Understanding Employee Response to Work-Related Use of Instant Messaging App After-Hours: A Stress and Coping Perspective

Research-in-Progress

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Abstract

As mobile instant message (IM) apps allow individuals to communicate with each other in a real-time, cost-effective and convenient way, their use is becoming increasingly common in the workplace. More and more managers or supervisors began to use IM apps as medium for assigning tasks to or receiving feedback and information from their staff, even during after-hours or non-work time. Using IM Apps to perform supplemental work during after-hours might blur work-home boundaries and make staffs experience pressure from family to spend time with them, leading to work-family conflict. Drawing upon transactional model of stress and coping theory, this study develops a research model to examine how individuals cope with work-family conflict due to supplemental work-related instant messages from the supervisor during after-hours. The research model theorizes that the technological characteristic of IM, permeability, promotes work-family conflict, which in turn triggers two coping strategies, i.e., moral disengagement and behavioral disengagement. Moral disengagement is theorized to lead to behavioral disengagement, which in turn increases job strain and decreases job engagement. We further theorizes that moral disengagement moderates the relationship between work-family conflict and behavioral disengagement. This study will empirically test the model with data collected from 250 employees of Taiwan's companies.

Keywords: Behavioral disengagement, instant message, iob engagement, job strain, moral disengagement, transactional model of stress and coping, work-family conflict

Introduction

With high adoption rates and advanced functionality of the smartphone, individuals are now able to communicate with others, use a wide variety of applications, and connect to the office at any time and from anywhere. Studies on effect of using IM at work have shown that IM usage leads to enhanced communication quality, enhanced interactivity, mutual trust among employees, increased individual and team-based productivity and satisfaction (Ou and Davison, 2011), improved job performance and satisfaction (Sheer and Rice, 2017), and enhanced perception of task success (Hung et al., 2007). However, other studies have found that IM usage leads to increased overall perceived workload (Gupta et al., 2013). Using IM apps to perform supplemental work during after-hours might blur work-home boundaries and make staffs experience pressure from family to spend time with them, leading to work-family conflict. Work-family conflict reflects an absence of balance between work and family roles. For most workers, the after-hours used to be mainly dedicated to family life, though nowadays after-hours are increasingly being claimed by work demands intruding into the family domain owing to IM use, resulting in higher work-family conflict. Ayyagari et al. (2011) argued that individuals' high degree of reachability because of the ICT use (i.e., high presenteeism) leads to work-home conflict, which is a source of strain. In response to work-family conflict, individuals are likely to adopt dysfunctional (maladaptive) approaches to disengage and deny the invasion of ICT.

Against this backdrop, we offer a new avenue for understanding employees' job strain due to work-family conflict induced by permeability of the IM app usage and its coping response. Within the technostress (stress experienced by users of ICT) literature, work-family conflict is viewed as a stressor due to ICT use (i.e., technostress creator) and it has been found to influence employees' psychological strains (Ayyagari et al., 2011), organizational commitment (Ahuja et al, 2007), and job performance (Tarafdar et al., 2015). Stress that individuals experience as a result of their use of IM apps is a kind of technostress. In the present study, we extend the technostress concept to the domain of IM app usage and explore the mechanism underlying the relationship between IM app usage and strain.

Using Transactional Model of Stress and Coping Theory (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) as a foundation, we will develop and empirically test a model of behavioral disengagement from supplemental work which predicts that employees engage in cognitive disengagement coping (cognitive re-construing or re-framing of unethical behavior) in response to managers or supervisors' task assignment using IM apps after office hours. We explicate this cognitive disengagement coping in the form of cognitive rationalization processes drawn from moral disengagement theory (Bandura, 1986, 1991). In this manner of coping, employees respond to work-family conflict by disengaging their internal self-sanctions related to workplace ethics, which in turn increases their intention to not responding IM messages from their managers or supervisors to avoid engaging in supplemental work. Consistent with the technostress literature, we also posit that permeability due to IM apps increases work-family conflict.

While there is evidence that bad stressors are positively associated with maladaptive coping, to date, we have a limited understanding of possible boundary conditions of this relationship. In this paper, we posit that moral disengagement plays a moderating role in the relationship between work-family conflict and behavioral disengagement. In addition, prior research indicates that maladaptive coping is negatively associated with individuals' well-being at work, including job satisfaction, job engagement, and job stress. Accordingly, we theorize that behavioral disengagement decreases job engagement and increases job strain.

