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Diminished relational energy: How and when LMX ambivalence leads to leader-directed counterproductive work behavior

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Abstract

Researchers have often examined the leader-member exchange (LMX) relationship from a univalent perspective, using a continuum from low to high exchange quality. This perspective has overlooked the possibility that employees may perceive their LMX relationships as both high and low quality (known as LMX ambivalence). In the present study, we draw on the transactional theory of stress and coping to examine how LMX ambivalence influences employees' interpersonal behaviors toward their leaders. In Study 1, a three-wave field study with 338 Chinese employees, we found that the experience of LMX ambivalence can decrease relational energy and lead to an increase in avoidance- and approach-oriented counterproductive work behaviors towards leaders (CWBs-L). Furthermore, LMX importance intensifies the negative effects of LMX ambivalence on relational energy. Study 2 employed a scenario-based method to compare the effects of ambivalent LMX relationships with positive and negative LMX relationships and provided additional evidence for our hypotheses. This research contributes to a broader understanding of behavioral responses to LMX ambivalence.

The first two authors made an equal contribution to the current manuscript.

KEYWORDS

counterproductive work behavior, LMX ambivalence, LMX importance, relational energy

INTRODUCTION

Leader-member exchange (LMX) theory has emerged as one of the most compelling leadership theories, capable of predicting various employee attitudes and behaviors (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Kim et al., 2023). When examining the LMX relationship, traditional scholars (e.g., Radulovic et al., 2019) have often adopted a univalent perspective, viewing the relationship as a continuum from low to high quality. However, the quality of LMX relationships is not always dichotomous, with either low or high levels of quality (Lee, Thomas, Martin, & Guillaume, 2019a). The nature of LMX relationships is particularly prone to generating ambivalent perceptions (Han, 2020; Lee, Thomas, Martin, & Guillaume, 2019a). Specifically, power imbalances and dependency on leaders can create friction with employees' need for autonomy, thus generating ambivalent relationship perceptions (Dechawatanapaisal, 2021). Furthermore, leaders and employees must assume multiple organizational roles within the dyad, such as leader, mentor, coworker, and friend (Han & Sears, 2024), which may breed ambivalence due to the need to fulfill conflicting role expectations at different times (Chen & Weng, 2023). Despite the prevalence of these ambivalent relationships in the workplace, Methot et al. (2017) observed that management scholars have rarely studied this phenomenon.

Lee, Thomas, Martin, and Guillaume (2019a) introduced the concept of ambivalence within leader-employee relationships and characterized it as LMX ambivalence, defined as "the coexistence of positive (i.e., high-quality) and negative (i.e., low-quality) cognitions regarding the LMX relationship" (p. 5). In contrast to previous research, which has assumed that LMX relationships are univalent (ranging from low to high), Lee, Thomas, Martin, and Guillaume (2019a) proposed that they are bivalent in nature. At face value, it might be argued that LMX ambivalence would have a muted or neutral effect on employees' attitudes and behaviors, falling somewhere between the effects of low- and high-quality LMX relationships. However, studies on ambivalence have argued that inconsistent evaluations reflect a state of mind that differs from neutrality or indifference (Lee, Thomas, Martin, & Guillaume, 2019a). Some empirical studies (Chen & Weng, 2023; Kim et al., 2023) have found that LMX ambivalence has incremental predictive validity on employees' attitudes and behaviors beyond that of LMX quality. Furthermore, the traditional view of LMX highlighted the existence of considerable variation in LMX quality *between* leader-employee dyads within the same group because leaders often differ in their treatment of different employees (Henderson et al., 2009). The concept of LMX ambivalence extends the assumption of within-group LMX inconsistency and suggests that leaders may also be inconsistent in their treatment of the same employees *within* leader-employee dyads (Lee, Thomas, Martin, & Guillaume, 2019a).

To date, the emerging but limited research has consistently found that LMX ambivalence can lead to various adverse employee-related outcomes. These adverse outcomes include lower job performance (Lee, Thomas, Martin, & Guillaume, 2019a), less proactive behavior (Chen & Weng, 2023), and emotional exhaustion (Han & Sears, 2024). Although these findings contribute to our understanding of how employees are negatively affected by LMX

ambivalence, little scientific attention has been paid to the potential negative interpersonal behavioral responses to ambivalent partners, namely leaders (Chen et al., 2024; Rothman et al., 2017). Investigating potential interpersonal behavioral reactions is essential both in theory and practice. Previous research has shown that positive LMX relationships result in increased leader-directed helping behaviors, whereas negative LMX relationships result in increased leader-directed harming behaviors (Ferris et al., 2016). However, little is known about how ambivalent LMX relationships affect leader-directed behaviors (Zhao & Zhou, 2021). In practice, leaders should be aware of the potential interpersonal costs associated with causing LMX ambivalence (Chen et al., 2024). In addition, employees experiencing LMX ambivalence should be aware of their potential behavioral responses, which may help them to make more rational decisions.

To address this limitation in the literature, we draw on the transactional theory of stress and coping to examine whether and how LMX ambivalence influences employees' interpersonal behaviors toward leaders. According to the transactional theory of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, 1987), when individuals encounter an environmental stimulus, they engage in a two-stage cognitive appraisal process to determine how to cope. During the primary appraisal, individuals evaluate whether the environmental stimulus potentially threatens their well-being. Appraisals of the environmental stimulus, whether assessed as threatening or challenging, will elicit some psychological response. Spector and Fox (2005) have posited that negative emotional responses are proximal reactions to exposure to threatening stimuli. Furthermore, when individuals appraise environmental stimuli as threatening or harmful, they may engage in secondary appraisal to evaluate available coping strategies to reduce the negative emotional responses caused by those threatening stimuli. In this study, when employees experience LMX ambivalence, the two cognitive appraisals will be initiated sequentially. LMX ambivalence violates employees' cognitive consistency principles and can induce negative cognitions (Kim et al., 2023). Employees with conflicting thoughts toward their LMX relationship qualities will face greater uncertainty about how to interact with leaders and how to perform work (Chen & Weng, 2023), which thwarts their fulfillment of psychological needs at work (relatedness, competence, and autonomy) (Han & Sears, 2024). Thus, they are more likely to evaluate LMX ambivalence as a threat to their well-being during the primary appraisal, which leads to psychological strain. The present study focuses on a specific psychological strain, diminished relational energy. Relational energy describes the extent to which an individual experiences increased vitality, stamina, and vigor after interacting with a particular partner (Owens et al., 2016). In this study, relational energy captures the positive emotional state of employees that is directly stimulated by leader-employee interactions (Wang et al., 2018).

When employees experience diminished relational energy, they engage in secondary appraisal to determine how to cope with the resulting distress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, 1987). Based on previous studies indicating that employees engage in interpersonally directed counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs) to cope with undesirable treatment (Murtaza et al., 2023), this study also speculates that leader-directed CWBs (CWBs-L) may be possible behavioral responses to LMX ambivalence and diminished relational energy. CWBs-L are defined as employee behaviors that violate important organizational norms and are intended to harm their leaders (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007). Ferris et al. (2016) proposed that CWBs-L consists of avoidance-oriented and approach-oriented behaviors. While avoidance-oriented CWBs-L is characterized by behaviors that involve physically or verbally avoiding leaders, such as ignoring, ostracizing, or refusing to talk to them (Ferris et al., 2016), approach-

oriented CWBs-L involve antagonistic actions toward leaders, such as mocking, cursing, or insulting them (Guo et al., 2023). Previous studies (e.g., Carver et al., 1989) have found that when faced with a stressor, individuals may use various emotion-focused coping strategies, such as seeking emotional support, venting, and escaping/flighting from stressful situations. In this study, we propose that employees who experience diminished relational energy might engage in avoidance- and approach-oriented CWBs-L as different emotion-focused coping strategies. Specifically, employees may engage in avoidance-oriented CWBs-L to reduce energy-draining interactions with their leaders (Baker, 2019; Owens et al., 2016) and enact approach-oriented CWBs-L to vent negative emotions and express displeasure (Decoster et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the transactional theory of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, 1987) suggests that individual characteristics influence an individual's primary cognitive appraisal process of the environmental stimulus (to assess whether there is a threat to their well-being). For example, Peltokorpi (2019) found that employees with a high power distance orientation were more likely to take abusive supervision for granted and, as a result, appraise this undesirable treatment from their leaders as less threatening or irrelevant to their psychological well-being. In particular, Lee, Thomas, Martin, Guillaume, and Marstand (2019b) found that employees differ in their perceptions of the value of LMX relationships. They defined LMX importance as the meta-perception that indicates whether employees view their LMX relationship as personally important or valuable to them. In this study, we focused on the moderating role of LMX importance on the relationship between LMX ambivalence and diminished relational energy. Specifically, we propose that LMX importance influences employees' primary appraisal of LMX ambivalence as a threat to well-being. When employees perceive LMX relationships as less important, they may evaluate "less socio-emotional or economic value in the exchange of resources" (Lee, Thomas, Martin, Guillaume, & Marstand, 2019b, p. 741). Thus, they are less likely to evaluate LMX ambivalence as a stressor and do not experience diminished relational energy. Conversely, for employees who perceive LMX relationships to be more important, the resources from leaders are perceived as highly valuable (Gerbasi et al., 2023; Halbesleben et al., 2014). They are more likely to appraise LMX ambivalence as a stressor that threatens their well-being and thus experience diminished relational energy.

