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How and When Guanxi Victims Ostracize Beneficiaries in Response to Leaders' Guanxi HRM Practices

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ABSTRACT

Leaders' guanxi human resource management (HRM) practices are prevalent in East Asian organizational contexts shaped by Confucian culture. In such settings, leaders often allocate limited resources to beneficiaries with whom they share guanxi, at the expense of victims who lose access to those resources. While prior research has primarily focused on the self-directed consequences of leaders' guanxi HRM practices for victims, much less attention has been paid to the other-directed behavioral responses—particularly from the perspective of interactions between guanxi victims and beneficiaries. Drawing from theories of social comparison and dual-system self-control, this paper develops a theoretical model to elucidate how and when leaders' guanxi HRM practices lead victims to ostracize beneficiaries. Across three studies conducted with Chinese samples, we found that leaders' guanxi HRM practices elicit both contempt (via downward comparison) and envy (via upward comparison) toward beneficiaries among victims, which in turn lead to ostracism of beneficiaries. Moreover, victims' orientation toward superficial harmony was found to weaken the relationship between contempt and ostracism, although its moderating effect on envy-ostracism was not significant. The stronger the victim's tendency toward superficial harmony, the weaker the indirect effect of leaders' guanxi HRM practices on their ostracism toward beneficiaries via contempt. This paper advances the literature on guanxi HRM practices by shifting the focus from intra-individual to interpersonal consequences and provides practical insights for managers to optimize guanxi-based human resource decisions.

1 | Introduction

Guanxi is defined as an informal personal connection characterized by an implicit psychological contract adhering to social norms like mutual commitment and reciprocal obligations (Chen and Chen 2004). In East Asian societies shaped by Confucian culture, guanxi is widely recognized as a hidden rule for allocating social resources (Chen et al. 2013). Scholars refer to this pattern of allocating resources based on interpersonal connections as guanxi practice (Chen et al. 2004). In organizational settings, leaders' guanxi HRM practices involve making human resource decisions—such as performance

appraisals, promotions, bonuses, and task allocations—based on supervisor-subordinate guanxi rather than formal criteria (Chen et al. 2004). Because such decisions are made by line managers, they reflect the manager-driven implementation emphasized in the strategic HRM process perspective and contribute to variation in HRM practices and effects across units within the same organization (Kehoe and Han 2020). Rooted in the Confucian principle of renqing, leaders often feel affective obligations to favor close subordinates and may face moral criticism if they do not (Mao et al. 2012). As competition intensifies, employees strategically cultivate guanxi with leaders to secure advantages, making guanxi HRM

Summary

- Leaders' guanxi HRM practices prompt victims to engage in moral (downward) and resource-based (upward) comparisons with beneficiaries, eliciting contempt and envy.
- Contempt and envy mediate the relationship between leaders' guanxi HRM practices and victims' ostracism of beneficiaries.
- Victims' superficial harmony orientation weakens the indirect effect of leaders' guanxi HRM practices on ostracism via contempt, but not via envy.

practices pervasive in organizations in East Asian contexts (Zhang et al. 2016).

Research on guanxi HRM practices has primarily examined victims' self-directed outcomes in the leader-victim dyad. Empirical studies show that victims of guanxi-based favoritism experience lower work engagement (Yang et al. 2018), diminished performance (Yang 2014; Yang and Yang 2020; Yang et al. 2021), reduced innovation (Ren et al. 2024), heightened psychological withdrawal (Yang et al. 2025), and compromised well-being (Liu and Jia 2021). This literature implicitly assumes that victims primarily internalize disadvantage by adjusting their own attitudes and behaviors. Yet guanxi HRM practices unfold in a multi-party social environment involving leaders, beneficiaries, victims, and observers (Chen et al. 2024), where beneficiaries and victims—co-workers at the same hierarchical level—must continue interacting after guanxi-based decisions have been made.

Although guanxi HRM practices clearly shape relationships among these parties, prior research has focused on victims' internalized reactions. Far less is known about how victims respond interpersonally, particularly toward beneficiaries who gain undeserved advantages. This gap constrains theoretical understanding of the broader social consequences of guanxi HRM practices and the relational strains it can generate within workgroups.

Understanding this gap is theoretically important. Guanxi HRM practices place victims in a psychologically complex comparison environment. When leaders allocate resources based on guanxi, victims often view themselves as having adhered to fairness norms while beneficiaries appear to violate them, prompting downward moral comparisons (Miranda and Welbourne 2023). At the same time, victims observe beneficiaries receiving more valuable resources, prompting upward resource comparisons (Pan et al. 2021). This dual comparison structure—moral superiority combined with material disadvantage—has not been theorized in prior research on guanxi HRM practices, yet it has direct implications for workplace relationships, team functioning, and the emergent interpersonal dynamics that can disrupt coordination and cohesion within workgroups.

To explicate these dynamics, we draw on social comparison theory (Buunk and Gibbons 2007; Festinger 1954) to propose that guanxi HRM practices elicit two distinct comparison-based emotions in victims: contempt, arising from downward moral comparisons, and envy, arising from upward resource comparisons. Both emotions are inherently other-directed and have clear implications for interpersonal behavior. Specifically, we focus on ostracism, defined as ignoring, excluding, or rejecting others (Ferris et al. 2008; Henle et al. 2023), as the interpersonal behavioral outcome. To clarify when these emotions translate into ostracism, we incorporate the dual-system self-control model (Hofmann et al. 2009; Strack and Deutsch 2004). In Confucian-influenced contexts, superficial harmony (Leung et al. 2011) functions as a culturally grounded regulatory orientation that may suppress or redirect negative impulses. Thus, victims' superficial harmony should shape the extent to which contempt and envy lead to ostracism. In summary, this paper develops and tests a theoretical model (see Figure 1) explaining how and when leaders' guanxi HRM practices lead victims to ostracize beneficiaries. We evaluate the model with evidence from a two-wave field study and two scenario-based experiments.

Our framework yields several contributions. Theoretically, we first shift the literature on guanxi HRM practices from its longstanding emphasis on victims' self-directed outcomes to the interpersonal dynamics between victims and

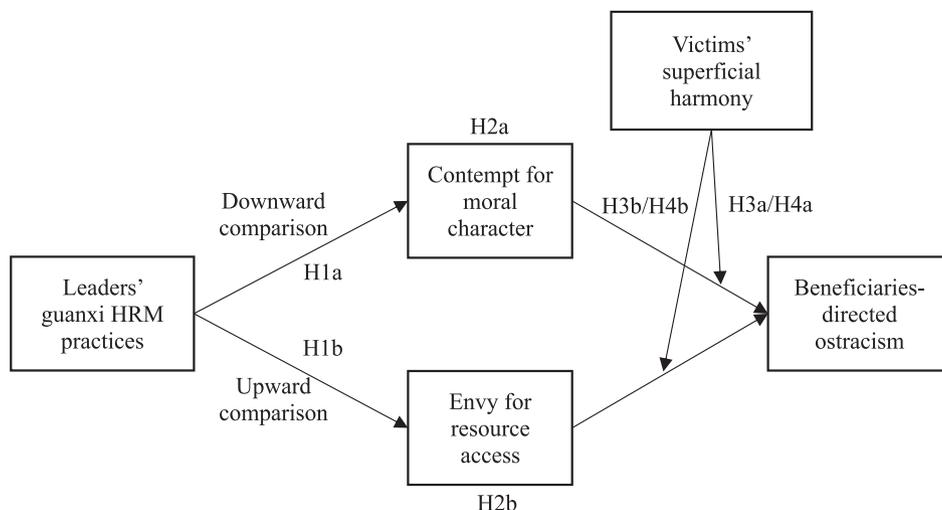


FIGURE 1 | Conceptual model.