This study sets out to answer the following research question: Does moral disengagement moderate the relationship between work-family conflict and behavioral disengagement? The research aims were thus to:

(1) Determine whether significant relationships exist among the research constructs (that is, permeability, work-family conflict, moral disengagement, behavioral disengagement, job strain and job engagement).
(2) determine whether moral disengagement acts as a moderator and mediator in the relationship

between work-family conflict and behavioral disengagement. Does proactive personality have a positive effect on IT/IS professionals' work engagement?

Literature Review

Technostress

In the early 1980s, Craig Brod, a psychotherapist and consultant on integrating new technologies into the workplace, was one of the first to define technostress (Ennis, 2005). It refers to "modern disease of adaptation caused by an inability to cope with new computer technologies in a healthy manner" (Brod 1984). Ragu-Nathan et al. (2008) defined it as the stress experienced by individuals due to the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs). In the context of organization, technostress is described as the phenomenon of 'stress caused by an inability to cope with the demands of organizational computer usage' (Tarafdar et al., p. 304). This research stream focuses on technostress experienced by end users in organizations. This focuses on factors that create technostress in the organization, and has received considerable attention in the information systems discipline in recent years (Ayyagari et al., 2011; Ragu-Nathan et al., 2008; Tarafdar et al., 2011; Tarafdar et al., 2015). In this research stream, researchers have identified factors that create stress from the use of ICTs. For example, Tarafdar et al. (2007) identified five technostress creators or stressors: techno-overload, techno-invasion, techno-complexity, techno-insecurity and techno-uncertainty. Studies have found that these technostress creators are likely to affect job strain, satisfaction, and performance (e.g., Ragu-Nathan et al., 2008; Tarafdar et al., 2011; Tarafdar et al., 2015). Ayyagari et al. (2011) indicated that presenteeism (permeability) has a strong effect on work-family conflict, work overload, and role ambiguity. Work-family conflict is analogous to techno-invasion, but permeability is not directly associated with techno-overload, techno-complexity, techno-insecurity and techno-uncertainty, so we did not include them into the research model.

Transactional Model of Stress and Coping

The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) is a framework for evaluating the processes of coping with stressful events. By transactional, it means that stress is a product of the interaction or transaction between the *person* and the *environment*. Stressful experiences are construed as person-environment transactions, in which the impact of an external stressor is mediated by a person's appraisal of the stressor, and the psychological, social, and cultural resources at his or her disposal (Lazarus and Cohen, 1977). The particular demands that cause people to experience stress are called stressors. Psychological stress is "a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being" (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984, p. 19). This relationship goes through two important phases that are (1) cognitive appraisals and (2) coping.

Coping is defined as the *person's "constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the person's resources"* (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984, p.141). There are many ways to categorize coping strategies. One of the most commonly used categories is *problem-focused versus emotion-focused coping* (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). An example of emotion-focused coping is escape-avoidance strategies that comprise wishful thinking and behavioral efforts to escape or avoid the problem at hand, therefore cognitive disengagement coping is analogous to emotion-focused coping.

Moral Disengagement

Moral disengagement is an individual difference in the way people cognitively process decisions and behavior so as to behave unethically without feeling distress (Bandura 1990, 1999, 2002). These moral standards regulate behavior through evaluative self-reactions: People feel good when their actions match their moral standards, and they feel bad when their actions violate these standards. These evaluative self-reactions regulate conduct anticipatorily: People are more likely to perform acts that will confer self-worth and satisfaction and avoid acts that will evoke self-condemnation (Bandura,

1991, 2002). Bandura proposed that moral disengagement occurs through a set of eight interrelated cognitive mechanisms that facilitate unethical behavior: moral justification, euphemistic labeling, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, distortion of consequences, dehumanization, and attribution of blame. The first category, reconstruing the conduct, consists of three mechanisms: moral justification, euphemistic labeling, and advantageous comparison. Reconstruing the conduct involve cognitive misconstrual of reprehensible behavior in a way that increases its moral acceptability (Bandura, 1986). In other words, it serves to cognitively restructure unethical acts so that they appear less harmful. The second category, obscuring or distorting consequences, consists of three moral disengagement mechanisms: displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, and distortion of consequences. This category of mechanisms occur when an individual obscures or distorts the effects of harmful actions (Bandura, 1986). The third category, devaluing the target, consists of two moral disengagement mechanisms: dehumanization and attribution of blame. These two mechanisms can disengage moral sanctions by reducing identification with the targets of harmful acts (Detert et al., 2008).