This study makes several contributions to the existing literature. First, there is a lack of empirical evidence on the impact of LMX ambivalence on employees' interpersonal behaviors toward leaders (Chen et al., 2024). Our research empirically advances this line of research by demonstrating that LMX ambivalence can be a potential catalyst for employees' different CWBs-L. Secondly, extending prior studies that have mainly focused on the factors that can increase employees' relational energy (Wang et al., 2018) and the effect of relational energy on task performance (Owens et al., 2016) or contextual performance (Grosser et al., 2023), this study examines the mediating effects of diminished relational energy on the relationship between LMX ambivalence and employees' CWBs-L. Thirdly, we identify avoidance-oriented and approach-oriented CWBs-L as potential employees' behavioral responses to LMX ambivalence, which extends the list of interpersonal causes of CWBs-L and further enriches the role of LMX quality in CWB management. Finally, by examining the moderating effect of LMX importance, this study not only clarifies when LMX ambivalence is evaluated as a stressor, but also addresses the call to consider both LMX quality (i.e., LMX ambivalence) and employees' perceived value of LMX relationships (i.e., LMX importance) collectively (Lee, Thomas, Martin, Guillaume, & Marstand, 2019b). The conceptual framework is depicted in Figure 1.

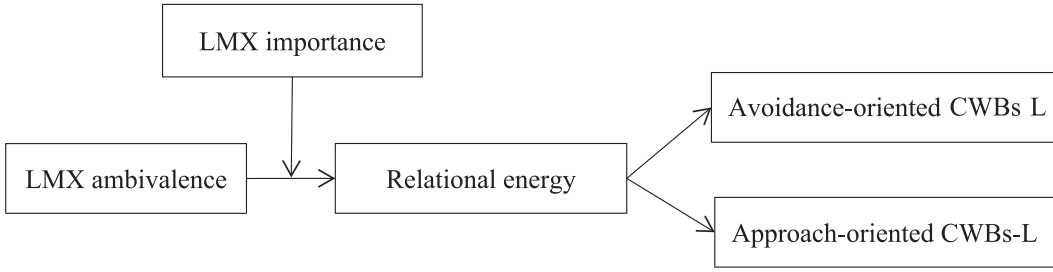

FIGURE 1 Hypothesized model. CWBs-L = counterproductive work behaviors towards leaders.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Conceptualizing LMX ambivalence and its outcomes within a stressor-strain framework

Workplace stressors are generally considered to include any aversive organizational conditions that have the potential to impair employees' well-being (Han et al., 2022). The stressor-strain framework (Spector & Jex, 1998) posits that exposure to stressful conditions (i.e., stressors) triggers individuals' negative responses, such as physical (e.g., sleep disruption and somatic complaints), psychological (e.g., emotional exhaustion and anxiety), and behavioral (e.g., withdrawal and aggression) strains. Within the stressor-strain framework, various organizational theories, such as dynamic equilibrium theory (Headey & Wearing, 1989), transactional theory of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, 1987), frustration-aggression theory (Berkowitz, 1989), and job-demands resources model (Demerouti et al., 2001), have been employed to investigate how workplace stressors relate to employees' psychological and behavioral strains.

Because ambivalence violates the principle of cognitive consistency (e.g., Ashforth et al., 2014), it is generally described as unpleasant, uncomfortable, or even distressing to the extent that individuals must expend significant psychological resources to cope with such aversive experience (Lee, Thomas, Martin, & Guillaume, 2019a). Some scholars argue that ambivalent relationships are more destructive than purely negative ones (Han & Sears, 2024). For instance, compared with positive and negative relationships, ambivalent relationships are associated with more health outcomes and physical strains, such as cardiovascular reactivity (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2007), cellular aging (Uchino et al., 2012), and ambulatory blood pressure (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2003). This study focused on ambivalence in leader-employee relationships (i.e., LMX ambivalence). LMX ambivalence has been found to produce various psychological strains, such as decreased career commitment (Dechawatanapaisal, 2021) and emotional exhaustion (Kim et al., 2023), and behavioral strains, such as decreased proactive work behaviors (Chen & Weng, 2023) and decreased taking charge behaviors (Kim et al., 2023).

Prior studies have demonstrated that diminished emotional energy may be a potential proximal psychological strain associated with various workplace stressors, such as supervisor unfavorable feedback (Zhu et al., 2023), coworker incompetence accusation (Mao et al., 2022), and workplace ostracism (Xia et al., 2019). In addition, CWBs have been conceptualized as a type of behavioral strain that occurs in response to workplace stressors (Penney et al., 2011). For

example, previous research has demonstrated that CWBs can be provoked by potential workplace stressors, such as exploitative leadership (Guo et al., 2023) and workplace incivility (Welbourne & Sariol, 2017).

Therefore, it seems reasonable to suggest that LMX ambivalence can also be considered within the stressor-strain framework. Within this framework, LMX ambivalence can be classified as a stressor, with diminished relational energy and CWBs-L representing the resulting psychological and behavioral strain, respectively. Specifically, drawing on the transactional theory of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987), it is theoretically presumed that LMX ambivalence (i.e., the stressor) is associated with diminished relational energy (i.e., the psychological strain), which, in turn, leads to CWBs-L (i.e., the behavioral strain).

Diminished relational energy as a psychological strain

The transactional theory of stress and coping posits that environmental stimuli are not the direct precipitating causes of a strain response; instead, an individual's appraisal of a challenge or threat precedes the response (Schuler, 1982). Specifically, environmental stimuli in the workplace initially prompt individuals to engage in a primary cognitive appraisal, which can be defined as "the process of categorizing an encounter, and its various facets, with respect to its significance for well-being" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 31). During the primary appraisal, encounters are evaluated as benign-positive (exerting positive effects on individuals' well-being), irrelevant (of no significance to individuals' well-being), or stressful (posing threats to individuals' well-being). Schuler (1982) highlighted that the primary cognitive appraisal elicits immediate psychological strains, which are a range of emotional responses. The emotional responses to a given encounter are contingent upon the appraisal of that encounter (Tariq et al., 2023). Negative emotional states are formed when encounters are appraised as threatening or harmful, whereas positive emotional states are engendered when encounters are appraised as challenging or benign. No emotional response is elicited when an encounter is deemed irrelevant or unimportant (Mackey & Perrewe, 2014).

Deci and Ryan (2000) propose that the fulfillment of three basic needs (i.e., competence, relatedness, and autonomy) is essential to individuals' psychological growth and well-being. Using primary appraisal, employees who experience LMX ambivalence will recognize it as a stressor that thwarts their need fulfillment and impairs their well-being. Specifically, LMX ambivalence violates the basic need for relationship consistency, further triggering psychological tension and discomfort (Kim et al., 2023). Employees who experience LMX ambivalence need to devote psychological and cognitive resources to cope with this aversive experience (Ashforth et al., 2014). They are reluctant to invest their limited resources in discretionary work activities (Chen & Weng, 2023). Thus, LMX ambivalence may diminish employees' sense of personal choice and freedom in performing jobs (i.e., the satisfaction of the need for autonomy). In the context of LMX ambivalence, ambiguous and inconsistent role expectations may lower employees' attachment to work roles (Lee, Thomas, Martin, & Guillaume, 2019a) and even destroy the fit and connection that binds them to organizations (Dechawatanapaisal, 2021). LMX ambivalence has been found to exert adverse effects on employees' taking charge behavior (Kim et al., 2023) and task performance (Lee, Thomas, Martin, & Guillaume, 2019a), which signals that LMX ambivalence may hinder employees' task mastery and goal attainment (i.e., the satisfaction of need for competence). Finally, those with ambivalent perceptions of their LMX relationships are uncertain whether leaders care about or invest resources in them (Suurd

Ralph & Barling, 2023). They may perceive their relationships with leaders as less stable and their leaders as less trustworthy (Lee, Thomas, Martin, & Guillaume, 2019a; Lin & Du, 2024). Thus, LMX ambivalence threatens social bonds with leaders and reduces employees' sense of social connection in the workplace (i.e., the satisfaction of the need for relatedness; Zhao & Zhou, 2021).

