

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Relationship between Workers' Tenure and Social Relationship: Conflict Management as a Mediator or Moderator?

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Abstract

Previous studies on the relationship between workers' tenure and social relationship have yet to provide definitive answers. This study was designed to survey the non-linear relationship between workers' tenure and social relationship; the linear relationships investigated included workers' tenure and conflict management, conflict management and social relationship, and the mediating and moderating effects of conflict management. This study collected 209 questionnaires from 43 Taiwanese technology companies, and hierarchical regression analysis was employed to test the hypotheses. The results show that there was a curvilinear relationship (inverted S-shaped) between workers' tenure and social relationship and that conflict management positively influenced social relationship. This curvilinear relationship was mediated by conflict management, but the moderating effect was not significant. In terms of theoretical implications, this study considered that the appropriate period to perform conflict management was from 5.52 to 19.38 years of employees' tenure. The implications of the present findings for research and managerial practice, along with directions for future research, are analyzed and discussed. The main contribution of this study is the exploration of the curvilinear relationship between workers' tenure and social relationship, confirming that conflict management plays a mediating or moderating role in this curvilinear relationship.

Keywords: *Conflict management, Social relationship, Workers' tenure.*

Introduction

In Chinese, "guanxi" is a common term used in reference to social networking, and it can be translated as "relationship" or "connection" [1]. Cheng [2] indicated that increased attention has been given to guanxi in recent years, especially guanxi networks, which are treated as important elements in Chinese society. The above statements are similar to the concept of social relationship. Social relationship refers to an individual's connection with another person and whether the

individual considers himself/herself as belonging to a group, through which the individual obtains social support [3]. Thus, social relationship not only contains the perspective of guanxi but also the concept of team identification. Team identification can be defined as a psychological attachment that provides members with a sense of belonging to a larger social structure [4]. Job tenure has been found to be related to several behaviors, such as job satisfaction [5] and

innovation [6]. Job tenure refers to the length of time an individual has been in one position or service in their occupation [5, 7]. Social capital theory demonstrates that individuals work in an organization longer if they have established social links and strong ties with their colleagues. In other words, individuals with longer organizational tenure tend to have more links with other people in their workplaces and obtain more help from their colleagues [8]. Moreover, tenure had been shown to influence job performance and job satisfaction [5-7]. A positive correlation exists between tenure and perceived organizational support [9]; however, research on tenure and social relationship has yet to provide definitive answers.

Research on tenure has presented inconsistent results. For example, tenure has been found to be positively correlated with senior peers' organizational identification, negatively correlated with managers' organizational identification [10], and unrelated to perceived organizational support [9]. Although the above statements do not describe the relationship between tenure and social relationship, organizational identification and perceived organizational support are the core ideas of social relationship. Following human capital theory, knowledge, skills and job performance increase with greater tenure [7]. To reconcile the inconsistent past results, this study aimed to investigate the relationship between tenure and social relationship. However, although previous studies have examined or mentioned worker' tenure, we found that the effects of tenure on other constructs were non-linear [7], U-shaped or inverted U-shaped [5, 11]. Therefore, the main contribution of this study is the exploration of the curvilinear relationship between workers' tenure and social relationship.

Social information processing indicates that

organizational members' attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs are influenced by the social context and social referents. Furthermore, social information sources might change as employees' organizational tenure increases, and a positive correlation exists between organizational tenures and organizational identification [10]. One method of reducing the dysfunctions of organizational identification is to decrease conflict between change and control processes [12]. However, appropriate conflict management has been found to improve organizational performance, foster learning and enhance organizational effectiveness [13]. By implementing conflict management, organizations facilitate employees' organizational identification, learning, performance and effectiveness. Hence, our initial hypothesis was that conflict management mediates and moderates the curvilinear relationship between tenure and social relationship. To explore this, we examined the effects of tenure on conflict management and conflict management on social relationship.

Previous studies have explored the relationship between tenure and organizational issues, mainly in the United States. By contrast, Taiwan is a collectivist culture [6] that focuses on collective values [14], so social relationship is an important issue for Taiwan. As per the above statements, we proposed a hypothesized model (see Fig. 1).