beneficiaries, highlighting that guanxi HRM practices can create relational fallout that persists beyond leader-employee interactions. Second, by positioning social comparison theory as the overarching lens, we identify contempt and envy as distinct comparison-based emotional mechanisms that explain how guanxi HRM practices translate into victims' interpersonal responses—advancing theorization on the emotional consequences of HRM implementation. Third, by integrating the dual-system self-control model and examining superficial harmony as a culturally rooted boundary condition, we specify when comparison-based emotions are most likely to be enacted behaviorally, thereby enriching understanding of how cultural regulatory tendencies shape HRM effects. Collectively, these contributions broaden insight into the social consequences of manager-driven HRM implementation within Confucian cultural contexts. Practically, our framework helps Eastern managers better anticipate the potential negative consequences of guanxi HRM practices and the interpersonal harm they may impose on employees, emphasizing the need to enhance the standardization and transparency of line managers' HRM execution, provide targeted HR and ethical training, and establish mechanisms to monitor guanxi networks.

2 | Theory and Hypotheses

2.1 | Victims' Emotional Responses to Leaders' Guanxi HRM Practices

Leaders' guanxi HRM practices are characterized by allocating resources based on interpersonal guanxi, whereby leaders tend to favor employees with whom they share close guanxi (Chen et al. 2004). Leaders often feel compelled—due to emotional attachment and perceived obligations—to prioritize those with whom they have close guanxi (Chen et al. 2013). Given the inherent scarcity of organizational resources, this practice creates a zero-sum context in which beneficiaries receive a disproportionate share of resources, often at the expense of victims who lack such guanxi (Chen et al. 2011). This unequal distribution triggers social comparisons among victims. According to social comparison theory, individuals engage in comparisons with others to obtain more accurate self-evaluations (Festinger 1954). The comparison process typically begins with the acquisition of relevant comparison information that highlights disparities (Watkins 2021). These comparisons vary in direction: downward comparisons involve targets perceived as inferior, while upward comparisons involve targets perceived as superior (Buunk and Gibbons 2007). Notably, individuals may simultaneously engage in both downward and upward comparisons with the same target (Li et al. 2022), depending on the dimensions being evaluated. Leaders' guanxi HRM practices expose victims to both downward and upward comparison information, which elicit two distinct emotional responses: contempt and envy, respectively.

2.1.1 | Contempt Toward Beneficiaries

We propose that leaders' guanxi HRM practices provide victims with moral comparison information, leading them to perceive themselves as morally superior to beneficiaries. Specifically, the

unethical nature of leaders' guanxi HRM practices undermines victims' perceptions of beneficiaries' moral character. In contrast, victims, who follow formal procedures rather than relying on personal guanxi, adhere to principles of fair competition and uphold moral standards in resource allocation. This contrast makes victims more prone to engage in downward moral comparisons with beneficiaries, viewing beneficiaries as morally inferior. Such comparisons often evoke other-directed moral emotions, particularly contempt (Greenbaum et al. 2020), which is closely associated with downward comparisons. Contempt is an other-directed derogatory emotion triggered when others are perceived to violate one's internalized moral standards (Fischer and Giner-Sorolla 2016), and is often rooted in downward social comparisons (Matta and Van Dyne 2020).

Early research in evolutionary psychology conceptualized contempt as a relatively calm, moderate emotion that supports survival, enhances self-esteem, and facilitates self-protection, often arising as a post-event defensive reaction to one's own failure or unfulfilled desires (Izard 1977; Keltner et al. 2006). However, recent research has distinguished this defensive form from moral contempt, which serves a moral function by enabling individuals to condemn norm-violating behaviors (Greenbaum et al. 2020). Importantly, moral contempt arises not merely from individuals experiencing disadvantage but from attributing that disadvantage to others' illegitimate gains—a feature closely aligned with guanxi-based favoritism. Crucially, this process is independent of beneficiaries' capability or performance; once resource allocation is based on guanxi rather than merit, victims perceive a moral violation and thus experience moral contempt. Consistent with this view, prior research has shown that employees are more likely to feel contempt toward colleagues when they perceive their own moral characters as superior (Miranda and Welbourne 2023; Quade et al. 2019). Therefore, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1a. *Leaders' guanxi HRM practices are positively related to victims' contempt toward beneficiaries.*

2.1.2 | Envy Toward Beneficiaries

At the same time, leaders' guanxi HRM practices provide victims with resource comparison information, leading them to perceive themselves as disadvantaged in terms of resource access. This disparity makes victims more likely to engage in upward resource comparisons with beneficiaries, viewing beneficiaries as enjoying resource advantages. Under such circumstances, victims may develop other-directed negative emotions, particularly envy, which is typically associated with upward comparisons. Envy is a complex emotion characterized by feelings of inferiority and hostility, arising when individuals perceive others as possessing advantages they lack (Tai et al. 2012). Prior research has identified unfair resource distribution as a key antecedent of envy (Tai et al. 2012). For example, employees in low-quality leader-member exchange relationships often report envy toward those with high-quality exchanges (Matta and Van Dyne 2020; Pan et al. 2021). Leaders' guanxi HRM practices intensify victims' perceptions that beneficiaries have obtained excessive resources, thereby prompting upward resource comparisons with beneficiaries focused on resource

disparities. Moreover, when such advantages are perceived as resulting from favoritism rather than merit, they are regarded as illegitimate, further increasing the likelihood of victims' envy. Therefore, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1b. *Leaders' guanxi HRM practices are positively related to victims' envy toward beneficiaries.*

2.2 | From Victims' Contempt and Envy to Ostracism

Drawing from social comparison theory, individuals often engage in behavioral responses to mitigate the negative emotions triggered by social comparisons (Breidenthal et al. 2020; Peng et al. 2024). Both contempt and envy are emotions rooted in social comparisons that can motivate distancing behaviors toward comparison targets, yet the underlying mechanisms differ. Contempt contains elements of social exclusion (Greenbaum et al. 2020), motivating the expresser to avoid and reject others to preserve psychological distance (Fischer and Giner-Sorolla 2016). One common behavior that guanxi victims may adopt is seeking to distance themselves from beneficiaries; however, simply increasing physical distance often proves insufficient. Instead, ostracism serves as a method to create psychological distance, manifested through behaviors such as sarcasm, avoidance, and suppression to ignore and exclude colleagues (Ferris et al. 2008), which may become the preferred mode of interaction for victims. On the one hand, as a negative emotional response, contempt can deplete the psychological resources of victims, driving them to enact ostracism toward beneficiaries as a means to vent their inner negativity. On the other hand, contempt can induce a sense of moral superiority in victims, making them reluctant to associate themselves with beneficiaries, ultimately resulting in ostracism toward beneficiaries. Based on this, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2a. *Leaders' guanxi HRM practices lead to victims' ostracism toward beneficiaries through victims' contempt.*