According to the transactional theory of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, 1987), when employees perceive a threat to their well-being due to LMX ambivalence, they experience more psychological strain (i.e., diminished relational energy). Relational energy can be reflected in the positive aroused emotions of vitality, vigor, and enthusiasm generated from interpersonal interactions (Owens et al., 2016). In this study, relational energy captures the positive emotional state of employees directly stimulated by leader-employee interactions (Wang et al., 2018). Because leaders control valuable resources (e.g., information and financial support) in the workplace, employees are motivated to seek energy resources through their leaders (Baker, 2019; Yang et al., 2019). If interpersonal interactions with leaders can induce positive cognitive and affective psychological resources in employees, their well-being and relational energy are expected to improve (Huang et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2023). Previous research has also posited that lower need satisfaction and reduced well-being at work de-energize employees (Han & Sears, 2024; Van den Broeck et al., 2008). LMX ambivalence impedes the fulfillment of employees' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Han & Sears, 2024), which are necessary for the experience of relational energy. In addition, we speculated that LMX ambivalence reduces relational energy because previous studies have shown that it elicits negative emotions that contradict the existence of relational energy. Specifically, scholars have found that LMX ambivalence induces psychological tension, discomfort (Kim et al., 2023), and anxiety (Huang et al., 2022). These negative affective outcomes would reduce employees' vitality and enthusiasm for work (Baker, 2019) and disrupt energetic activation, decreasing relational energy (Zhu et al., 2023). Therefore, we propose the following:

> **Hypothesis 1.** LMX ambivalence is positively related to diminished relational energy.

Diminished relational energy as a mediator of the link between LMX ambivalence and CWBs-L

Schuler (1982) proposed that psychological strains represent the immediate responses to stressful situations and that behavioral strains are a function of the individual's psychological strains rather than the stressor. For example, some scholars (Guo et al., 2023; Murtaza et al., 2023) have shown that behavioral strains reflect individuals' attempts to cope with the negative emotional states elicited by stressors. According to the transactional theory of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, 1987), when faced with LMX ambivalence, employees will perceive a threat to their well-being and experience more psychological strains (i.e., diminished relational energy) by engaging in a primary appraisal. Subsequently, they undertake a secondary appraisal to determine how to cope with the diminished relational energy associated with LMX ambivalence. Coping strategies consist of "cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p.141). In general, these efforts may be directed at addressing or modifying the stressor itself or at regulating the negative emotions elicited by a

stressor (i.e., emotion-focused coping). When individuals perceive stressors as less controllable, they tend to use emotion-focused coping strategies and direct their efforts at regulating negative emotions (Eatough & Chang, 2018; Welbourne & Sariol, 2017).

In the context of the leader-employee dyad, Chen et al. (2024) have proposed that employees tend to view their leaders as the source of the emotional uplift and hassles generated by the quality of the LMX relationship. However, due to power imbalance and resource dependence, employees are more likely to perceive stressors caused by their leaders as less controllable than stressors associated with the behaviors of their coworkers (Eatough & Chang, 2018). Thus, employees may perceive LMX ambivalence as an uncontrollable stressor and engage in emotion-focused coping. Emotion-focused coping includes various strategies, such as seeking emotional support, venting, and escaping/fleeing stressful situations (Carver et al., 1989). Shoss, Jundt, et al. (2016b) posited that when employees perceive stressors as uncontrollable, they will view their CWBs as more instrumental in coping. In this study, we speculated that employees may emotionally cope with diminished relational energy through avoidance-oriented CWBs-L, which allows them to avoid these energy-depleting social interactions, or approach-oriented CWBs-L, which harms their leaders to seek catharsis.

Avoidance-oriented CWBs-L as a behavioral strain

Avoidance has been conceptualized as a general response to the experience of relational ambivalence (Rothman et al., 2017). The assertion is supported by empirical studies demonstrating various behavioral attempts by individuals to relationally distance themselves from the sources of ambivalence (e.g., withdrawal, poor cooperation, or low helping). For example, Suurd Ralph and Barling (2023) found that employees' perceptions of inconsistent leadership were positively related to subjective ambivalence towards leaders, leading to leader avoidance. Chang and Raver (2020) demonstrated that employees experiencing emotional ambivalence toward coworkers would subsequently engage in relational distancing behaviors. Therefore, it is reasonable to posit that employees who hold ambivalent cognitions regarding their LMX relationships may experience a reduction in relational energy from interactions with their leaders and, in turn, avoid these energy-depleting interactions (Owens et al., 2016; Zhu et al., 2023). They are likely to use avoidance behavioral responses in the form of avoidance-oriented CWBs-L (e.g., keeping a considerable distance from their supervisors and refusing to talk to them; Guo et al., 2023). Therefore, we proposed the following:

> **Hypothesis 2.** LMX ambivalence is positively related to avoidance-oriented CWBs-L through diminished relational energy.

Approach-oriented CWBs-L as a behavioral strain

Social psychological research suggests a societal belief in the cathartic value of aggression, and such a view underscores the enactment of aggressive behaviors in stressful situations (Shoss, Hunter, & Penney, 2016a). In this study, we argued that engaging in approach-oriented CWBs-L (e.g., mocking and swearing at leaders; Ferris et al., 2016) in response to diminished relational energy is a means of seeking catharsis. Specifically, Spector and Fox (2002) posited that employees are hedonically inclined to engage in negative behaviors to vent negative

emotions and experience pleasure. Thus, when employees experience diminished relational energy due to LMX ambivalence, they may engage in approach-oriented CWBs-L to directly retaliate against their leaders' inconsistent treatment and express their displeasure (Rothman et al., 2017). Prior studies have already confirmed that when employees experience undesirable treatment from their leaders, such as abusive supervision (Vogel & Mitchell, 2017), self-serving leadership (Decoster et al., 2021), and exploitative leadership (Guo et al., 2023), they tend to choose direct forms of aggression (i.e., approach-oriented CWBs) to release negative emotions. Therefore, we propose the following:

> **Hypothesis 3.** LMX ambivalence is positively related to approach-oriented CWBs-L through diminished relational energy.

Avoidance- versus approach-oriented CWBs-L as behavioral strains

The transactional theory of stress and coping states that "anything one does (expect cognitively) to handle stressful transactions falls within the rubric of direct action" (Lazarus, 1981, p. 37). The appropriateness of different direct actions is determined by the specific conditions associated with stress. In addition to evaluating the available direct actions, individuals also evaluate the outcomes of these actions.

Rothman et al. (2017) noted that experiencing ambivalence in interpersonal relationships may lead individuals to respond by "moving away" from the target of their ambivalence (e.g., avoidance-oriented CWBs-L) or "moving against the target (e.g., approach-oriented CWBs-L). In this study, avoidance-oriented and approach-oriented CWBs-L are direct actions that focus on regulating negative emotions (i.e., diminished relational energy) triggered by LMX ambivalence. Avoidance-oriented CWBs-L reflect employees' attempts to limit their exposure to stressful situations and allow initial negative emotions to subside (Guo et al., 2023; Suurd Ralph & Barling, 2023). Approach-oriented CWBs-L may reflect employees' attempts to vent negative emotions by seeking revenge against the leaders responsible for causing the stressors (Vogel & Mitchell, 2017). Both types of CWBs-L provide different emotional coping mechanisms for employees experiencing diminished relational energy and LMX ambivalence, and existing research supports both mechanisms. Therefore, we propose that employees experiencing diminished relational energy due to LMX ambivalence may exhibit both avoidance-oriented and approach-oriented CWBs-L.

However, due to leaders' hierarchical status and higher power, implementing approach-oriented CWBs-L can be risky and potentially costly (Mackey et al., 2015). For example, direct retaliation against leaders might lead to counter-retaliation, punishment, and even dismissal. Peltokorpi (2019) found that abused employees relied more on avoidance coping strategies to distance themselves from leaders rather than direct retaliation against leaders. Nevertheless, Spanouli and Hofmans (2021) proposed that although approach-oriented CWBs-L is not a rational coping strategy, the momentary relief it provides may outweigh the uncertainty of its potential consequences, thus reinforcing this activity as an energy resource replenishment for employees experiencing low relational energy. Thus, some scholars (e.g., Lyubykh et al., 2022) maintain that individuals may engage in retaliatory behaviors even at significant personal costs and that these behaviors may be more intense than the initial transgression. In this study, we proposed that for employees experiencing LMX ambivalence and diminished relational energy, approach-oriented CWBs-L may be a viable option, but less appealing and safer than

avoidance-oriented CWBs-L. In sum, employees who experience diminished relational energy due to LMX ambivalence will exhibit higher levels of CWBs-L, and this effect will be more pronounced for avoidance-oriented CWBs-L compared with approach-oriented CWBs-L. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

> **Hypothesis 4.** LMX ambivalence and diminished relational energy will be more strongly correlated with avoidance-oriented CWBs-L than approach-oriented CWBs-L.