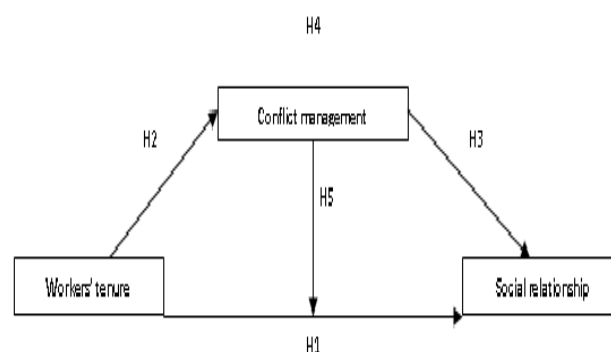


Fig. 1: Hypothesized model

Theory and Hypotheses

The Curvilinear Relationship between Workers' Tenure and Social Relationship

Social capital theory indicates that individuals who have stayed longer within an organization are likely to have developed a greater number of social links and stronger links with others [8]. Moreover, a guanxi network facilitates the propensity to stay with an organization [15], and social capital is positively associated with workers' job tenure [16].

Boyas et al. [17] presumed that different tenures create different organizational contexts and affect employees' psychological outcomes. Based on this concept, workers with longer organizational tenure tend to have strong ties with others and receive assistance from other people [17]. Therefore, we posited that workers' tenure influences their social relationship.

Past studies have found that tenure is related to several variables, such as job satisfaction and burnout. The relationship between tenure and job satisfaction has been found to be U-shaped; however, the relationship between tenure and burnout has been found to be inverted U-shaped [5]. In several studies, individuals with high job satisfaction and did not show anxiety [18], so their social relationship improved [19]. Furthermore, in other studies, job satisfaction improved social relationship and reduced depression [20], and social support correlated with burnout [21]. Moreover, job satisfaction has been found to influenced burnout negatively [22]; with higher burnout, there is greater deterioration of social relationship. Shirom and Mazej [5] proposed that newcomers begin with high job satisfaction, which drops after the first year or two of service, stays low for several years and then goes up again as workers' tenure increases.

Ng and Feldman [8] indicated that longer tenure is related to greater boredom. Thus, we considered

that the curvilinear relationship between tenure and social relationship has two stages: U-shaped and inverted U-shaped curves.

Hypothesis 1: The relationship between workers' tenure and social relationship is a U-shaped at first and then reverses into an inverted U-shape curve (inverted S-shaped).

The Relationship between Workers' Tenure and Conflict Management

Past studies have discussed the effect of workers' tenure on conflict management to a limited extent. Leach-López *et al.* [23] proposed that conflict influences satisfaction, which in turn influences job tenure (or turnover intention) and performance. Furthermore, conflict has been found to lead to increased staff turnover [24]. Harris *et al.* [25] found that job tenure was unrelated to relationship conflict; however, Suliman and Al-Shaikh [26] found that the older employees with longer job tenure in their study tended to report lower levels of goal conflict than the younger employees who had shorter job tenure, as the older and long-tenured workers were more likely to be in more senior positions and obtain more organizational rewards, so they were more likely to confront lower levels of conflict. Therefore, this study considered that long-tenured workers have more experience and can more effectively deal with difficult issues and uncertainty. Hence, we hypothesized that long-tenured workers have better skills in conflict management when they face relationship or task conflicts.

Hypothesis 2: Workers' tenure positively influences conflict management. When workers' tenure is longer, their conflict management is more effective.

The Relationship between Conflict Management and Social Relationship

Conflict management includes diagnostic processes, interpersonal styles, negotiating strategies, etc. Conflict that occurs in a group can

involve task and relationship conflicts. Task conflict refers to disagreement among group members about making decisions, where individuals have different viewpoints, ideas and opinions. Relationship conflict means interpersonal incompatibility and consists of annoyance and animosity among individuals [27]. Additionally, conflict is viewed as an obstacles to cooperation, so today's managers and employees consider conflict as negative and something to be avoided or resolved [28]. Conflict influences the relationships between/among individuals [29]. If conflict escalates, it can cause psychological problems; it can also cause individuals to hurt one another and interpersonal relations to break down. Hence, conflict management is an important challenge [30]. In this regard, we assumed that handling conflict appropriately makes workers have positive relationships.

Hypothesis 3: Conflict management positively influences social relationship. When conflict management is more effective, social relationship is stronger.