Envy, characterized by both pain and hostility, motivates individuals to take measures to narrow the gap with the comparison target—often through behaviors that undermine the target's resources (Tai et al. 2012). Ostracism serves as an effective strategy for achieving this goal by aiming to ignore, exclude, and suppress others to diminish their perceived advantages (Ferris et al. 2008). Empirical research has shown that when employees feel envious of colleagues' creativity (Breidenthal et al. 2020), status (Reh et al. 2017), and positive work events (Watkins 2021), they are more inclined to engage in exclusionary and destructive behaviors. The primary motivations for victims to ostracize beneficiaries can be outlined as follows. First, victims may use ostracism to diminish the competitive advantage of beneficiaries as a compensatory mechanism for lowered self-esteem and negative self-evaluations stemming from social comparison, ultimately facilitating emotional relief (Cheng et al. 2024). Second, victims may aim to highlight the illegitimacy of the beneficiaries' resource acquisition through ostracism, thereby undermining their status and preemptively neutralizing potential threats to themselves. Based on this, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2b. *Leaders' guanxi HRM practices lead to victims' ostracism toward beneficiaries through victims' envy.*

2.3 | Moderating Role of Victims' Superficial Harmony

Based on social comparison theory, we propose that victims' contempt and envy toward beneficiaries ultimately drive ostracism. However, not all victims respond to these emotions in the same way. Because ostracism reflects acting on immediate emotional impulses rather than prioritizing long-term relational goals, it can be regarded as a self-control failure. The dual-system model of self-control (Hofmann et al. 2009; Strack and Deutsch 2004) offers a useful framework for explaining this process. The model posits that behavior results from the interplay between two systems: a hot impulsive system, which produces fast, automatic emotional responses, and a cool reflective system, which supports slower, deliberate cognitive monitoring and restraint. When victims experience emotions such as contempt and envy, the impulsive system may trigger immediate urges to react negatively (e.g., through ostracism). However, the reflective system can override these impulses. Traditional Confucian cultural values shape individuals' cognitive processing and behavioral regulation (Pan and Sun 2018), thereby enhancing the activation of the reflective system. One such cultural value is superficial harmony, which emphasizes maintaining interpersonal harmony through a passive and instrumental approach that prioritizes avoiding overt conflict rather than seeking genuine resolution (Leung et al. 2011, 2002). Thus, we propose that victims' superficial harmony moderates the effects of their contempt and envy on ostracism.

Specifically, in the context of leaders' guanxi HRM practices, superficial harmony may not reduce victims' contempt and envy, but it significantly influences how these emotions are regulated and behaviorally expressed (Mischel and Ayduk 2002). Victims with high superficial harmony tend to avoid direct confrontation, as they view such behavior as detrimental to relational harmony and likely to incur negative outcomes (Zhang and Wei 2017). Although ostracism is relatively subtle (Robinson et al. 2013), it may still disrupt perceived harmony (Liu et al. 2018). According to the dual-system model, high superficial harmony facilitates the operation of the reflective system by adopting cognitive monitoring and reappraisal tactics, which helps victims override automatic reactions triggered by the impulsive system. Therefore, victims are more inclined to exert self-control by inhibiting behavioral expressions of contempt and envy, leading to lower levels of ostracism.

In contrast, victims with low superficial harmony orientation are less likely to suppress their true feelings and less concerned with maintaining external harmony. When experiencing contempt and envy, they may perceive ostracism as a justified or even necessary response to unfairness. Without strong internal restraints supported by the reflective system, they are more prone to act on their emotional impulses. In this context, they are more likely to engage in ostracism to distance themselves from beneficiaries and undermine their position. Accordingly, the emotional impact of contempt and envy on ostracism is more

pronounced among victims with low superficial harmony. Based on this, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3. *Victims' superficial harmony orientation moderates the relationship between their (a) contempt and (b) envy and their ostracism toward beneficiaries. Specifically, these relationships will be weaker among victims with high superficial harmony compared to those with low superficial harmony.*

Based on theories of social comparison and dual-system self-control, Hypotheses 2a and 2b posit that leaders' guanxi HRM practices indirectly influence victims' ostracism toward beneficiaries through the mediating roles of contempt and envy. Hypothesis 3 further suggest that the translation of contempt and envy into ostracism is contingent on victims' levels of superficial harmony. Integrating these arguments, we propose a moderated mediation model in which superficial harmony weakens the overall indirect effect of leaders' guanxi HRM practices on ostracism. When the victims exhibit a strong superficial harmony orientation, the indirect effect of leaders' guanxi HRM practices on victims' ostracism toward beneficiaries—mediated by victims' contempt and envy—will be weakened. Conversely, a weak superficial harmony orientation will significantly increase the likelihood of leaders' guanxi HRM practices leading to victims ostracizing beneficiaries. Based on this, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4. *Victims' superficial harmony orientation moderates the indirect effects of leaders' guanxi HRM practices on victims' ostracism toward beneficiaries through their (a) contempt and (b) envy. Specifically, this indirect effect will be weaker among victims with high superficial harmony compared to those with low superficial harmony.*

3 | Overview of Studies

We used a combination of a field survey and two scenario-based experiments with Chinese samples to test the proposed model. These methods are well-established in guanxi research (Chen et al. 2004; Chen and Ren 2023). Study 1 used a field survey to evaluate the full moderated mediation model in a real organizational context. To enhance causal inferences, we conducted two scenario-based experiments using a friendship-based guanxi and bonus allocation scenario (Study 2) and a kinship-based guanxi and job promotion scenario (Study 3).

4 | Study 1

4.1 | Sample and Procedures

Participants were employees from over 40 manufacturing enterprises in Jiangxi Province, China, spanning industries such as metal smelting, green building materials, furniture, and smart manufacturing. This sector was chosen because guanxi HRM practices are especially prevalent in private enterprises, making it highly relevant to our research. Given the sensitive nature of guanxi, we assured participants of strict confidentiality and voluntary participation throughout the data collection process. Guanxi HRM practices are usually confined to specific

individuals within a single organization; broader sampling across multiple organizations is necessary to ensure sample diversity and external validity. To address this challenge, we collected field data from over 40 enterprises with the support of local government and company leadership. All variables were measured through employee self-reports, with questionnaires matched via the last four digits of participants' mobile numbers. To mitigate common method bias (Podsakoff et al. 2003), we implemented several procedural remedies: (1) ensured the anonymity of responses, (2) informed participants that there were no right or wrong answers, and (3) randomized the order of items to reduce potential sequence effects.

To further reduce common method bias, data were collected in two waves with a one-month interval. A third wave was not conducted to minimize memory decay that might undermine the consistency and accuracy of beneficiary matching across waves. At Time 1, participants reported whether, in recent months, colleagues had received valuable opportunities (e.g., promotions, bonuses, important assignments) that might have belonged to them, due to close guanxi with leaders (e.g., relatives or friends). A “yes” response identified them as guanxi victims. These participants then completed measures on social comparison orientation, superficial harmony, perceived leaders' guanxi HRM practices, positive and negative affect, and demographic variables, yielding 569 valid responses. At Time 2, participants recalled the guanxi beneficiaries by providing nicknames or initials and completed measures of contempt, envy, and ostracism towards the beneficiaries over the past month, resulting in 458 responses. After matching data from T1 and T2 and removing invalid responses, 287 valid responses remained (effective response rate: 50.44%). Among the valid sample, 41.8% were male and 32.1% held a bachelor's degree. The average age was 36.12years (SD=9.63), and the average tenure was 5.12years (SD= 5.06).