The moderating role of LMX importance

Lazarus and Folkman (1981, 1984) identified three key components of the transactional process model of stress: environmental stressors, individual characteristics, and strain reactions. The environmental stressor and the resulting strain response are a dynamic interaction between an individual and his/her environment (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, 1987). Individual characteristics influence an individual's primary appraisal process of the environment (to assess whether stressors are present), influencing the subsequent strain response (Lazarus, 1981). Specifically, stress is defined as "a perceived dynamic state about something important" (Schuler, 1982, p. 5). However, what is important to one individual may not be considered important to another as they may have different needs and values (Halbesleben et al., 2014). Schuler (1982, p.8) states that "an individual experiences stress from his/her perception of the environment with his/her own set of unique skills, needs and characteristics." Therefore, what is a stressor for an individual may not be for another (Majeed & Naseer, 2021). In this study, we speculate that the effect of LMX ambivalence on diminished relational energy is contingent on the perceived value of LMX relationships (i.e., LMX importance). LMX importance, a meta-perception that indicates whether employees view their LMX relationships as personally valuable to them (Lee, Thomas, Martin, Guillaume, & Marstand, 2019b), influences employees' primary appraisal of LMX ambivalence as a stressor.

As previously stated, a given experience is evaluated as benign-positive, stressful, or irrelevant/unimportant during primary appraisal (Lazarus & Folkman, 1981, 1984). When employees experience LMX ambivalence, they feel uncertain about how to interact with leaders (Chen & Weng, 2023; Kim et al., 2023), which hinders their psychological need fulfillment (Han & Sears, 2024). For employees who attach greater importance to their LMX relationships, the resources they receive from leaders are perceived as highly valuable (Lee, Thomas, Martin, Guillaume, & Marstand, 2019b). They are more likely to appraise LMX ambivalence as a stressor that threatens their well-being and thus experience diminished relational energy. Conversely, when employees perceive LMX relationships as low in importance, they might assess "less socio-emotional or economic value in the exchange of resources" (Lee, Thomas, Martin, Guillaume, & Marstand, 2019b, p. 741). Thus, they may evaluate LMX ambivalence as irrelevant and not experience diminished relational energy.

In addition, individuals cognitively appraise a situation as threatening or challenging (primary appraisal), depending on whether or not they have the resources to cope with it (Majeed & Naseer, 2021). From a resource perspective, scholars (Hobfoll, 2001; Tang et al., 2016) note that one of the methods of coping with stress is resource substitution, whereby a depleted resource can be replaced with an alternative. For example, Lee, Thomas, Martin, and Guillaume (2019a) have shown that perceived coworker support can buffer the detrimental

effects of LMX ambivalence. However, the value of resources varies across individuals (Halbesleben et al., 2014). Thus, resource substitution depends on individuals' perceived value of particular resources (Gerbasi et al., 2023). Scholars (Lee, Thomas, Martin, Guillaume, & Marstand, 2019b; Liden et al., 1997) have posited that employees will ascribe little importance to their LMX relationships when they develop informal networks with coworkers that can serve as alternative sources of some valued resources. The perceived uniqueness and scarcity of resources from leaders are reduced for employees who view their LMX relationship as low in importance. Thus, when experiencing LMX ambivalence, they are less likely to perceive LMX ambivalence as a stressor because they can seek alternative resources from other sources. Conversely, when employees attach greater importance to their LMX relationship (i.e., high LMX importance), resources from other coworkers may not be sufficient to compensate for the lack of resources from their leaders (Gerbasi et al., 2023). They are more likely to perceive LMX ambivalence as a stressor and experience diminished relational energy because they may perceive their resources as insufficient to cope with this stressful situation. In sum, we proposed that:

> **Hypothesis 5.** LMX importance moderates the positive effect of LMX ambivalence on diminished relational energy such that this effect is stronger when LMX importance is higher (versus lower).

STUDY 1 METHOD

Participants and procedure

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a multi-wave survey of respondents from various industries in China. The study questionnaires were distributed to participants via *WeChat* and *QQ*, two multipurpose messaging applications widely used in China. A cover letter was attached to each questionnaire to ensure confidentiality and to explain the academic purposes to the participants. Each participant was paid three RMB for completing each questionnaire.

To reduce the potential for common method variance (CMV), the data collection period for the current study was four weeks, with three measurement points (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Each participant was assigned a unique identity number to match their responses across the three-time points. At Time 1, 625 participants were invited to complete a survey questionnaire measuring the following variables: LMX ambivalence, power distance orientation, LMX quality, and demographic information (e.g., gender and dyadic tenure). A total of 549 usable responses were obtained, giving an 87.840% response rate. Two weeks later, at Time 2, the 549 participants were asked to report their relational energy from leaders and LMX importance. A total of 459 completed responses were received, resulting in a response rate of 83.607%. At Time 3, participants who completed the Time 2 questionnaire were invited to rate their avoidance- and approach-oriented CWBs-L. A total of 338 valid questionnaires were received, representing a response rate of 73.638%.

The final sample consisted of 58.579% males with a mean age of 31.240 years (SD = 6.328) and a mean dyadic tenure of 3.580 years (SD = 2.269). More specifically, in terms of age, 9.172% of these participants were 24 years old or younger, 64.793% were 25–34 years old, 21.893% were 35–44 years old, and 4.142% were over 45 years old. The length of dyadic tenure was one year or less for 18.047% of the participants, two to four years for 41.124%, four to six

years for 23.965%, and six years or more for 16.864%. Regarding education, 14.201% of participants had a junior or high school degree, 18.935% had a junior college degree, 46.154% had a bachelor's degree, and 20.710% had a master's degree or above. Among these participants, 46.746% held non-managerial positions, 37.278% were entry-level managers, 13.905% were mid-level managers, and 2.071% were senior-level managers. Participants worked in diverse industries, including engineering (19.236%), education (15.437%), finance (13.869%), manufacturing (11.765%), retail (9.238%), transport (7.965%), construction (6.753%), R & D (4.689%), and other (11.048%).

Measures

All variables, except the demographic variables, were measured using a Likert-type response scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree").

LMX ambivalence

LMX ambivalence was measured using Lee, Thomas, Martin, and Guillaume's (2019a) seven-item scale. A sample item is "I have conflicting thoughts: sometimes I think that my working relationship with my leader is very good, while at other times I don't." The Cronbach's alpha of the scale was .930.

Relational energy

We measured relational energy from leaders with a five-item scale developed by Owens et al. (2016). A sample item is "I feel invigorated when I interact with this leader." The Cronbach's alpha of the scale was .905.

CWBs-L

Consistent with prior research (Ferris et al., 2016; Guo et al., 2023), we assessed avoidance- and approach-oriented CWBs-L using items from two measures. Specifically, avoidance-oriented CWBs-L was measured using a four-item scale developed by McCullough et al. (1997) and Mitchell and Ambrose (2007). A sample item is "I refused to talk to my immediate leader." The Cronbach's alpha of the scale was .870. Approach-oriented CWBs-L was measured using an eight-item scale developed by Mitchell and Ambrose (2007). A sample item is "I made fun of my immediate leader at work." The Cronbach's alpha of the scale was .920.

LMX importance

LMX importance was measured using a seven-item scale developed by Lee, Thomas, Martin, Guillaume, and Marstand (2019b). A sample item is "It is important to me that my working relationship with my leader is very good." The Cronbach's alpha of the scale was .938.

Control variables

We controlled for employee demographics, including gender, age, education, dyadic tenure, and position, as these are related to the experience of LMX ambivalence (Chen & Weng, 2023) and CWBs-L (Ferris et al., 2016; Guo et al., 2023). Prior studies (e.g., Jawahar et al., 2018) have shown that employees' LMX quality has a negative effect on their engagement in CWBs-L. In addition, following prior studies (Chen & Weng, 2023; Han & Sears, 2024), we also controlled for LMX quality to determine the unique effect of LMX ambivalence on relational energy and CWBs-L beyond that explained by LMX quality. LMX quality was assessed using a seven-item scale developed by Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995). A sample item is "I would characterize my working relationship with my leader as very good." The Cronbach's alpha of the scale was .902. In addition, Park et al. (2019) found that employees in higher power distance cultures are less likely to engage in CWBs-L. Therefore, we also controlled for power distance orientation. Power distance orientation was measured using a six-item scale from Dorfman and Howell (1988). A sample item is "Leaders should make most decisions without consulting employees." The Cronbach's alpha of the scale was .927.

RESULTS

Harman's single factor test

To perform Harman's single-factor test, all key variables were entered into an exploratory factor analysis (using unrotated principal component analysis) in SPSS 27.0 software. Harman's single-factor test revealed that the first principal component accounted for 21.287% of the variance in the current study. This value was significantly lower than the benchmark of 50%, indicating no severe problem with CMV.