Research Model and Hypotheses

Drawing upon transactional model of stress and coping (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984), and moral disengagement theory *Bandura (1990, 1999)*, we propose a model to study and explain the influence of work-family conflict on individuals' behavioral disengagement, job strain and job engagement. Job strain refers to the situation where one experiences high job demands combined with low control or decision latitude at work (Karasek, 1979), while job engagement refers to a positive, fulfilling, affective motivational state of work-related well-being (Bakker et al., 2008). According to work/family border theory (Clark, 2000), the extent of integration or segmentation in the role domains is indicated primarily by two characteristics: permeability and flexibility. Permeability refers to the extent to which a boundary allows psychological or behavioral aspects of one domain to enter another. Leung and Zhang (2017) indicated that high permeability of work/family borders increased work-family conflict in the context of telecommuting and ICT use at home. Ayyagari et al. (2011) viewed presenteeism, the degree to which the technology enables users to be reachable, as a technology characteristic and found it has a strong effect on work-family conflict. The concept of permeability is analogous to presenteeism, and permeability is easier to understand. Accordingly, we viewed permeability as a technology characteristic and modeled it as the antecedent of work-family conflict. The research model theorizes that work-family conflict leads to behavioral disengagement directly and indirectly through moral disengagement, which in turn increases to job strain and decreases job engagement. In addition, the research model theorizes that moral disengagement moderates the relationship between work-family conflict and behavioral disengagement.

H1: Individual behavioral disengagement is positively related to job strain.
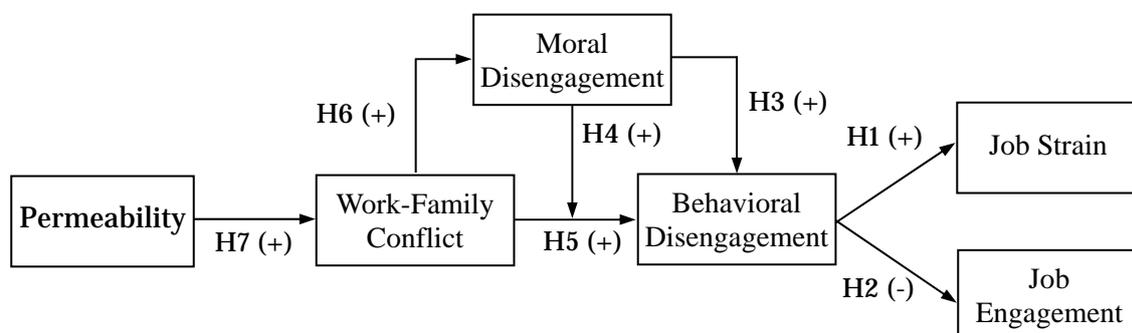

Figure 1.   Research Model

Behavioral disengagement means giving up, or withdrawing from coping with a stressor. In this study, behavioral disengagement refers to a subordinate giving up or withdrawing effort from responding to his or her managers or supervisors' instant message calls. Behavioral disengagement has been viewed

as a "maladaptive" or negative coping strategy. Use of behavioral disengagement coping mechanism is likely to be linked to negative health outcomes such as anxiety and depression (Li et al., 2014). Maladaptive coping is dysfunctional and can create a snowball effect that may results in greater work exhaustion (Gaudioso et al., 2017). Behavioral disengagement is dysfunctional (maladaptive) for workers because it allows them to only temporarily withdraw from the stressors (Jex et al., 2001). In the long run, workers' use of behavioral disengagement may lead to their job strain (Davies and Clark, 1998). Burker et al. (2005) found that behavioral disengagement was associated with increased levels of depression.

H2: Individual behavioral disengagement is negatively related to job engagement.

In this study, moral disengagement is defined as a set of cognitive mechanisms that deactivate moral self-regulatory processes and thereby help explain why individuals often make unethical decisions without apparent guilt or self-censure (Bandura, 1986). According to moral disengagement theory, an important driver of unethical behavior is an individual's propensity to morally disengage. According to Deter et al. (2008), moral disengagement increases unethical behavior (i.e., not responding to instant messages from their supervisors during after-hours) because morally disengaged reasoning (i.e., it is important to maintain work-life balance) disconnects a contemplated act from the guilt or self-censure that would otherwise prevent it.

H3: Moral disengagement is positively related to behavioral disengagement.