The Mediating and Moderating Roles of Conflict Management

Although organizational tenure could not reflect social reality in organizations [10], the length of tenure could be an indicator of networking behavior [31]. However, McNamara and Pitt-Catsouphes [32] described that the males in their study had larger social network when they had shorter tenure, but the females did not have this result. Because social network is an aspect of social relationship [33], we considered that the results of their studies regarding the effects of tenure on social relationship were inconsistent. Based on the socialization perspective, organizational socialization describes how employees acquire knowledge about and adjust to new jobs, roles, work groups and organizational culture to make themselves become organizational members. Moreover, socialization is an important

issue for newcomers or shorter-tenured workers, and socialization depends on workers' tenure [10, 34]. Haueter *et al.*'s [34] study revealed that longer-tenured workers show higher organizational socialization, group socialization and task socialization than shorter-tenured workers. That is to say, if workers stay with an organization longer, they are more likely to show socialization and pay more attention to social network, so they are likely to obtain more assistance and support for their work.

To reconcile the aforementioned inconsistent results, conflict management should be considered. Workers with shorter tenure usually have higher motivation to work and higher job satisfaction; however, longer-tenured workers are more likely to show burnout and feel less motivation as time passes. Furthermore, in a study by Ng and Feldman [8], the correlation between tenure and organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) was highest with less than three years of tenure, decreased with between three and 14 years of tenure, and then increased with more than 14 years of tenure. The researchers indicated the relation between commitment and OCB in the low-tenured group (average tenure of less than five years) was lowest, increased in the medium-tenured group (average tenure of between five and ten years) and then decreased in the high-tenured group (average tenure of more than ten years), so different tenures resulted in different behaviors.

Lots of stresses in the workplace are created by work conflict and interpersonal conflict [35]. Job stress is negatively related to job satisfaction [36], and psychologists view burnout as a type of job stress [37]. That is, when workers' stress is reduced, their job satisfaction improves and burnout diminishes. Aggregately, effective conflict management could reduce job stress, facilitate job satisfaction for shorter-tenured workers, and

lessen burnout for longer-tenured workers.

Rognes and Schei [30] indicated that the effects of an integrative approach to conflict management on agreement quality, perceived fairness, satisfaction and trust are positive. Additionally, conflict management involves using a collaborative style, which is a style that entails high concern for others and oneself [38]. The ties of social networks play critical roles in the bottom-up emergence of conflict culture [39]. Furthermore, communication manages conflict and creates a supportive climate, causing team members to be willing to work with others and to share their knowledge or information with other members (i.e. improving social relationship) [6, 29]. Therefore, conflict management promotes collaboration and supported among medium- to high-tenured employees, leading to stronger social relationship.

Medina *et al.* [28b] proposed that different types of conflict could play mediating or moderating roles, positing that relationship conflict mediates the relationship between task conflict and several affective variables (e.g. satisfaction). Janssen *et al.* [40] indicated that task conflict in interaction with person conflict is expected to moderate the relationship between positive interdependence and decision-making effectiveness. Against this background, we put forth the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 4: Conflict management positively mediates the curvilinear relationship between workers' tenure and social relationship such that the relation is stronger for workers who use effective conflict management.

Hypothesis 5: Conflict management positive moderates the curvilinear relationship between workers' tenure and social relationship such that the relation is stronger for workers who use effective conflict management.

Method

Samples and Procedures

A total of 250 workers from 43 Taiwanese technology companies participated in this study. Both managers and non-managers were included in the sample. After we had obtained agreements from workers in the technology companies, we used several channels to deliver the questionnaires. First, we gave questionnaires to the workers and asked them to distribute them. Second, we sent questionnaires with return envelopes to the technology companies. Third, we mailed questionnaires to the workers, and they mailed the completed questionnaires back to us. In order to reduce bias, we clearly explained the research purpose and guaranteed the anonymity of the participants. After six months, we had received 209 completed surveys: a response rate of approximately 83.6 percent. The sample was 60.8 percent male. A total of 57.9 percent of the respondents were non-managers, and 88.5 percent of the respondents had less than ten years of tenure. The average age was 34.52 years.

Measures

The original version of the questionnaires used in this study was translated into Chinese by the authors and then a bilingual language expert translated it back from Chinese into English. All items were measured using a Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7), except for workers' tenure.