Descriptive statistics

We used SPSS 27.0 software for descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation analysis. As shown in Table 1, LMX ambivalence was negatively related to relational energy ($r = -.321$, $p < .001$). Relational energy was negatively related to avoidance-oriented CWBs-L ($r = -.400$, $p < .001$) and approach-oriented CWBs-L ($r = -.254$, $p < .001$). These results provided initial support for our hypothesized relationships.

Construct validity

We conducted a series of confirmatory factor analyses using Amos 24.0 software to test the construct distinctiveness of the seven key variables in our model. Table 2 shows that the seven-factor model provided an excellent fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 1293.116$, $df = 881$, $\chi^2/df = 1.468$, IFI = .959, TLI = .955, CFI = .958, RMSEA = .037) and had a better fit than other models.

TABLE 1 Means, standard deviations and correlations for study 1.

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Gender	1.410	.493	-										
2. Age	31.240	6.328	.153[b]	-									
3. Education	2.730	.947	-.138[c]	.033	-								
4. Position	1.710	.780	−.022	.082[a]	.049	-							
5. Dyadic tenure	3.580	2.269	.001	.224[a]	.060	.175[a]	-						
6. LMX quality	3.638	.845	.048	−.009	.103	.103	.122[c]	-					
7. Power distance orientation	3.216	1.049	.035	.025	−.044	.063	−.018	.225[a]	-				
8. LMX ambivalence	3.279	1.077	−.031	.002	-.133[c]	−.035	-.198[a]	-.176[a]	−.053	-			
9. Relational energy	3.100	1.057	.041	−.069	.058	−.038	.097	.277[a]	.320[a]	-.321[a]	-		
10. LMX importance	3.029	1.080	.025	−.013	.028	.051	.114[c]	.087	.149[b]	-.155[b]	.099	-	
11. Avoidance-oriented CWBs-L	2.296	.955	−.070	−.004	-.069[a]	.087	−.059	-.247[a]	-.143[b]	.286[a]	-.400[a]	-.308[a]	-
12. Approach-oriented CWBs-L	2.737	.933	.049	.123[c]	−.045	.065	.040	−.097	-.129[c]	.145[b]	-.254[a]	-.110[c]	.182[a]

Note: N = 338;
[a]p < .001, [b]p < .01, and [c]p < .05.

TABLE 2 Confirmatory factor analysis and model comparison for study 1.

Model	Descriptions	χ^2	*Df*	χ^2/df	IFI	TLI	CFI	RMSEA
Model 1	Seven factors: LMX ambivalence, power distance orientation, LMX quality, relational energy, LMX importance, approach-oriented CWBs-L and avoidance-oriented CWBs-L	1293.116	881	1.468	.959	.955	.958	.037
Model 2	Six factors: LMX ambivalence and LMX importance were combined into one factor	3051.214	887	3.440	.783	.767	.781	.085
Model 3	Five factors: LMX ambivalence and LMX importance were combined into one factor; approach-oriented CWBs-L and avoidance-oriented CWBs-L were combined into one factor	3739.764	892	4.193	.714	.695	.712	.097
Model 4	Four factors: LMX ambivalence, LMX quality, and LMX importance were combined into one factor; approach-oriented CWBs-L and avoidance-oriented CWBs-L were combined into one factor	4924.574	896	5.496	.595	.571	.593	.116
Model 5	Three factors: LMX ambivalence, LMX quality, and LMX importance were combined into one factor; relational energy, approach-oriented CWBs-L, and avoidance-oriented CWBs-L were combined into one factor	5886.174	899	6.547	.499	.470	.496	.128
Model 6	Two factors: LMX ambivalence, LMX quality, LMX importance, relational energy, and power distance orientation were combined into one factor; approach-oriented CWBs-L and avoidance-oriented CWBs-L were combined into one factor	7720.137	901	8.013	.365	.330	.362	.144
Model 7	One factor: LMX ambivalence, power distance orientation, LMX quality, relational energy, LMX importance, approach-oriented CWBs-L, and avoidance-oriented CWBs-L were combined into one factor	8410.409	902	9.324	.245	.205	.242	.157

Note: N = 338.

Hypothesis testing

We conducted hierarchical regression analyses using SPSS 27.0 software to test our hypotheses. As shown in Table 3, the significant negative relationship between LMX ambivalence and relational energy ($\beta = -.258$, $p < .001$, Model 10) supported Hypothesis 1. Hypotheses 2 and 3 proposed that relational energy mediated the positive relationships between LMX ambivalence and

TABLE 3 Hierarchical regression analysis for Study 1.

	Avoidance-oriented CWBs-L				Approach-oriented CWBs-L				Relational energy		
Variable	M_1	M_2	M_3	M_4	M_5	M_6	M_7	M_8	M_9	M_{10}	M_{11}
Gender	−.123	−.100	−.094	−.083	.066	.079	.084	.090	.091	.064	.057
Age	.002	.001	−.004	−.004	.017[c]	.016	.013	.013	−.017	−.014	−.013
Education	−.064	−.034	−.044	−.027	−.046	−.030	−.033	−.025	.064	.029	.033
Position	.156[c]	.151[c]	.117	.120	.086	.084	.062[c]	.063	−.121	−.116	−.109
Dyadic tenure	−.023	−.004	−.007	.004	.005	.015	.015	.021	.052[c]	.029	.025
LMX quality	-.249[a]	-.213[a]	-.171[b]	-.157[b]	−.082	−.062	−.033	-.027[c]	.249[a]	.206[a]	.189[b]
Power distance orientation	−.094	−.086	−.003	−.010	-.109[c]	-.016[c]	−.053	−.057	.289[a]	.280[a]	.261[a]
LMX ambivalence		.217[a]		.146[b]		.117[c]		.072		-.258[a]	-.249[a]
Relational energy			-.315[a]	-.272[a]			-.196[a]	-.174[a]			
LMX importance											−.001
LMX ambivalence × LMX importance											-.132[c]
R^2	.092	.147	.193	.216	.046	.063	.087	.092	.173	.237	.250
F	4.800	7.108	9.842	10.059	2.273	2.758	3.896	3.712	9.875	12.766	10.914

Note: N = 338;
[a]p < .001, [b]p < .01, and [c]p < .05.

avoidance-oriented and approach-oriented CWBs-L. LMA ambivalence was positively related to avoidance-oriented CWBs-L ($\beta = .217$, $p < .001$, Model 2) and approach-oriented CWBs-L ($\beta = .117$, $p < .05$, Model 6). When we included relational energy in the models, LMX ambivalence remained positively related to avoidance-oriented CWBs-L ($\beta = .146$, $p < .01$, Model 4), and the relationship between relational energy and avoidance-oriented CWBs-L ($\beta = -.272$, $p < .001$, Model 4) was also significant, supporting Hypothesis 2. When considering the effect of relational energy, the effect of relational energy on approach-oriented CWBs-L remained significant ($\beta = -.174$, $p < .001$, Model 8), but the effect of LMX ambivalence on approach-oriented CWBs-L became nonsignificant ($\beta = .072$, *ns*., Model 8), supporting Hypothesis 3. To further assess the significance of these indirect effects, we conducted a bootstrapping analysis (bootstrapped samples = 5000) in the SPSS 27.0 PROCESS macro to generate confidence intervals (CIs). The results showed that the indirect effects of LMX ambivalence on avoidance- and approach-oriented CWBs-L via relational energy were .070 (95% CI [.032, .116]) and .045 (95% CI [.016, .083]), respectively, providing support for Hypotheses 2 and 3.

To test Hypothesis 4, we compared the correlations using the Hotelling-Williams *t*-test for dependent correlations (Williams, 1959). The correlation between LMX ambivalence and avoidance-oriented CWBs-L was significantly greater than the correlations between LMX ambivalence and approach-oriented CWBs-L [t (335) = 2.101, $p < .05$]. Similarly, the correlation between relational energy and avoidance-oriented CWBs-L was significantly greater than that between relational energy and approach-oriented CWBs-L [t (335) = −.296, $p < .001$]. In addition, the results in Table 3 show that when controlling for demographic variables, power distance orientation, and LMX quality in the regression models, LMX ambivalence explained 5.5% of the variance in avoidance-oriented CWBs-L and 1.7% in approach-oriented CWBs-L. After including control variables in the regression models, relational energy explained 10.1% of the variance in avoidance-oriented CWBs-L and 4.1% in approach-oriented CWBs-L. Thus, Hypothesis 4 was supported.