4.2 | Measures

All measurement items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Same-point Likert scales with different scaling were used for leaders' guanxi HRM practices, positive affect, and negative affect. The English scales underwent translation and back-translation following Brislin's (1980) procedures to guarantee cross-cultural measurement equivalence.

4.2.1 | Leaders' Guanxi HRM Practices

To assess leaders' guanxi HRM practices, we adapted the three-item scale developed by Chen et al. (2011), with modifications to align with the current research context. The items included: “Under the conditions of similar qualifications, your supervisor assigns important and easy tasks to your colleagues rather than to you, due to their guanxi (e.g., kinship or friendship) with the supervisor”; “Under the conditions of similar qualifications, your supervisor is more likely to promote your colleagues first due to their guanxi (e.g., kinship or friendship) with the supervisor”; and “Under the conditions of similar qualifications, your supervisor allocates more bonuses

to your colleagues due to their guanxi (e.g., kinship or friendship) with the supervisor” (1 = very rarely; 5 = very frequently) ($\alpha = 0.89$).

4.2.2 | Superficial Harmony

To assess superficial harmony, we utilized the eight-item scale from Leung et al. (2011). The sample items included: “You should not disturb your harmonious relationships with others, in order that embarrassment is avoided in future encounters,” and “In order to maintain harmony, people might have to give up principles of justice in handling matters” ($\alpha = 0.90$).

4.2.3 | Contempt

To assess contempt, we adapted the three-item scale from Li et al. (2022), emphasizing moral character as the target of comparison. The items included: “You feel contemptuous of this colleague because you perceive his/her as less moral and principled than you,” “You feel disdainful of this colleague because you perceive his/her as less moral and principled than you,” and “You feel scornful of this colleague because you perceive his/her as less moral and principled than you” ($\alpha = 0.83$).

4.2.4 | Envy

To assess envy, we adapted the four-item scale developed by Moran and Schweitzer (2008), emphasizing resource access as the target of comparison. The items included: “You feel that this colleague, who is equally qualified, has gained many advantages over you in resource allocation,” “Thinking about the fact that this colleague has received more resources than you despite equal qualifications makes you feel resentful and frustrated,” “You wish to obtain the greater outcomes and resources that this colleague, who is equally qualified as you, has received,” and “You feel envious of this colleague, who enjoys more resources than you despite having similar qualifications” ($\alpha = 0.89$).

4.2.5 | Ostracism

To assess ostracism, we adapted the ten-item scale developed by Ferris et al. (2008), modifying it to reflect the perspective of the ostracizer rather than the target. The sample items included: “You intentionally did not respond to this colleague’s greeting during the past month”, and “You avoided interacting with this colleague at work during the past month” ($\alpha = 0.95$).

4.2.6 | Control Variables

In addition to demographic variables, we controlled for social comparison orientation, positive affect, and negative affect. Social comparison orientation was measured using an eleven-item scale developed by Gibbons and Buunk (1999), which captures individuals’ tendency to compare themselves with others (Tse et al. 2013). A sample item was “You always pay a lot of attention to how you do things compared with how your

coworkers do things” ($\alpha = 0.92$). Given that contempt and envy are discrete emotions, we also controlled for general affective states following prior research (Tang et al. 2020). Positive and negative affect were measured using the twenty-item PANAS (Watson et al. 1988), which includes ten items each for positive affect (PA; $\alpha = 0.94$) and negative affect (NA; $\alpha = 0.95$), rated on a 5-point scale (1 = not at all, 5 = always).

4.3 | Results

4.3.1 | Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted using Mplus 8.3 to assess the discriminant validity of five focal constructs—leaders’ guanxi HRM practices, contempt, envy, superficial harmony, and ostracism—alongside three control variables: social comparison orientation, positive affect, and negative affect. To address model estimation instability associated with latent constructs containing 10 or more items (Williams et al. 2025), we applied balanced parceling to four constructs: ostracism, positive affect, negative affect, and social comparison orientation. Fit indices (see Table 1) showed that the hypothesized eight-factor model ($\chi^2/df = 2.07$, TLI = 0.92, CFI = 0.93, SRMR = 0.05, RMSEA = 0.06) outperformed all alternatives, demonstrating strong discriminant validity of the constructs.

4.3.2 | Common Method Variance

Although this study used a two-wave time-lagged design, all variables were self-reported, which may raise concerns about common method variance (CMV). To assess this issue, we first conducted Harman’s single-factor test (Podsakoff et al. 2003) by performing an unrotated principal component analysis on all items from the five focal constructs and three control variables. The first factor accounted for only 23.34% of the total variance, well below the 40% threshold, indicating that CMV was not a major concern. We further tested a single-factor confirmatory model, which showed poor fit ($\chi^2/df = 11.29$, TLI = 0.25, CFI = 0.29, SRMR = 0.20, RMSEA = 0.19), suggesting the data were not explained by a single factor. Recognizing the limitations of Harman’s test, we also applied the unmeasured latent method construct (ULMC) approach by adding a latent method factor to the original eight-factor model (Podsakoff et al. 2003). The resulting nine-factor model showed minimal fit improvement ($\chi^2/df = 2.00$, TLI = 0.93, CFI = 0.94, SRMR = 0.04, RMSEA = 0.06), indicating the method factor had little impact. Overall, we believe that CMV is unlikely to have biased our results.

4.3.3 | Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Table 2 showed the means, standard deviations, and correlations among variables. Leaders’ guanxi HRM practices were significantly positively correlated with contempt ($r = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$) and envy ($r = 0.27$, $p < 0.001$). Both contempt and envy were positively associated with ostracism ($r = 0.58$, $p < 0.001$; $r = 0.47$, $p < 0.001$, respectively). Additionally, leaders’ guanxi HRM practices correlated positively with ostracism ($r = 0.34$, $p < 0.001$), while superficial harmony was

TABLE 1 | Confirmatory factor analysis (Study 1).

Models	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	TLI	CFI	SRMR	RMSEA
Eight-factor model	1393.31	674	2.07	0.92	0.93	0.05	0.06
Seven-factor model	1694.44	681	2.49	0.89	0.90	0.07	0.07
Six-factor model	2124.17	687	3.09	0.85	0.86	0.08	0.09
Five-factor model	3216.89	692	4.65	0.73	0.75	0.12	0.11
Four-factor model	3541.87	696	5.09	0.70	0.72	0.12	0.12
Three-factor model	5116.79	699	7.32	0.54	0.56	0.16	0.15
Two-factor model	6943.64	701	9.91	0.35	0.38	0.19	0.18
One-factor model	7923.21	702	11.29	0.25	0.29	0.20	0.19

Note: $N=287$; eight-factor model: leaders' guanxi HRM practices, contempt, envy, ostracism, superficial harmony, positive affect, negative affect, social comparison orientation; seven-factor model: leaders' guanxi HRM practices + contempt, envy, ostracism, superficial harmony, positive affect, negative affect, social comparison orientation; six-factor model: leaders' guanxi HRM practices + contempt + envy, ostracism, superficial harmony, positive affect, negative affect, social comparison orientation; five-factor model: leaders' guanxi HRM practices + contempt + envy + ostracism, superficial harmony, positive affect, negative affect, social comparison orientation; four-factor model: leaders' guanxi HRM practices + contempt + envy + ostracism + superficial harmony, positive affect, negative affect, social comparison orientation; three-factor model: leaders' guanxi HRM practices + contempt + envy + ostracism + superficial harmony + positive affect, negative affect, social comparison orientation; two-factor model: leaders' guanxi HRM practices + contempt + envy + ostracism + superficial harmony + positive affect + negative affect, social comparison orientation; one-factor model: leaders' guanxi HRM practices + contempt + envy + ostracism + superficial harmony + positive affect + negative affect + social comparison orientation.

negatively correlated with ostracism ($r = -0.18$, $p < 0.001$). These findings provide preliminary empirical support for the study's hypotheses.