Workers' tenure. All past studies have measured job tenure through self-reporting measures. Most of these studies measured job tenure as a continuous variable [7], and this study coded tenure in terms of years. In order to improve the willingness of the participants, we informed them that their demographic information would be applied only for aggregate data analysis and not for identification purposes [6, 41].

Social relationship. Social relationship in business can be seen to have a ground in strong or weak ties [42]. In this study, a six-item scale developed by Bauer and Mulder [3] was used to measure social relationship. A sample item is “I feel at ease with my colleagues.” The Cronbach’s alpha for this scale equaled 0.91.

Conflict management. The conflict type refers to the substantive issue where the tension is rooted [43]. Conflict management includes diagnostic processes, interpersonal styles, negotiating strategies and other interventions designed to avoid unnecessary conflict [27]. In this study, we used Ahmed *et al.*’s [27] four-item scale. A sample item is: “Employees handle their conflict at their own.” Because this study aimed to investigate the mediating effect of conflict management on the relationship between tenure and social relationship, a composite score was used to examine these effects [6]. As Chi *et al.* [6] suggested, to examine the composite score, we applied principal component factor analysis with oblique rotation to check if the four items of conflict management could be combined into a single index. The results of the factor analysis indicated that only one factor explained 48 percent of the total variance, and this value exceeded 40 percent [44], so the questionnaire was considered to be reliable. The Cronbach’s alpha for this scale equaled 0.63. As this value is larger than 0.60 [45], this scale was acceptable.

The results of the confirmatory factor analysis reveal that the proposed items fit the data. Hence, Chi-square index = 0.09, goodness-of-fit index (GFI) = 1.00, comparative fit index (CFI) = 1.00, normed fit index (NFI) = 0.99, non-normed fit index (NNFI) = 1.04, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.00 and standardized root mean residual (SRMR) = 0.00. Furthermore, all factor loadings of the items of conflict management were statistically significant ($p < .01$), and this suggests that the convergent validity of all the measures was acceptable [46].

Control Variables

Gender influences social support [47]; males and females have different strength ties and personal networks [48]. We considered gender as a control variable. As age increases, individuals have reduced social support and job demands [47], so age was also chosen as a control variable. Marital status moderates the relationship between job satisfaction and turnover intention [49], and it is an important factor that influences individual attitudes [50]. Higher educated workers have higher job satisfaction and better quality of job [51]. Position affects obedience, loyalty [52], network size and strength of ties [48]. Therefore, marital status, educational level and position were also included as control variables.

Additionally, information on gender (coded: male = 1, female = 2), age (coded in years: means = 34.52, SD = 7.99), marital status (coded: married = 1, unmarried = 2), educational level (coded: senior high school = 1, college = 2, undergraduate degree = 3, Master’s degree = 4, doctoral degree = 5), job position (coded: manager = 1, non-managers = 2) was recorded.

Results

Aggregation Issues

To examine the validity of the company-level construct and the appropriateness of the data aggregation, we calculated the interrater agreement index of conflict management (r_{wg}) [6, 53]. The result shows that the r_{wg} value for conflict management was 0.94; this value exceeds the conventionally acceptable value of 0.70 [53], which means that the workers in the technology companies possessed high agreement based on their ratings regarding conflict management [6, 54]. Next, we calculated the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC(1)) and the reliability of the mean (ICC(2)) of conflict management. The results indicate that ICC(1) equaled 0.86 and ICC(2) equaled 0.99 for conflict management ($F = 6.59, p$

< .001). These results mean that high between organizational variance and within organizational variance existed in conflict management [6]. Due to the r_{wg} value, we considered that the data aggregation was appropriate.

Bivariate Correlations

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, reliabilities, and bivariate correlations for all variables in this study. As can be seen in Table 1, conflict management is positively related to social relationship ($r = 0.54, p < .01$). Lu [55] suggested that if the demographic variables have significant correlations with the study variables, these demographic variables should be included in future analysis as control variables.

Hypothesis Testing

The relationship between workers' tenure and social relationship. In this study, hierarchical regression analysis was used to test the hypotheses, and the predictors were standardized and interaction terms were created from standardized predictors. In Hypothesis 1, we hypothesized that the relationship between

workers' tenure and social relationship was curvilinear. In Step 1, when predicting social relationship, all control variables were entered into the equation. In Step 2, squared and cubed terms of workers' tenure were used as predictors. In Step 3, conflict management was also entered into the equation as a mediator.