Table 3 showed that the interactions between LMX ambivalence and LMX importance were significantly related to relational energy ($\beta = -.132$, $p < .05$, Model 11), supporting Hypothesis 5. The simple-slope test was conducted to demonstrate the interaction. As shown in Figure 2, the effect of LMX ambivalence on relational energy was significant when LMX importance was high (1 standard deviation above average; $\beta_{simple} = -.371$, $p < .001$) but not significant when LMX importance was low (1 standard deviation below the average; $\beta_{simple} = -.126$, *ns*.).

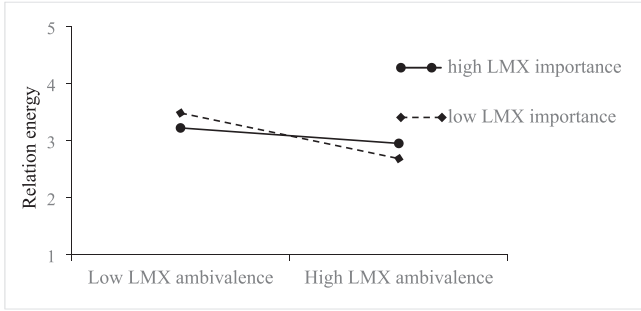

FIGURE 2 The moderating effect of LMX importance (study 1).

STUDY 2 METHOD

Participants

In Study 2, we employed a scenario experiment to increase the robustness of the results observed in Study 1 and to compare the effects of positive, negative, and ambivalent perceptions of LMX relationship quality on subsequent emotional (i.e., relational energy) and behavioral responses (i.e., CWBs-L). A total of 380 full-time employees from China were recruited through *Credamo*, a Chinese online survey platform (Huang et al., 2023), to participate in this experiment in exchange for 3 RMB (approximately $0.42). Participants were randomly assigned to one of three scenarios (i.e., positive, negative, and ambivalent conditions). We excluded 19 participants who failed the attention check questions, 22 who completed the questionnaires in less than 50% of the median time required to complete them, and 13 who did not provide complete demographic information, leaving a final sample of 326 participants.

The final sample was composed of 46.626% female and 53.374% male, with 23.006% of respondents below the age of 25, 57.362% between 26 and 35, 13.804% between 36 and 45, and the remaining 5.828% over 45 years of age. The overall level of education was high, with 12.270% of participants having completed a junior or high school degree, 21.166% having obtained a junior college degree, 48.160% having completed a bachelor's degree, and 18.404% having attained a master's degree or above. The length of dyadic tenure was less than one year for 15.337% of participants, between two and four years for 45.706%, between five and seven years for 30.368%, and eight years or more for 8.589%. In terms of position, 55.215% of participants held non-managerial positions, 30.675% were entry-level managers, 11.043% were mid-level managers, and 3.067% were senior-level managers. Participants were from various industries, including education (16.564%), finance (14.417%), telecommunications (12.087%), manufacturing (11.656%), healthcare (10.123%), public administration (8.282%), food (7.362%), and others (19.509%).

Procedure and experimental design

Scenario-based experimental designs have been used extensively in previous LMX studies and have been shown to possess desirable validity in manipulating employee LMX (e.g., Radulovic et al., 2019). Following Chen et al. (2024) research, our experimental conditions for positive and negative LMX relationships were created with reference to the manipulations developed by Radulovic et al. (2019), which relied on the four dimensions of LMX, namely, contribution, affect, professional respect, and loyalty, as outlined in Liden and Maslyn's (1998) LMX-MDM scale. Participants' LMX relationship qualities were manipulated using different scenarios depicting their relationships with a hypothetical leader named *Li Hua*. In the positive (negative, n = 107) LMX relationship condition (n = 111), participants read the following statements: "You perceive that your leader Li Hua seems (not) to trust you and (not) to rely on you in difficult situations ... Li Hua is (not) willing to spend personal time giving you tips and tricks on how to deal with difficulties." In the ambivalent LMX relationship condition (n = 108), participants read the following: "At times, you perceive that Li Hua seems to trust you and rely on you, and you sometimes perceive that Li Hua does not seem to trust you nor rely on you in difficult situations...At times, you perceive that Li Hua is willing to spend personal time giving you tips and tricks on how to deal with difficulties, and you sometimes perceive that Li Hua is not willing."

Following the scenarios, participants answered the manipulation check questions (i.e., LMX and LMX ambivalence), completed measures of relational energy, power distance orientation, LMX importance, avoidance- and approach-oriented CWBs-L and reported their demographics.

Measures

A 5-point Likert scale was used for all study variables except demographics. Each scale item referred to *Li Hua*, the name of the hypothetical leader from the above scenarios, and avoided using personal pronouns.

LMX ambivalence

LMX ambivalence was measured using Lee, Thomas, Martin, and Guillaume's (2019a) scale as in Study 1 ($\alpha = .888$).

LMX quality

LMX quality was assessed using Graen and Uhl-Bien's (1995) seven-item scale, as in Study 1 ($\alpha = .932$).

Relational energy

Relational energy was assessed with Owens et al.'s (2016) five-item scale as in Study 1 ($\alpha = .892$).

LMX importance

LMX importance was measured using Lee, Thomas, Martin, Guillaume, and Marstand's (2019b) seven-item scale as Study 1 ($\alpha = .909$).

CWBs-L

CWBs-L were assessed with the same measures used in Study 1 (McCullough et al., 1997; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; $\alpha = .815$ for avoidance-oriented CWBs-L; $\alpha = .892$ for approach-oriented CWBs-L).

Control variables

We controlled for the same demographic variables as in Study 1. Power distance orientation was also controlled using Dorfman and Howell's (1988) six-item scale as in Study 1 ($\alpha = .879$).

RESULTS

Manipulation check

ANOVA results indicated that LMX ambivalence differed significantly across the three LMX relationship conditions, F (2, 323) = 17.427, $p < .001$, $\eta 2$ $p = .097$. Specifically, participants rated the highest LMX ambivalence in the ambivalent LMX relationship condition ($M = 4.009$, $SD = .658$), significantly lower LMX ambivalence in the positive LMX relationship condition ($M = 3.413$, $SD = .890$), as indicated by the difference contrast, $Diff = .596$, $SE = .105$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.349, .843], and again significantly lower of LMX ambivalence in the negative LMX relationship condition ($M = 3.559$, $SD = .761$), $Diff = .450$, $SE = .106$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.200, .699]. Furthermore, participants reported their LMX relationship significantly higher in the positive LMX relationship condition ($M = 3.557$, $SD = .875$) than in the negative LMX relationship condition ($M = 2.335$, $SD = .976$, t [216] = 9.738, $p < .001$). Thus, our manipulation was effective.

Tests of hypotheses

Descriptive statistics and correlations for our variables are presented in Table 4. Given that the positive and negative LMX relationship conditions did not differ significantly in LMX ambivalence ($Diff = .146$, $SE = .112$, $p > .05$, 95% CI [−.368, .075]), we followed previous studies (e.g., Baer et al., 2010; Loi et al., 2021) and combined them for subsequent analyses (i.e., 1 = ambivalent LMX relationship condition and 0 = control condition).

To test our hypotheses, an ANOVA was conducted using SPSS 27.0 software, and the results indicated that participants assigned to the ambivalent LMX relationship condition reported lower relational energy ($M = 2.207$, $SD = .569$) than those in the control condition ($M = 3.230$, $SD = .876$), $Diff = -1.023$, $SE = .093$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−1.205, −.840]. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported. We used the SPSS PROCESS Model macro based on bootstrapping 5000 resamples to test hypotheses 2 and 3. The results of the bootstrapped analysis indicated that the indirect effects of LMX ambivalence on avoidance-oriented (*indirect effect* = .364, $SE = .067$, 95% CI [.236, .499]) and approach-oriented CWBs-L (*indirect effect* = .217, $SE = .052$, 95% CI [.115, .317]) via relational energy were all significant, supporting Hypotheses 2 and 3. In addition, participants assigned to the ambivalent LMX relationship condition reported more avoidance-oriented CWBs-L ($M = 3.801$, $SD = .700$) and approach-oriented CWBs-L ($M = 3.569$, $SD = .696$) than those in the control condition ($M = 3.067$, $SD = .862$, $Diff = .734$, $SE = .089$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.546, .922]; $M = 2.971$, $SD = .696$, $Diff = .599$, $SE = .089$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.424, .774]). Thus, our Hypothesis 4 was confirmed. The interaction between LMX ambivalence and LMX importance was significantly related to relational energy ($\beta = -.351$, $SE = .046$, $p < .001$). As shown in Figure 3, the result of the simple slope test revealed that the effect of LMX ambivalence on relational energy was more significant when LMX importance was high (1 standard deviation above the mean; $\beta_{simple} = -1.772$, $p < .001$) than when it was low (1 standard deviation below the mean; $\beta_{simple} = -.253$, $p < .001$). Therefore, Hypothesis 5 was confirmed.