4.3.4 | Hypothesis Testing

To test Hypotheses 1a–4, we conducted OLS regression using SPSS 26.0 and the PROCESS Macro (Hayes 2017). Hypotheses 1a and 1b proposed that leaders' guanxi HRM practices significantly predict victims' contempt and envy toward beneficiaries, respectively. To test this, we first entered control variables (gender, age, education, tenure, social comparison orientation, positive affect, and negative affect) into the baseline model, then added leaders' guanxi HRM practices. Results in Table 3 showed that leaders' guanxi HRM practices significantly predicted victims' contempt ($B = 0.33$, $p < 0.001$; Model 2) and envy ($B = 0.16$, $p < 0.01$; Model 4), thereby supporting Hypotheses 1a and 1b, respectively.

Hypotheses 2a and 2b proposed that contempt and envy mediate the effect of leaders' guanxi HRM practices on victims' ostracism. Using Model 4 of the PROCESS macro with 5000 bootstrap samples and controlling for positive and negative affect, gender, education, and other covariates, the analysis showed a significant indirect effect via contempt ($B = 0.11$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% $CI = [0.05, 0.18]$), supporting Hypothesis 2a. The indirect effect through envy was also significant ($B = 0.04$, $SE = 0.02$, 95% $CI = [0.005, 0.09]$), supporting Hypothesis 2b.

Hypothesis 3 proposed that victims' superficial harmony negatively moderates the relationships between their contempt and envy and ostracism. To test this, control variables were first entered into the baseline model. Then, contempt, envy, and superficial harmony were mean-centered to reduce multicollinearity, and interaction terms were created by multiplying the

centered variables. Leaders' guanxi HRM practices, contempt, envy, superficial harmony, and the interaction terms were sequentially added to the regression model. Results (see Table 4, Model 3) showed a significant negative interaction between contempt and superficial harmony predicting ostracism ($B = -0.20$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < 0.001$), supporting Hypothesis 3a. However, the interaction between envy and superficial harmony was not significant ($B = 0.09$, $SE = 0.05$, $p > 0.05$), providing no support for Hypothesis 3b. To visually illustrate the moderating effect, we followed Dawson's (2014) procedure and plotted the interaction effect (see Figure 2). Simple slope analyses revealed that contempt strongly predicted ostracism when superficial harmony was low ($B = 0.49$, $t = 8.78$, $p < 0.001$), but the effect was weaker, though still significant, when superficial harmony was high ($B = 0.22$, $t = 4.40$, $p < 0.001$).

Hypothesis 4 proposed that victims' superficial harmony negatively moderates the indirect effects of leaders' guanxi HRM practices on victims' ostracism through contempt and envy. We tested this moderated mediation using Model 14 of the PROCESS macro with 5000 bootstrap samples, controlling for positive and negative affect, gender, education, and other covariates. Results (see Table 5) showed that the indirect effect via contempt was significant at both low and high levels of superficial harmony, but stronger when superficial harmony was low (indirect effect = 0.16, $SE = 0.04$, 95% $CI = [0.09, 0.24]$) than when it was high (indirect effect = 0.07, $SE = 0.03$, 95% $CI = [0.01, 0.14]$). The difference between these effects was significant (difference = -0.09 , $SE = 0.04$, 95% $CI = [-0.16, -0.02]$), supporting Hypothesis 4a. For envy, the indirect effect was significant only when superficial harmony was high (indirect effect = 0.04, $SE = 0.02$, 95% $CI = [0.004, 0.10]$), but not when low (indirect effect = 0.02, $SE = 0.02$, 95% $CI = [-0.004, 0.07]$). However, the difference between these effects was not significant (difference = 0.02, $SE = 0.02$, 95% $CI = [-0.02, 0.07]$), so Hypothesis 4b was not supported.

TABLE 2 | Descriptive statistics and correlations (Study 1).

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	
1. Gender												
2. Age	-0.07											
3. Education	-0.01	-0.34***										
4. Tenure	-0.11	0.48***	-0.07									
5. Social comparison orientation	-0.21***	-0.01	0.16**	0.03	(0.92)							
6. Positive affect	-0.11	0.09	-0.01	0.01	0.27***	(0.94)						
7. Negative affect	-0.12*	-0.09	0.15**	0.05	0.57***	0.07	(0.95)					
8. Leaders' Guanxi HRM practices	-0.12	-0.04	0.02	0.00	0.24***	0.03	0.38***	(0.89)				
9. Contempt	-0.06	-0.05	0.04	0.04	0.16**	-0.07	0.28***	0.41***	(0.83)			
10. Envy	-0.07	0.01	-0.04	0.05	0.11	-0.09	0.25***	0.27***	0.42***	(0.89)		
11. Ostracism	-0.12*	0.01	-0.07	0.05	0.20***	-0.12*	0.30***	0.34***	0.58***	0.47***	(0.95)	
12. Superficial harmony	-0.14*	0.01	-0.01	0.00	0.04	-0.01	-0.03	-0.00	-0.08	-0.06	-0.18**	(0.90)
<i>M</i>	1.58	36.12	2.91	5.12	2.79	3.18	2.26	2.12	2.51	2.53	2.31	3.09
<i>SD</i>	0.49	9.63	1.02	5.06	0.68	0.73	0.86	1.10	1.03	0.92	0.88	0.67

Note: $N = 287$; gender: male = 1, female = 2; education: junior high school or below = 1, vocational high school and senior high school = 2, college = 3, bachelor = 4, master or above = 5; age and tenure were in years.

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

4.4 | Discussion

Study 1 revealed that leaders' guanxi HRM practices positively predicted victims' contempt and envy toward beneficiaries, and that both emotions mediated the relationship between leaders' guanxi HRM practices and victims' ostracism. Victims' superficial harmony negatively moderated both the relationship between contempt and ostracism and the mediation effect of leaders' guanxi HRM practices on ostracism through contempt. However, superficial harmony did not significantly moderate the relationship between envy and ostracism. Study 1 used a two-wave field survey, which enhances external validity but cannot establish causality and makes it difficult to rule out reverse causality. Because leaders' guanxi HRM practices were measured through victims' perceptions, victims might attribute their failure to obtain promotions or resources to such practices. To address this limitation, we conducted Study 2 using a scenario-based experiment.