Table 2 shows the results of the hierarchical regression analysis. Workers' tenure had a negative effect ($\beta_{1a} = -1.04, p < .05$) on social relationship, but its squared term had a positive effect ($\beta_{1b} = 2.22, p < .05$) on social relationship; however, its cubed term had a negative effect ($\beta_{1c} = -1.30, p < .1$) on social relationship. As per Chi *et al.* [6], these results mean that the curvilinear relationship between workers' tenure and social relationship existed. Nevertheless, none of the control variables significantly influenced social relationship. Therefore, we found that the relationship between workers' tenure and social relationship was inverted S-shaped (Fig. 2). Hence, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gender	—	—								
2. Age	34.52	7.99	.23**							
3. Marital status	—	—	<i>.08</i>	.42***						
4. Educational level	—	—	<i>.25**</i>	.35***	<i>.19</i>					
5. Position	—	—	<i>.19**</i>	.34***	<i>.26***</i>	<i>.17</i>				
6. Tenure	5.52	4.62	.47	.56**	.60**	.51	.55			
7. Conflict management	4.75	0.90	.32	<i>.03</i>	.33	.28	.35	<i>.02</i>	.63	
8. Social relationship	5.51	0.91	.37	<i>-.05</i>	.31	.38	.33	<i>-.04</i>	.54**	.91

Notes. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients are shown in bold and italics on the diagonal. Chi-square correlation coefficients are shown in italics. Eta coefficients are shown in bold. * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed)

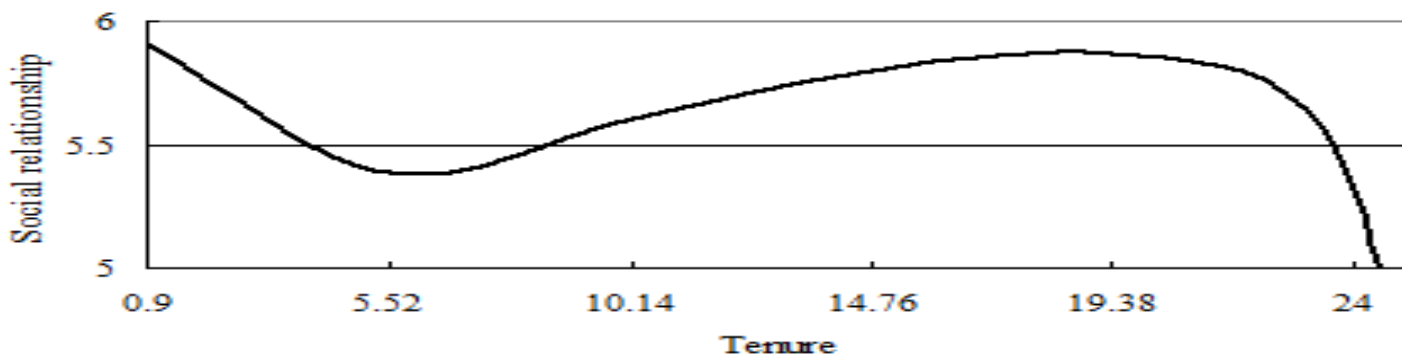


Fig. 2: The curvilinear relationship between workers' tenure and social relationship.

The relationship between workers' tenure and conflict management. To evaluate Hypothesis 2, we explored the relationship between workers' tenure and conflict management. To check this hypothesis, conflict management was entered into the equation as an outcome variable; workers' tenure and its squared and cubed terms were used as independent variables in Step 2. Table 2 shows that workers' tenure had a significant positive influence on conflict management ($\beta_2 = 0.53, p < .001$), and this step explained an additional 2 percent of the variation ($p < .01$). Thus, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

The Relationship between Conflict Management and Social Relationship

To assess Hypothesis 3, we investigated the relationship between conflict management and social relationship. To examine this relationship, conflict management was entered into the equation as a predictor in Step 3. Table 2 shows that conflict management had a significant positive influence on social relationship ($\beta_3 = 0.52, p < .001$), and this step explained an additional 25 percent of the variation ($p < .001$). Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was supported. The mediating effect of conflict management. For Hypothesis 4, we proposed that conflict management mediated the inverted S-shaped relationship between workers' tenure and social relationship. To check this hypothesis, conflict management was entered into the equation. The mediating role of conflict management related to social relationship was