In addition, following prior studies (Chen et al., 2024; Melwani & Rothman, 2022), we also specified a multi-categorical predictor to further compare the effects of ambivalent, positive, and negative LMX relationships. Specifically, we dummy-coded the categorical LMX

TABLE 4 Means, standard deviations, and correlations for Study 2.

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
13. Gender	1.530	.500	-										
14. Age	30.620	7.028	.034	-									
15. Education	2.730	.902	.031	.003	-								
16. Position	1.620	.802	−.045	.052	.115[c]	-							
17. Dyadic tenure	4.140	3.025	.036	.404[a]	.051	.025	-						
18. LMX quality	2.886	1.064	−.008	−.025	−.104	.204[a]	.018	-					
19. Power distance orientation	2.957	.979	−.044	.010	.052	.157[b]	−.024	.268[a]	-				
20. LMX ambivalence	3.659	.815	.034	−.059	-.129[c]	−.072	−.019	-.266[a]	-.133[c]	-			
21. Relational energy	2.891	.923	−.039	−.013	−.011	.074	−.029	.351[a]	.087	-.244[a]	-		
22. LMX importance	3.167	.888	.055	−.012	.024	−.055	.021	.216[a]	−.056	-.132[c]	.361[a]	-	
23. Avoidance-oriented CWBs-L	3.310	.882	.030	.029	.038	−.005	.064	-.222[a]	−.053	.423[a]	-.477[a]	-.170[b]	-
24. Approach-oriented CWBs-L	3.169	.805	.058	.005	.013	.054	−.014	-.136[c]	.012	.138[c]	-.357[a]	-.241[a]	.232[a]

Note: N = 326;
[a]p < .001, [b]p < .01, and [c]p < .05.

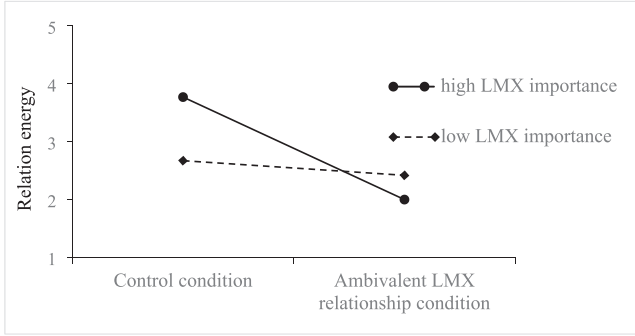

FIGURE 3 The moderating effect of LMX importance (study 2).

relationship variables into two dummy variables, with the ambivalent relationship serving as the reference category. The first dummy-coded variable, D1 (ambivalent/negative LMX relationship was coded as 0, and positive LMX relationship was coded as 1), reflected the comparison between ambivalent and positive LMX relationships. The second dummy-coded variable, D2 (ambivalent/positive LMX relationship was coded as 0, and negative LMX relationship was coded as 1), reflected the comparison between ambivalent and negative LMX relationships.

As shown in Table 5, participants in the ambivalent LMX relationship condition were less likely to experience relational energy when compared to those in the positive (*contrast estimate* = 1.695, $p < .001$, Model 10) and negative (*contrast estimate* = .317, $p < .001$, Model 10) LMX relationship conditions. In addition, participants in the ambivalent LMX relationship condition engage in more avoidance-oriented CWBs-L compared to those in the positive (*contrast estimate* = −1.043, $p < .001$, Model 2) and negative (*contrast estimate* = −.423, $p < .001$, Model 2) LMX relationship conditions. Similarly, participants in the ambivalent LMX relationship condition engage in more approach-oriented CWBs-L compared to those in the positive (*contrast estimate* = −.797, $p < .001$, Model 6) and negative (*contrast estimate* = −.435, $p < .001$, Model 6) conditions.

We conducted a mediation analysis using the SPSS PROCESS macro, model 4, and calculated 95% bootstrap CIs based on 5000 iterations. The results of the bootstrapped analyses indicated that the 95% CIs for the indirect effects of the ambivalent (vs. positive) LMX relationship on avoidance-oriented CWBs-L (*effect* = −.431, *SE* = .134, 95% CI = [−.698, −.169]) and approach-oriented CWBs-L (*effect* = −.268, *SE* = .132, 95% CI = [−.523, −.008]) were significant. Similarly, the 95% CIs for the indirect effects of the ambivalent (vs. negative) LMX relationship on avoidance-oriented CWBs-L (*effect* = −.081, *SE* = .033, 95% CI = [−.153, −.025]) and approach-oriented CWBs-L (*effect* = −.050, *SE* = .026, 95% CI = [−.107, −.003]) were significant.

As shown in Table 5, we also found a significant D1 × LMX importance interaction ($\beta = .209$, $p < .001$, Model 11) and a significant D2 × LMX importance interaction ($\beta = .242$, $p < .001$, Model 11). Further exploration of these findings revealed that the effect of ambivalent (vs. negative) LMX relationship on relational energy was more significant when LMX importance was higher (1 standard deviation above the mean; $\beta_{simple} = .999$, $p < .001$) rather than lower (1 standard deviation below the mean; $\beta_{simple} = -.031$, *ns.*). The effect of ambivalent (vs. positive) LMX relationship on relational energy was more significant when LMX importance was higher (1 standard deviation above the mean; $\beta_{simple} = 2.013$, $p < .001$) rather than

TABLE 5 Hierarchical regression analysis for Study 2.

	Avoidance-oriented CWBs-L				Approach-oriented CWBs-L				Relational energy		
Variable	M_1	M_2	M_3	M_4	M_5	M_6	M_7	M_8	M_9	M_{10}	M_{11}
Gender	.043	.033	.017	.022	.098	.090	.080	.084	−.058	−.042	−.048
Age	.001	−.002	.001	−.001	.001	−.001	.001	−.001	−.001	.001	−.003
Education	.036	.045	.027	.042	.005	.019	−.001	.017	−.021	−.013	−.014
Position	−.001	.023	.032	.033	.056	.076	.079	.083	.073	.041	.050
Dyadic tenure	.017	.016	.013	.013	−.006	−.008	−.008	−.009	−.007	−.010	−.003
Power distance orientation	−.048	−.001	−.015	−.005	.005	.036	.027	.033	.071	−.016	−.006
D1 [Ambivalent (0) vs. Positive (1)]		−1.043[a]		-.612[a]		-.797[a]		-.529[a]		1.695[a]	1.573[a]
D2 [Ambivalent (0) vs. Negative (1)]		-.423[a]		-.342[b]		-.435[a]		-.385[a]		.317[a]	.484[a]
Relational energy			-.454[a]	-.254[a]			-.319[a]	-.158[c]			
LMX importance											.114[b]
D1 × LMX importance											.209[a]
D2 × LMX importance											.242[a]
R^2	.009	.244	.232	.269	.007	.169	.138	.181	.014	.648	.704
F	.474	12.765	13.719	12.895	.375	8.072	7.298	7.750	.729	72.796	67.762

Note: N = 326; [a] $p < .001$, [b] $p < .01$, [c] $p < .05$.
D1, dummy-codded, 0 = ambivalent/negative LMX relationship, 1 = positive LMX relationship;
D2, dummy-codded, 0 = ambivalent/positive LMX relationship, 1 = negative LMX relationship.

lower (1 standard deviation below the mean; $\beta_{simple} = 1.131$, $p < .001$). In sum, our study demonstrated the mediating role of relational energy and the moderating role of LMX importance on the relationship between ambivalent LMX relationships (compared to negative and positive LMX relationships) on CWBs-L.

DISCUSSION

Theoretical implications

First, we contribute to the LMX ambivalence literature by exploring the strain responses to LMX ambivalence, thereby broadening and deepening knowledge in the LMX ambivalence literature. While previous studies have often considered LMX from a univalent perspective, Lee, Thomas, Martin, and Guillaume (2019a) have called for adopting a bivalent perspective to explore the effects of LMX ambivalence. However, to date, existing research on LMX ambivalence has mainly focused on its psychological strains, such as decreased career commitment (Dechawatanapaisal, 2021), reduced self-efficacy (Lin & Du, 2024), and emotional exhaustion (Han & Sears, 2024). Although some studies have examined employees' behavioral responses to LMX ambivalence, Chen et al. (2024) pointed out that these studies mainly emphasized individual work behaviors, such as reduced proactive work behaviors (Chen & Weng, 2023) and reduced taking charge behavior (Kim et al., 2023), and neglected dyadic interpersonal behaviors. Thus, this study responds to the call (Chen et al., 2024; Zhao & Zhou, 2021) to explore how employees experiencing LMX ambivalence treat their leaders. By demonstrating the positive effect between LMX ambivalence and CWBs-L, our study extends the nomological network of LMX ambivalence and enhances our understanding of LMX ambivalence and its effects.