5 | Study 2

5.1 | Sample and Procedures

Study 2 utilized a between-subjects design. We recruited 230 employees via the Credamo online platform, a research tool similar to MTurk that provides professional data collection services in China. Credamo has been recognized for its data quality in top-tier journals (e.g., Wang et al. 2024). Two participants failed the attention test, and four did not pass the manipulation check, resulting in a final valid sample of 224 participants. Using G*Power 3.1, we calculated the effect size corresponding to this sample size. A sensitivity power analysis showed that with $\alpha = 0.05$ and power = 0.95, the effect size for a sample of 224 was calculated to be 0.07, indicating that it falls between small and medium. Participants were randomly assigned to either the high leaders' guanxi HRM practices group ($n = 112$) or the low leaders' guanxi HRM practices group ($n = 112$). Participants first read a scenario

TABLE 3 | Main effect of the contempt and envy (Study 1).

Variables	Victims' contempt				Victims' envy			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>B</i>	SE
Intercept	2.46***	0.52	1.97***	0.50	2.69***	0.47	2.45***	0.47
Gender	-0.07	0.12	-0.02	0.11	-0.10	0.11	-0.07	0.11
Age	-0.01	0.01	-0.01	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.01
Education	-0.03	0.06	-0.01	0.06	-0.07	0.06	-0.06	0.06
Tenure	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.01
Social comparison orientation	0.05	0.11	0.03	0.10	-0.03	0.10	-0.04	0.10
Positive affect	-0.14	0.08	-0.13	0.08	-0.14	0.08	-0.14	0.07
Negative affect	0.32***	0.08	0.16	0.08	0.30***	0.08	0.22**	0.08
Leaders' guanxi HRM practices			0.33***	0.05			0.16**	0.05
<i>R</i> ²	0.09		0.20		0.09		0.12	
ΔR^2	0.09***		0.11***		0.09***		0.03**	
<i>F</i>	4.12***		8.72***		3.80***		4.72***	

Note: *N* = 287.***p* < 0.01.****p* < 0.001.**TABLE 4** | Moderating effect of the superficial harmony (Study 1).

Variables	Victims' ostracism toward beneficiaries					
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>B</i>	SE
Intercept	2.57***	0.43	2.47***	0.36	2.43***	0.35
Gender	-0.15	0.10	-0.09	0.08	-0.11	0.08
Age	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.00
Education	-0.11*	0.05	-0.08	0.04	-0.10*	0.04
Tenure	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.01
Social comparison orientation	0.13	0.09	0.11	0.08	0.14	0.07
Positive affect	-0.21**	0.07	-0.13*	0.06	-0.11*	0.06
Negative affect	0.27***	0.07	0.07	0.06	0.07	0.06
Leaders' guanxi HRM practices			0.05	0.04	0.04	0.04
Contempt			0.34***	0.05	0.35***	0.04
Envy			0.22***	0.05	0.18***	0.05
Superficial harmony					-0.19**	0.06
Contempt × Superficial harmony					-0.20***	0.04
Envy × Superficial harmony					0.09	0.05
<i>R</i> ²	0.14		0.42		0.48	
ΔR^2	0.14***		0.28***		0.06***	
<i>F</i>	6.50***		20.35***		19.79***	

Note: *N* = 287.**p* < 0.05.***p* < 0.01.****p* < 0.001.

related to leaders' guanxi HRM practices and completed the corresponding measurement items. Following this, they responded to measures assessing positive and negative affect, superficial harmony, contempt, envy, and ostracism. Finally, participants provided their demographic information and completed an attention check item (Huang et al. 2025), which included a specific question where "moderately agree" was the correct response. Upon completion of the experiment, participants were compensated with 3 RMB. Among the valid participants, 67.4% were female, with an average age of 31.41 years (SD = 8.46). The average tenure of participants was 8.08 years (SD = 7.96). In terms of educational background, the largest proportion of participants held a bachelor's degree, constituting 71.0%. Regarding job positions, the majority of participants were bottom-level employees, accounting for 51.3%, while executive managers represented the smallest group at 6.7%.

5.2 | Manipulations

Leaders' guanxi HRM practices were manipulated using materials developed by Chen et al. (2004) and Chen and Ren (2023), which comprised two components: guanxi base and resource allocation. Specifically, the guanxi base was manipulated through a close friend scenario, while resource allocation was manipulated as a bonus allocation scenario. Initially, participants were presented with the following scenario: "You and your colleague Qi Wang both work in the human resources department of a company, with Manager Zhang as your direct supervisor. Manager Zhang and Qi Wang share a personal guanxi as friends, whereas you have no

personal guanxi with Manager Zhang. Recently, you and your colleague Qi Wang are tasked with completing an assignment, and Manager Zhang decides how to allocate a bonus of 150,000 RMB based on the task's completion. By the end of the year, both you and Qi Wang achieve 100% of your performance targets. Subsequently, participants assigned to the high leaders' guanxi HRM practices group read: Ultimately, you receive a bonus of only 50,000 RMB, whereas Qi Wang, because of his/her close guanxi with Manager Zhang, successfully obtains a bonus of 100,000 RMB. Conversely, those in the low group read: Ultimately, both you and Qi Wang are each allocated a bonus of 75,000 RMB."

5.3 | Measures

All measurement items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Same-point Likert scales with different scaling were used for positive and negative affect. The English scales underwent translation and back-translation following Brislin's (1980) procedures to guarantee cross-cultural measurement equivalence.

5.3.1 | Leaders' Guanxi HRM Practices

To assess leaders' guanxi HRM practices, we adapted the five-item scale developed by Chen et al. (2004). To align with the experimental context, we selected two representative items for this study. The items included: "The bonus allocations in your department are influenced by personal guanxi" and "The bonus allocations in your department are often determined by the guanxi closeness" ($\alpha = 0.95$).

5.3.2 | Contempt

To assess contempt, we adapted the three-item scale developed by Li et al. (2022), consistent with those used in Study 1 ($\alpha = 0.97$).

5.3.3 | Envy

To assess envy, we adapted the four-item scale developed by Moran and Schweitzer (2008), consistent with those used in Study 1 ($\alpha = 0.91$).

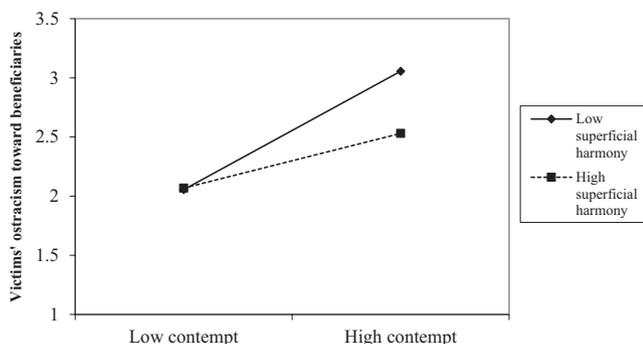


FIGURE 2 | Moderating effect of the superficial harmony on the relationship between victims' contempt and their ostracism toward beneficiaries (Study 1).

TABLE 5 | Moderated mediation effect (Study 1).