significant, as indicated by the Sobel test value of -1.89 ($p < .05$). This means that workers' tenure influenced conflict management, and conflict management in turn influenced social relationship; conflict management mediated the relationship between workers' tenure and social relationship. We found that once the relationship between conflict management and social relationship had been accounted for, there was a weaker relation between workers' tenure and social relationship ($\beta_{1a} = -1.04$ is larger than $\beta_{1a'} = -0.27$). Nevertheless, in Step 3, it was found that workers' tenure did not have a significant influence on social relationship ($\beta_{1a'} = -0.27, p > .05$), indicating that the effect of workers' tenure was completely mediated by conflict management. Hence, Hypothesis 4 was supported. The moderating effect of conflict management. For Hypothesis 5, we proposed that conflict management moderated the inverted S-shaped relationship between workers' tenure and social relationship. To check this hypothesis, three interaction terms (i.e. workers' tenure, workers' tenure squared and workers' tenure cubed) were entered into the equation. The results are presented in Table 3. However, the three interaction terms did not achieve significant levels; the coefficients were 0.48, 1.53 and -1.80, respectively. Hence, conflict management did not play a moderating role in the relationship between workers' tenure and social relationship, so Hypothesis 5 was not supported.

Table 2: Hierarchical Regression Analysis of the Curvilinear Relationship between Workers' Tenure and Social Relationship with Conflict Management as a Mediator

Variables	Social Relationship					
	Step 1		Step 2		Step 3	
	Coefficient	t value	Coefficient	t value	Coefficient	t value
<i>Control variables:</i>						
Gender	-0.06	-0.78	-0.01	-0.17	-0.02	-0.28
Age	-0.13	-1.32	-0.13	-1.72	-0.12	-1.47
Marital status	-0.13	-1.63	-0.07	-0.98	-0.09	-1.27
Educational level	0.03	0.33	-0.00	-0.05	0.00	-0.04
Position	-0.12	-1.60	-0.07	-1.09	-0.07	-1.09
<i>Testing Step 1:</i>						
Outcome: Social relationship						
Predictors:						
Workers' tenure	-1.04*	-2.37				

Workers' tenure squared	2.22*	2.14		
Workers' tenure cubed	-1.30†	-1.89		
<i>Testing Step 2:</i>				
Outcome: Conflict management			0.53***	8.64
Predictors:				
Workers' tenure				
Workers' tenure squared				
Workers' tenure cubed				
<i>Testing Step 3:</i>				
Outcome: Social relationship				
Mediator: Conflict management			0.52***	8.24
Predictors:				
Workers' tenure			-0.27	-0.69
Workers' tenure squared			0.34	0.37
Workers' tenure cubed			-0.08	-0.14
R ²	0.06	0.08**	0.31***	
Adjusted R ²	0.02	0.05	0.28	

Notes. Standardized regression coefficients (β) are presented in each equation. N = 209. † $p < .10$ * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Table 3: Hierarchical Regression Analysis of the Curvilinear Relationship between Workers' Tenure and Social Relationship with Conflict Management as a Moderator

Variables	Social Relationship					
	Step 1		Step 2		Step 3	
	Coefficient	t value	Coefficient	t value	Coefficient	t value
<i>Step 1: Control variables:</i>						
Gender	-0.06	-0.78	-0.02	-0.28	-0.03	-0.37
Age	-0.13	-1.32	-0.12	-1.47	-0.10	-1.24
Marital status	-0.13	-1.63	-0.10	-1.27	-0.08	-1.14
Educational level	0.03	0.33	0.00	-0.04	0.00	-0.01
Position	-0.12	-1.60	-0.07	-1.09	-0.07	-0.98
<i>Step 2: Independent variables:</i>						
Workers' tenure	-1.04*	-2.37	-0.27	-0.69	-0.70	-0.32
Workers' tenure squared	2.22*	2.14	0.34	0.37	-1.30	-0.25
Workers' tenure cubed	-1.30†	-1.89	-0.08	-0.14	1.84	-0.52
<i>Step 3: Moderator:</i>						
Conflict management			0.52***	8.24	0.38*	2.18
<i>Step 4: Interaction items:</i>						
WT × CM					0.48	0.21
WT squared × CM					1.53	0.30
WT cubed × CM					-1.80	-0.54
R ²	0.06		0.31***		0.32	
Adjusted R ²	0.02		0.28		0.28	

Notes. Standardized regression coefficients (β) are presented in each equation. N = 209. WT = workers' tenure, CM = conflict management.

