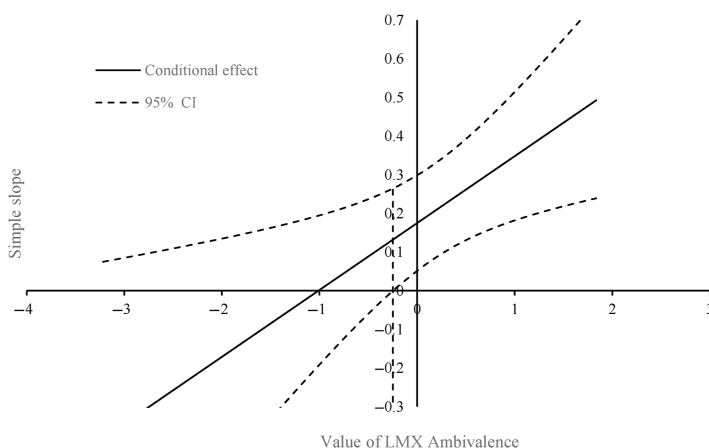
Regression results for overall moderated-mediation model

Note(s): $N = 275$. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$. We report unstandardized regression coefficients. The bootstrap sample size is 5,000

Source(s): Table created by authors

Discussion

Previous research has paid limited attention to the specific role of Machiavellianism in cultivating relationships with their leaders. O'Boyle *et al.* (2012) demonstrated that Machs showed significant variability in % their work and employed diverse manipulative tactics in different situations. This highlights the necessity for more nuanced perspectives to comprehend the attitudes and behaviors of Machs in the workplace. In this study, we aim to explore the mechanism of how Machs gain relational energy with their leaders and elaborate



Note(s): Regions of significance in this study: Simple slope of Machiavellianism on facades of conformity by LMX Ambivalence. This figure shows the simple slope (Y -axis) across values of LMX Ambivalence (X -axis). Values of LMX Ambivalence were mean-centered. Machiavellianism predicts facades of conformity for LMX Ambivalence values ≥ -0.25

Source(s): Figure created by authors

Figure 2. Regions of significant for the conditional relationship between Machiavellianism and facades of conformity as a function of LMX ambivalence at a 95% confidence level

on the moderating role of LMX ambivalence that activates the demand mechanism. The results of a three-wave time-lagged study of 275 employees supported our prediction that Machs will gain relational energy through facades of conformity. Additionally, we find Machs are more inclined to engage in facades of conformity and further acquire relational energy when they perceive strong LMX ambivalence.

Theoretical implication

This study has three theoretical implications. The primary contribution lies in shedding light on the underlying mechanism through which Machs can establish and maintain a sense of relational energy with their leaders. Our study develops a theoretical model from the trait activation perspective, conceptualizing Machiavellianism as the “underlying motivation” and LMX ambivalence as the “situational cue” whose interaction activates the releaser mechanism in TAT (Tett and Burnett, 2003). We find that Machs possess an inherent inclination towards chronic and moral flexibility, employing a distinctive approach to control and limit the influence of others in the workplace (Jones and Mueller, 2021). They utilized low-intensity strategies to preserve psychological resources and relationships with their leaders. Additionally, our study enriches the understanding of how specific personality traits generate relational energy by employing TAT to explain how both dark personality dispositions and contextual factors interact to predict this phenomenon (Morkeviciūtė and Endriulaitienė, 2022).

Secondly, we emphasize the boundary role of LMX ambivalence. Although LMX ambivalence has traditionally been viewed negatively, recent research has begun to explore and seek evidence of its potentially beneficial effects, suggesting that ambivalent relationships can yield functional outcomes (Rothman *et al.*, 2017). Unlike the predominantly positive effects of LMX on outcome variables (Kalyar *et al.*, 2020), the mechanisms through which LMX ambivalence influences outcomes remain unclear and are

still in the early stages of exploration (Lee *et al.*, 2019). Guarana and Hernandez (2016) argued that individuals who can accurately identify the causes of their ambivalence are better equipped to process relevant situational cues and make effective decisions. Our study coincides with this point, demonstrating that Machs make timely strategic adjustments after recognizing LMX ambivalence as a social-level cue and benefits from which they can benefit.