Path	Superficial harmony	Indirect effect	Standard error	95% CI
X → M1 → Y	Low	0.16	0.04	[0.09, 0.24]
	High	0.07	0.03	[0.01, 0.14]
	Difference	-0.09	0.04	[-0.16, -0.02]
X → M2 → Y	Low	0.02	0.02	[-0.004, 0.07]
	High	0.04	0.02	[0.004, 0.10]
	Difference	0.02	0.02	[-0.02, 0.07]

Note: X, M1, M2, and Y represent leaders' guanxi HRM practices, contempt, envy, and ostracism, respectively.

5.3.4 | Ostracism

To assess ostracism, we utilized the three-item scale from Quade et al. (2019). The items included: “You will intentionally avoid Qi Li at future work,” “You are less likely to proactively greet Qi Li at future work,” and “You will largely shut Qi Li out of your conversations at future work” ($\alpha=0.94$).

5.3.5 | Superficial Harmony

To assess superficial harmony, we utilized the eight-item scale developed by Leung et al. (2011), consistent with those used in Study 1 ($\alpha=0.89$).

5.3.6 | Control Variables

In addition to demographic variables, we controlled for positive and negative affect to ensure that the observed mediating effects of contempt and envy were not simply driven by overall affect (Tang et al. 2020). We measured positive and negative affect using the simplified ten-item scale developed by Mackinnon et al. (1999). Sample items for positive affect included “Excited” and “Enthusiastic” (1 = never; 7 = always) ($\alpha=0.92$), while sample items for negative affect included “Upset” and “Distressed” (1 = never; 7 = always) ($\alpha=0.90$).

5.4 | Results

5.4.1 | Manipulation Check

The independent samples *t*-test indicated that bonus allocation was significantly more influenced by guanxi in the high leaders' guanxi HRM practices group ($M=6.21$, $SD=0.72$) compared to the low group ($M=2.10$, $SD=1.30$), $t(172.56)=29.26$, $p<0.001$, Cohen's $d=3.91$. This confirmed that leaders' guanxi HRM practices were successfully manipulated.

5.4.2 | Confirmatory Factor Analysis

This study used Mplus 8.3 to conduct confirmatory factor analysis on four key variables—contempt, envy, superficial harmony, and ostracism—alongside two control variables: positive and negative affect. Model fit indices indicated that the six-factor model ($\chi^2/df=1.82$, $TLI=0.94$, $CFI=0.95$, $SRMR=0.07$, $RMSEA=0.06$) showed a significantly better fit than alternative models, indicating strong discriminant validity among the variables.

5.4.3 | Hypothesis Testing

To test Hypotheses 1a–4, we conducted independent samples *t*-test and OLS regression using SPSS 26.0 and the PROCESS Macro (Hayes 2017). Hypothesis 1a proposed that leaders' guanxi HRM practices significantly predict victims' contempt toward beneficiaries. Results showed that victims in the high guanxi condition reported significantly higher contempt ($M=5.70$, $SD=0.92$) than those in the low group ($M=2.06$,

$SD=1.12$), $t(222)=26.57$, $p<0.001$, Cohen's $d=3.55$, supporting Hypothesis 1a. Similarly, Hypothesis 1b posited that leaders' guanxi HRM practices significantly predict victims' envy. Results showed that the high guanxi group showed significantly higher envy ($M=5.22$, $SD=0.94$) than the low group ($M=2.39$, $SD=1.21$), $t(209.96)=19.58$, $p<0.001$, Cohen's $d=2.61$. Thus, Hypothesis 1b was supported.

Hypotheses 2a and 2b proposed that leaders' guanxi HRM practices lead to victims' ostracism toward beneficiaries through victims' contempt and envy. To test this, we utilized SPSS 26.0 to run OLS regressions controlling for positive and negative affect, gender, age, education, position, and tenure (see Figure 3). Results showed that leaders' guanxi HRM practices positively predicted victims' contempt ($B=3.62$, $p<0.001$) and envy ($B=2.82$, $p<0.001$). Both contempt ($B=0.64$, $p<0.001$) and envy significantly predicted ostracism ($B=0.22$, $p<0.01$). We then used PROCESS Model 4 with 5000 bootstrap samples to test the indirect effects. The results indicated that the unstandardized indirect effect of leaders' guanxi HRM practices on victims' ostracism toward beneficiaries via contempt was 2.33 (95% CI = [1.73, 3.00], excluding 0), supporting Hypothesis 2a. The unstandardized indirect effect via envy was 0.61 (95% CI = [0.10, 1.10], excluding 0), thereby supporting Hypothesis 2b.

Hypothesis 3 proposed that victims' superficial harmony negatively moderates the relationship between victims' (a) contempt and (b) envy and their ostracism toward beneficiaries. To test this, we mean-centered contempt, envy, and ostracism, then created interaction terms and conducted OLS regression (see Table 6). The results showed a significant negative interaction between superficial harmony and contempt ($B=-0.14$, $SE=0.05$, $p<0.01$), supporting Hypothesis 3a. However, the interaction between superficial harmony and envy was not significant ($B=-0.01$, $SE=0.06$, $p>0.05$), so Hypothesis 3b was not supported. To illustrate the moderation effect of superficial harmony on the contempt–ostracism link, we plotted simple slopes at one standard deviation above and below the mean (see Figure 4), as recommended by Dawson (2014). Simple slope analysis revealed that contempt significantly predicted ostracism both when superficial harmony was low ($B=0.71$, $t=7.04$, $p<0.001$) and high ($B=0.39$, $t=4.74$, $p<0.001$). The effect of contempt on ostracism was significantly attenuated at higher levels of superficial harmony, further supporting Hypothesis 3a.

Hypothesis 4 proposed that victims' superficial harmony negatively moderates the indirect effects of leaders' guanxi HRM practices on victims' ostracism toward beneficiaries through victims' (a) contempt and (b) envy. To test this, we used Process Model 14 with 5000 bootstrap samples (see Table 7). For victims with low superficial harmony, the mediation effect via contempt was significant (unstandardized indirect effect = 2.56, 95% CI = [1.75, 3.35]). This effect remained significant for those with high superficial harmony, though weaker (unstandardized indirect effect = 1.41, 95% CI = [0.79, 2.10]). The difference between high and low groups was significant (difference = -1.15, 95% CI = [-2.02, -0.18]), supporting Hypothesis 4a. Likewise, the mediation effect via envy was significant at both low (unstandardized indirect effect = 0.89,

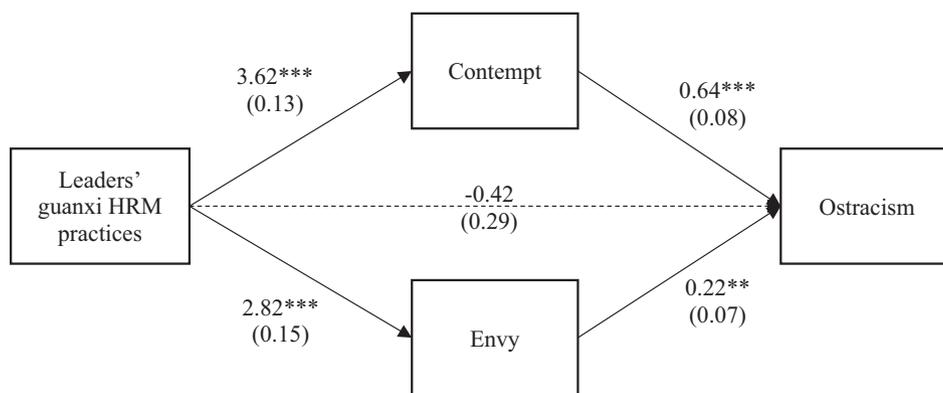


FIGURE 3 | Unstandardized coefficients for the mediation effect (Study 2). $N=224$; $**p < 0.01$, $***p < 0.001$; standard errors in parentheses; dashed lines indicate non-significant results, solid lines indicate significant results.