† $p < .10$ * $p < .05$ *** $p < .001$

tenure and social relationship, the linear relationship between conflict management and social relationship, and the mediating and moderating effects of conflict management. As we expected, the results show that the relationship between workers' tenure and social relationship had an inverted S-shape. Thereby, workers' tenure was initially negatively related to social relationship, subsequently, this relationship turned positive and then turned negative. Additionally, conflict management positively influenced social relationship, and conflict management mediated the curvilinear relationship between workers' tenure and social relationship. However, the moderating effect was not significant.

This study contributes to the workers' tenure literature in several aspects. First, job tenure has been considered as a demographic variable or a control variable in previous studies, such as Liaw *et al.* [56], Zagenczyk *et al.* [57] and Reyhav and Weisberg [58]. Moreover, job tenure as independent variable influence on dependent variable has been found to be U-shaped or invert U-shaped, for example, by Hunt and Saul [11] and Shirom and Mazeh [5]. However, the results of this study indicate that the workers in the medium-tenured group had stronger social relationship than those in the low- and high-tenured groups. Therefore, we considered that individuals with different tenures show different behaviors. This finding satisfies the

concept of social capital theory [8]. However, the relationship between workers' tenure and social relationship was negative first, then turned positive and finally showed a negative relationship (see Fig. 2).

Second, this study found that workers' tenure positively affected conflict management. This result is consistent with the study conducted by Suliman and Al-Shaikh [26], who posited that long-tenured employees reported lower levels of goal conflict. Furthermore, workers with longer tenure in a job are more likely to know how to face different problems and complete tasks [7]. Tenure in a job is related to performance, as experience is a medium of learning. Tenure in a specific job is more closely related to the accumulation of skills and knowledge required for job performance than overall organizational tenure; hence, job tenure is more likely to help individuals to redirect resources to job tasks under stress [59]. Older and longer-tenured workers show higher emotional intelligence than younger and shorter-tenured workers, and older and longer-tenured workers are likely to be more experienced and working in senior jobs [26]. As per the above statements, longer-tenured workers have more competencies to handle their work, so they can manage conflict effectively.

Third, the relationship between conflict management and social relationship had not been clearly explored in the extant literature. We found that conflict management positively influenced social relationship, and this result is similar to the findings of Vaaland's [60] study, which indicated that when conflict is handled properly, tense relationship can be improved. Past studies have indicated that conflict in an organization involves task conflict and relationship conflict. Task conflict is where members have different viewpoints or ideas about decisions. This can generate creative thinking, solve problems and

lead to innovation. Relationship conflict refers to interpersonal incompatibility and obstacles, so conflict management is an important skill [28b, 61]. We consider that organizations should establish a good mechanism to manage task and relationship conflicts rather than avoid them so that the social relationship among members can remain strong.

Fourth, the results indicate that conflict management fully mediated the curvilinear relationship between workers' tenure and social relationship, but did not moderate this relationship. Ng and Feldman's [7] and Chuang *et al.*'s [62] studies proposed that tenure is positively associated with task-related conflict; as individuals stay longer in their jobs, they obtain more skills, experience, knowledge and task perceptions about jobs and use them to complete tasks. From a social capital perspective, strong social relationship is associated with low-conflict organizations [63], so we suggest that effective conflict management fosters social relationship. Yuan [13] indicated that an appropriate level of conflict management can improve organizational performance, learning and effectiveness. This study found that the appropriate period to perform conflict management is from 5.52 to 19.38 years of employees' tenure. Thus, conflict management strengthens social relationship in this period and the curvilinear showed positive tendency, as shown in Fig. 2.

Newcomers or shorter-tenured employees have not yet adapted to their organizations, so socialization occurs. As employees' tenure increases, socialization improves [10, 34]. This study suggests that if employees' tenure does not exceed 5.52 years, socialization is incomplete and employees are not sufficiently involved in the organizations. This leads employees to not obtain enough assistance from others. Since Taiwan is a collectivist culture [6], Taiwanese employees tend

to make use of the obliging and avoiding styles when handling conflict [64]. Thus, conflict management does not occur, and newcomers or shorter-tenured employees do not have opportunities to communicate with other workers, weakening social relationship.