According to moral disengagement theory *(Bandura 1990, 1999)*, individuals who have high levels of moral disengagement may be less likely to act upon their moral emotions (e.g., guilt and self-sanctions) than those with low levels of moral disengagement. Individuals who evaluate work-family conflict as a threat and have high levels of moral disengagement may deactivate self-regulated mechanisms and disengage moral self-sanctions from unethical behaviors, and thus they are more likely to adopt the maladaptive coping (e.g., behavioral disengagement) to withdraw efforts or avoid to deal with the stressful event.

H4: Moral disengagement moderates the relationship between work-family conflict and behavioral disengagement

Work-family conflict is frequently defined as "a form of interrole conflict" in which the behavioral requirements associated with the role performed in the work and family domains are mutually incompatible (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). In this study, we focus on the situation that work roles and responsibilities interfere with family role, which is called work interference into family. In the context of the present study, work-family conflict refers work demands IT employee received when using IM app during after-hours interfere with their family life. According to transactional model of stress and coping (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984), when individuals experience stressors (e.g., work-family conflict), they will adopt coping strategies to eliminate, modify, or manage the stressful event. When individuals experience work-family conflict, they will evaluate the situation as a threat, and then they will develop a negative stress response because they expect the stressor having the potential to harm personal growth, mastery, or gain. Because the growth, mastery, and gain are perceived as impossible results, individuals will adopt the maladaptive coping to withdraw efforts or avoid to deal with the stressful event (LePine et al., 2005). Aazami et al. (2015) indicated that individuals may perceive work-family conflict as not controllable, therefore they will adopt maladaptive coping strategies such as avoiding to manage the stressful event.

H5: Individual perception of work-family conflict is positively related to behavioral disengagement.

Moral disengagement has three broad categories. D'Arcy et al. (2014) provided support to the notion that stressors trigger moral disengagement. The first category moral disengagement is cognitive reconstrual of the conduct itself and includes moral justification, use of euphemistic language, and palliative comparison as specific mechanisms. Due to the rising concerns about work-family balance, individuals might have doubts about the worth of striving very hard at work at the cost of family life. Due to the negative impacts of work-family conflict, individuals might have doubts on the worth of striving very hard at work at the cost of family life. The doubts might lead employees to view

behavioral disengagement (not responding to the supervisors' IM calls during after-hours) as falling within the "gray areas" of workplace ethics or not against the workplace norms.

H6: Individual perception of work-family conflict is positively related to moral disengagement.

In the context of the present study, we define permeability as the degree to which instant messaging (IM) Apps enable individuals to be reachable. Clark (2000) argued that work and family life constitutes different domains, each with its own border that influences each other. Work/family border theory (Clark, 2000) states that when boundaries are more permeable, there are more interruptions across domains, which then increases the likelihood that work-related issues will spill over to the private domain (e.g., family life). According to the work/family border theory, increased border permeability makes it easier for people to carry over their emotions and behaviors from one domain to another (Clark, 2000).

H7: Individual perception of IM App permeability is positively related to perceived work-family conflict.

Research Methodology

Measurement items will be adapted from the literature wherever possible. A small-scale pretest of the questionnaire will be conducted using 20 part-time graduate students specializing in information systems to fine-tune the questionnaire.

The population selected for this study is the individuals with experience of receiving work demands from their supervisors during through LINE messages during after-hours. The research model will be tested with data collected from 250 employees of Taiwan's companies. The survey will be conducted through online survey in order to speed the process and minimize some workload.

Data analysis will utilize a two-step approach. The first step involves the analysis of the measurement model, while the second step tests the structural relationships among latent constructs. LISREL will be used to assess both the measurement model and the structural model. (Chin, et al., 2003)

The adequacy of the measurement model will be evaluated with reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Two approaches will be used to estimate common method bias: Harman's one-factor test and the marker variable technique. The degree of multicollinearity will be assessed by using variance inflation factors (VIF). In structural model analysis, examining structural paths and the R-square scores of endogenous variables assesses the explanatory power of a structural model. (Chin, 1998).

Expected Contribution

This research is expected to make three key contributions. First, drawing upon the transactional model of stress and coping theory, this study develops a research model to examine how individuals cope with work-family conflict due to supplemental work-related instant messages from the supervisor during after-hours. Second, the research model theorizes that the technological characteristic of IM, permeability, promotes work-family conflict, which in turn triggers two coping strategies, i.e., moral disengagement and behavioral disengagement. Third, Moral disengagement is theorized to lead to behavioral disengagement, which in turn increases job strain and decreases job engagement. We further theorizes that moral disengagement moderates the relationship between work-family conflict and behavioral disengagement.

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