Finally, this study enriches the literature on relational energy from the perspective of subordinates. Prior research has predominantly focused on how different leadership styles unilaterally impact subordinates' relational energy (Baker, 2019). Leadership styles such as spiritual leadership, empowering leadership, and servant leadership benefit employees and generate relational energy (Cai *et al.*, 2023; Mao *et al.*, 2022). However, these studies have largely emphasized the unidirectional stimulation of relational energy by leaders, overlooking the role of subordinates in shaping relationships and the significant impact of subordinates' personalities and perceptions on supervisor-subordinate interactions (Ni *et al.*, 2021). Our study brings forth the realization that relational energy is fundamentally a bidirectional interaction. Subordinates, by adapting strategies to cope with leaders, can actively engage in the reciprocal exchange of relational energy (Owens *et al.*, 2016). This nuanced perspective enhances our understanding of how employees contribute to and derive relational energy within the organizational context.

Managerial implications

Our study provides important insights into organizational behavior and leadership management. First, it acknowledges the inevitability of employees possessing different innate tendencies. For Machs, utilizing the facades of conformity to maintain relational energy with leaders represents a specific approach. Creating facades in the short term may assist them in mitigating destructive conflicts, preserving harmony, and reducing interference in the work environment, presenting positive implications. However, we believe that the overall long-term harm far outweighs any potential benefits. Machs may accumulate excessive negativity because of prolonged periods of facades of conformity, which is not only detrimental to the preservation of relational energy but may also negatively impact the team and even the organization (De Hoogh *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, leaders need to be aware of and identify the risks associated with the facades of conformity strategies employed by Machs to prevent these tactics from having a detrimental effect on the organization in the long term.

Second, situational factors play a pivotal role in activating trait-related behaviors, and organizations can benefit from identifying the contexts where situational trait correlations occur. For instance, if an organization seeks optimal employee performance, a systematic examination of the conditions that activate optimal performance for specific personalities can be instrumental in achieving the desired outcome. Similarly, if an organization aims to curb unethical behavior, recognizing situational cues that activate traits with unethical tendencies can be valuable (Greenbaum *et al.*, 2017). In our study, LMX ambivalence emerged as a common state perceived by every employee within an organization (Lee *et al.*, 2019). As familiarity between the two parties deepens, there is a greater likelihood of perceiving each other as multifaceted and imperfect. Recognizing this regularity and utilizing LMX ambivalence as a frequent situational cue may help alleviate psychological stress between leaders and subordinates. Identifying this key situational cue and maintaining it within a certain range can prevent triggering the dark side of Machs. Therefore, managers need to have effective conflict management skills and maintain a careful balance to prevent the excessive escalation of LMX conflicts, which could lead to unnecessary conflict and dissatisfaction (Sui *et al.*, 2016).

Limitations and future research directions

While this study has made some contributions, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations. First, China is characterized by a high degree of power distance and collectivism (Brockner *et al.*, 2001). In a cultural context that values harmony and stoicism, employees tend to be reluctant to express themselves openly (Hsiung and Tsai, 2017), thus potentially creating facades as an adaptive strategy in interpersonal interactions. Additionally, given that most participants in our study were from state-owned enterprises, which typically exhibit a higher collectivist culture and greater power distance than non-state-owned enterprises, which could partly explain the high correlation between LMX ambivalence and relational energy, as well as the increased likelihood of Machs exhibiting facades of conformity. Future research could retest the explanatory power of the model in other cultural contexts.

Second, our study proposes that LMX ambivalence serves as a situational cue, stimulating facades of conformity and strengthening the relationship between Machiavellianism and relational energy. We conceptualized the theoretical model by thinking of moderating variables solely at the dyadic relationship level, contending that the dyadic-level variable is likely to moderate the individual-level variable (Zhang, 2010). Future research could make additional theoretical advances by exploring potential moderators such as (1) other job characteristic cues closely linked to those in TAT (2) the overall relational climate in the organization or team; and (3) organizational policies and practices.

Third, the current study lacks exploration of the ethical outcomes associated with Machiavellianism. High-Machs are known for their intense focus on individual interests over collective interests, which potentially leads them to violate the principle of reciprocity in social exchanges (Forsyth *et al.*, 2012). Consequently, they may engage in misconduct and unethical behavior that could harm the organization. Our results primarily focus on the maintenance of an individual's relational energy, overlooking other potential consequences. Future research could expand on these findings by incorporating longitudinal tracking data to investigate effects over time. This approach might reveal the impact of prolonged Machiavellianism on the loss of psychological resources, relational energy, and the potential emergence of unethical outcomes.

Conclusions

We collected data from 275 employees at three time points and explored how Machs use facades of conformity as a strategy to gain relational energy. Based on TAT, we found that Machs tend to engage in facades of conformity and are further positively activated when LMX ambivalence is relatively high, which influences the relational energy. Our study offers valuable insights into how Machiavellianism can effectively preserve their psychological resources and enhance their relational energy in interactions with leaders.

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Further reading

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