Second, the current study contributes to the body of knowledge on relational energy. Specifically, based on the transactional theory of stress and coping (Lazarus, 1981, p. 37), this study identifies an important mediating role of diminished relational energy in the relationship between LMX ambivalence and CWBs-L. This finding is consistent with previous literature indicating that emotion is an important mediator between workplace stressors and CWBs (Guo et al., 2023). Prior work on the antecedents of relational energy has exclusively focused on the facilitators that may enhance employees' relational energy, such as spiritual leadership (Yang et al., 2019), leader humility (Wang et al., 2018), and feeling trusted (Fan et al., 2021). However, the inhibitors that may reduce employees' relational energy have remained unexplored (Mao et al., 2022). Thus, by revealing the de-energizing effect of LMX ambivalence, this study contributes to a richer understanding of the antecedents of relational energy. Furthermore, existing research on relational energy as an antecedent of job performance has mainly focused on task performance (Owens et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2018) or contextual performance (Grosser et al., 2023), with less attention paid to CWBs or other forms of negative performance indicators (Qu et al., 2023). Based on the transactional theory of stress and coping (Lazarus, 1981), this study suggested that diminished relational energy will lead to behavioral strains (i.e., CWBs-L). Finally, because the concept of relational energy was initially developed in Western cultures (Owens et al., 2016), researchers have questioned whether it applies to non-Western cultures (Yang et al., 2019). We have brought this research question to the Chinese context, thereby confirming the external validity of this construct in an Eastern cultural setting.

Third, our findings extend knowledge of the interpersonal antecedents of CWBs. Despite the detrimental effects of CWBs-L (Ferris et al., 2016), our understanding of what leads

employees to engage in these behaviors needs to be advanced. Existing research has shown that positive LMX relationships decrease CWBs-L, while negative LMX relationships increase CWBs-L (Vogel & Mitchell, 2017). However, little is known about how ambivalent LMX relationships influence CWBs-L (Chen et al., 2024; Melwani & Rothman, 2022). To advance this line of research, we demonstrated the positive effect of LMX ambivalence on employees' CWBs-L. Particularly, following previous studies (Ferris et al., 2016), we also used the avoidance/approach framework to distinguish between avoidance-oriented and approach-oriented CWBs-L, which contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between LMX ambivalence and CWBs-L (Guo et al., 2023). Employees may emotionally cope with this stressful situation through avoidance-oriented CWBs-L to avoid these energy-depleting social interactions with leaders or through approach-oriented CWBs-L to vent negative emotions by seeking revenge against leaders. Thus, by demonstrating the positive effect of ambivalent LMX relationships on CWBs, we provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between interpersonal relationships and CWBs.

Finally, previous studies have found that the effects of LMX ambivalence are not universal among employees (Kim et al., 2023; Lee, Thomas, Martin, & Guillaume, 2019a). Based on the transactional theory of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, 1987), we found that LMX importance influences an employee's primary appraisal process to evaluate whether LMX ambivalence is a stressor. By demonstrating the moderating effect of LMX importance, we respond to the call (Han & Sears, 2024) to explore the boundary conditions that buffer the adverse effects of LMX ambivalence on work outcomes. Moreover, previous research on LMX has primarily focused on the quality of LMX relationships (e.g., Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Radulovic et al., 2019), with less attention paid to employees' perceived value of LMX relationships (i.e., LMX importance; Lee, Thomas, Martin, & Guillaume, 2019a). By collectively considering LMX quality (i.e., LMX ambivalence) and employees' perceived value of LMX relationships (i.e., LMX importance), this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of social exchange dynamics in leader-employee dyads than considering LMX quality alone.

Practical implications

Our research has several important managerial implications. First, our findings suggest that when employees perceive their LMX relationships as *both* high and low quality, they are likely to experience lower levels of relational energy. One strategy for organizations to break the negative link between LMX ambivalence and relational energy is to manage employees' perceptions (Lee, Thomas, Martin, & Guillaume, 2019a). Promoting the notion that experiencing LMX ambivalence is common in the workplace may be comforting when employees actually experience it (Han & Sears, 2024). In addition, another strategy for organizations to mitigate the detrimental effects of LMX ambivalence is to encourage leaders' behavioral consistency through leadership training and development (Chen & Weng, 2023). Organizations could conduct regular one-on-one meetings for leaders and employees to improve communication (Kim et al., 2023) and ensure that a consistent LMX relationship is maintained between them.

Second, employees who experience decreased relational energy from their interactions with leaders are more likely to engage in CWBs-L. Therefore, leaders should engage in activities that increase employees' relational energy. Leaders can provide positive feedback and emotional support when employees encounter challenging situations (Owens et al., 2016; Zhu et al., 2023).

Furthermore, research has found that employees can obtain energy from different sources, such as leaders and colleagues (Baker, 2019). The energy derived from colleagues can, to some extent, compensate for the energy lost from leaders. Therefore, organizations should create a harmonious work environment where employees can interact regardless of their departments or positions, thus providing relational energy to each other.

Third, the present study shows that CWBs-L is an emotion-focused coping strategy for employees to regulate negative emotions. However, organizations need to help employees understand that although these behaviors may help them reduce negative emotions in the short term, they may also have long-term costs (Penney et al., 2011). In addition, organizations should emphasize employees' emotional well-being, provide more emotional support, and offer emotion management training to improve the ability to regulate emotions.

Finally, our findings suggest that leaders should recognize differences in employees' levels of LMX relationship importance. We found that employees with higher LMX importance are more likely to appraise LMX ambivalence as a stressor, thus experiencing less relational energy and exerting more CWBs-L. However, we do not discourage employees from assigning lower importance to their LMX relationships. This is because Lee, Thomas, Martin, Guillaume, and Marstand (2019b) have shown that when employees perceive their LMX relationships as important, high-quality LMX relationships lead them to feel more obligated to reciprocate favorable treatment and engage in more organizational citizenship behaviors. Therefore, not only should leaders invest efforts in cultivating high-quality LMX relationships with their employees and establishing the importance of these relationships to employees, but they should also recommend that employees seek other alternative sources of valued resources and reduce overreliance on leaders.

Limitations and direction for future research

First, although we attempted to mitigate the risk of CMV by collecting survey data at different time points (Podsakoff et al., 2003), the data for LMX ambivalence, relational energy, LMX importance, and CWBs-L were all self-reported and thus still susceptible to CMV. Therefore, future research is encouraged to use experimental or longitudinal designs to reduce the likelihood of CMV further. In addition, future research can use peer-reported or supervisor-rated CWBs, which have been suggested as appropriate alternatives to self-reported CWBs (Liu et al., 2010).

Second, we drew on the transactional theory of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, 1987) and examined the mediating role of relational energy in the relationship between LMX ambivalence and employees' CWBs-L. Future research can expand our knowledge of how LMX ambivalence affects employees' CWBs-L by adopting other possible theoretical perspectives and exploring other underlying mechanisms. For example, ego depletion theory suggests that the depletion of self-regulatory resources would dampen employees' ability to exercise self-control in subsequent activities (Baumeister et al., 1998). Employees' self-regulatory resources may be depleted when they regulate the negative emotions caused by LMX ambivalence (Kim et al., 2023; Lee, Thomas, Martin, & Guillaume, 2019a), thereby increasing their propensity to engage in CWBs-L. Thus, according to this perspective, relational ego depletion may be a potential mediator linking LMX ambivalence to employees' CWBs-L.

Third, it would be worthwhile for future studies to explore potential moderating factors that influence the relationship between LMX ambivalence and relational energy. For example,

employees with an anxious attachment style may be more sensitive to ambivalence (Melwani & Rothman, 2022) and consequently experience lower levels of relational energy. Conversely, employees with higher levels of dialectical thinking are better equipped to process inconsistent information about LMX quality, reducing their susceptibility to experiencing LMX ambivalence (Chen & Weng, 2023) and diminished relational energy.

Fourth, Chen et al. (2024) demonstrated that LMX ambivalence can lead to *both* helping and harming behaviors in these relationships. Further studies should explore whether positive behaviors (e.g., helping behavior) can serve as effective resource investment strategies to help employees experiencing LMX ambivalence rebuild high-quality LMX relationships and regain relational energy from leaders. Furthermore, according to displaced aggression theory (Dollard et al., 1939), direct confrontation against leaders (i.e., approach-oriented CWBs-L) is costly for employees. Thus, future research should examine whether LMX ambivalence can lead to covert deviant behaviors (e.g., negative gossip) towards leaders or "displaced" deviance towards coworkers.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

All authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

All procedures followed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the responsible committee on human experimentation (institutional and national) and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2000(5). Informed consent was obtained from all patients (employees) for being included in the study. No animal studies were carried out by the authors for this study.

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