Human capital theory indicates that an individual's knowledge, skills and performance are improved as his/her tenure increases [7]. This study found that the effectiveness of conflict management decreased when employees' tenure exceeded 19.38 years. Because high-tenured workers have the abilities required to complete their jobs by themselves and do not obtain assistance or support from others, their social relationship is weak. As per human capital theory and the results of the present study, we consider that workers' tenure influences social relationship via conflict management. In past studies, conflict management has been found to play a mediating and moderating role. For example, in a study by Santos and Passos [65], conflict mediated the relationship between team member model-similarity at the beginning of team lifecycles and in terms of effectiveness. In another study, relationship conflict partially mediated the relationship between family member impediment and distributive justice [66]. In Yang's [67] study, cooperative conflict management moderated the relationship between transformational leadership and leadership trust. Furthermore, in research conducted by Römer *et al.* [68], leaders' third-party conflict management behaviors (i.e. problem solving, forcing and avoiding) moderated the relationship between employees' perceived interpersonal conflict and employees' perceived conflict stress. In this regard, we consider that the strength of social relationship is decided by tenure; conflict management effectiveness does not change the relationship between tenure and social relationship. Hence, conflict management did not play a moderating role in the findings of the

present study. On the other hand, tenure influenced conflict management, and conflict management influenced social relationship, so we suggest that conflict management played a mediating role in the present study's findings.

Practical Implications

This study found three practical implications about workers' tenure and social relationship within Taiwanese technology companies.

First, we found that social relationship is weaker when workers' tenure is too short or too long. Therefore, the technology company workers with 0.9 and 19.38 years tenure had the strongest social relationship. Nevertheless, when workers' tenure exceeded both values, the effect of workers' tenure on social relationship turned negative, and workers with 5.52 years of tenure had the weakest social relationship. Hence, companies should assist workers in establishing strong social relationship. Second, Blinder [69] reported that the median job tenure in the United States was 5.4 years; in this present study in the Taiwanese technology industry, the average job tenure was 5.52 years and the median job tenure was 5.00 years. Because most workers repeatedly change their jobs during their working careers, 55 percent of the respondents concentrate about 5.00 to 5.50 years. Third, according to the socialization perspective, newcomers take a while to embed themselves in their job environments and to understand their job content. Supportive co-worker relationships improve newcomers' citizenship, task performance and job satisfaction [70], so newcomers should spend time connecting with others; in other words, they should establish guanxi [71]. In this study, we found that the workers' social relationship decreased as their tenure increased, so they had intentions to quit during the socialization process. Thus, companies should create friendly work environments, Chi *et al.* [6] indicated that high-technology companies are increasingly using mentor-protégé systems to

assign longer-tenured staff to take care of newcomers. To help newcomers become familiar with the organization, managers should focus on the socialization of workers.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations of this study should be noted. First, the primary variables, conflict management and social relationship, were self-reported measures. Self-reported measures reflect individual perceptions, so assessments might not be fully objective [72]. Another criticism of self-reported measures is common method variance (CMV). To reduce CMV, we followed the remedial approaches of Podsakoff and Organ [73] and employed Harman's single-factor test. The results reveal that the first factor accounted for 49 percent (< 50 percent) of the variance explained this study; therefore, CMV did not exist [74]. Moreover, workers' tenure is fact based in nature, so the potential for subjective bias needed to be minimized in the present study [6]. CMV might lead to inflation or deflation of the relationship between independent and dependent variables [75], but the aforementioned information together indicates that CMV was not a serious problem in this study. However, future research should strive to investigate social relationship from multiple raters, including employees, supervisors and

colleagues; this could help researchers to avoid CMV occurs.

The second limitation in this study was that a cross-sectional design was used, making causal inferences difficult [6]. Furthermore, workers' tenure is fact-based information; hence, we could not implement a reverse causality study. Future research should address this limitation, and we consider that a longitudinal design could be applied with this in mind.

Third, owing to the researchers only investigating workers from the Taiwanese technology industry, the generalizability of the results to other industries might be limited. Future research could implement replication and extension of the sample diversity to confirm our findings.

In conclusion, we investigated the inverted S-shaped relationship between workers' tenure and social relationship, finding that conflict management has a mediating effect. This study ruled out individual traits, so the investigation of the relationships between individual differences and the organizational environment is also a critical issue for future research.

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