TABLE 6 | Moderating effect of the superficial harmony (Study 2).

Variables	Victims' ostracism toward beneficiaries			
	Model 1		Model 2	
	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>B</i>	SE
Intercept	3.43***	0.87	3.49***	0.73
Gender	0.10	0.15	0.00	0.13
Age	0.01	0.02	0.00	0.02
Tenure	0.00	0.02	0.00	0.02
Education	0.03	0.11	0.02	0.09
Position	-0.11	0.08	-0.09	0.07
Positive affect	-0.07	0.06	-0.01	0.05
Negative affect	0.08	0.06	0.10	0.05
Leaders' guanxi HRM practices	-0.42	0.29	-0.44	0.24
Contempt	0.64***	0.08	0.55***	0.07
Envy	0.22**	0.07	0.31***	0.07
Superficial harmony			-0.28***	0.05
Contempt × Superficial harmony			-0.14**	0.05
Envy × Superficial harmony			-0.01	0.06
R^2	0.70		0.79	
ΔR^2	0.70***		0.09***	
F	50.42***		61.94***	

Note: $N=224$.
 $**p < 0.01$.
 $***p < 0.001$.

95% CI = [0.21, 1.59]) and high (unstandardized indirect effect = 0.83, 95% CI = [0.34, 1.27]) levels of superficial harmony. However, the difference between groups was not significant (difference = -0.06, 95% CI = [-0.97, 0.75]), so Hypothesis 4b was not supported.

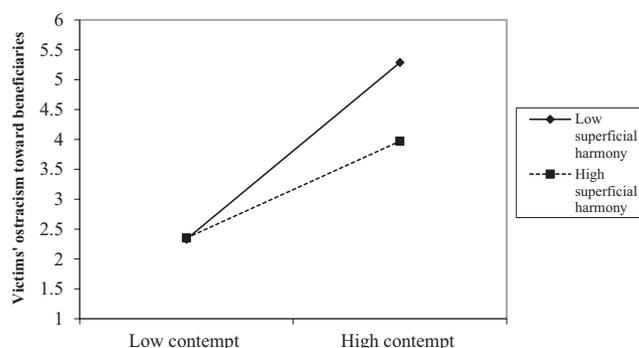


FIGURE 4 | Moderating effect of the superficial harmony on the relationship between victims' contempt and their ostracism toward beneficiaries (Study 2).

5.5 | Discussion

Study 2 successfully met its research objectives and replicated the findings of Study 1. However, several limitations remained. First, Study 2 only manipulated the guanxi base between leaders and beneficiaries as a close friend guanxi in a bonus allocation scenario, overlooking other guanxi bases and resource allocation contexts. Second, it did not examine potential alternative other-directed emotional mediators related to the context of unfairness, such as anger and resentment, even though general positive and negative affect were controlled. This is necessary given that contempt and envy are specifically other-directed emotional mediators. To address these limitations, we conducted Study 3.

6 | Study 3

6.1 | Sample and Procedures

Study 3 utilized a between-subjects design. We recruited 230 employees via the Credamo online platform. One participant failed the attention test, and six failed the manipulation check, resulting in a final valid sample of 223 participants. Using G*Power 3.1, we calculated the effect size corresponding to this sample size. A sensitivity power analysis showed that with $\alpha = 0.05$ and power = 0.95, the effect size for a sample of 223 was calculated

TABLE 7 | Moderated mediation effect (Study 2).

Path	Superficial harmony	Unstandardized indirect effect	Standard error	95% CI
X → M1 → Y	Low	2.56	0.41	[1.75, 3.35]
	High	1.41	0.33	[0.79, 2.10]
	Difference	-1.15	0.47	[-2.02, -0.18]
X → M2 → Y	Low	0.89	0.35	[0.21, 1.59]
	High	0.83	0.24	[0.34, 1.27]
	Difference	-0.06	0.44	[-0.97, 0.75]

Note: X, M1, M2, and Y represent leaders' guanxi HRM practices, contempt, envy, and ostracism, respectively.

to be 0.07, indicating that it falls between small and medium. Participants were randomly assigned to either the high leaders' guanxi HRM practices group ($n = 113$) or the low leaders' guanxi HRM practices group ($n = 110$). Initially, participants read the scenario materials designed to manipulate leaders' guanxi HRM practices and completed the corresponding measurement items. Following this, they responded to measures assessing positive and negative affect, superficial harmony, feelings of contempt and envy, feelings of anger and resentment, and ostracism. Participants also provided demographic information and completed an attention test, which included a critical question with "very dissatisfied" as the correct answer. Those who chose "very dissatisfied" passed the attention test. Upon completion of the experiment, participants were compensated with 3 RMB. Among the valid participants, 55.2% were female, with an average age of 32.27 years ($SD = 7.48$). The average tenure of participants was 8.37 years ($SD = 6.30$). In terms of educational background, the largest proportion of participants held a bachelor's degree, constituting 66.8% of the sample. Regarding job positions, the majority of participants were bottom-level employees, accounting for 47.1%, while executive managers represented the smallest group at 5.4%.

6.2 | Manipulations

Leaders' guanxi HRM practices were manipulated using materials developed by Chen et al. (2004) and Chen and Ren (2023), which were largely consistent with Study 2. The only difference was that the guanxi base and resource allocation scenario were changed to avoid the potential interference from the different contexts on the results. Specifically, the guanxi base was manipulated through a kin guanxi scenario, while resource allocation was manipulated as a job promotion scenario. Initially, participants were presented with the following scenario: You and your colleague Qi Li both work in the finance department of a company, reporting to the same supervisor, Manager Wang. Recently, Manager Wang assigns you and Qi Li to jointly complete an important financial reconciliation project. Performance on this project is one of the key factors Manager Wang considers when selecting candidates for the upcoming deputy manager opening. Manager Wang and Qi Li share a personal guanxi as uncle and nephew, while you possess no personal guanxi with Manager Wang. By the end of the year, both you and Qi Li successfully meet the project goals and achieve similar levels of performance. Subsequently, participants assigned to the high

leaders' guanxi HRM practices group read: Ultimately, Manager Wang assigns you a performance evaluation of "satisfactory," and you do not enter the candidate list for the deputy manager position. Conversely, due to his/her familial guanxi with Manager Wang, Qi Li receives a performance evaluation of "excellent" and successfully enters the candidate list. Conversely, participants assigned to the low group read: Ultimately, Manager Wang assigns the same performance evaluation of "excellent" to both you and Qi Li, and both of you enter the candidate list for the deputy manager position.

6.3 | Measures

Study 3 used the same Likert scales and translation-back-translation procedures as reported in Study 2.

6.3.1 | Leaders' Guanxi HRM Practices

To assess leaders' guanxi HRM practices, we adapted the five-item scale developed by Chen et al. (2004). To align with the experimental context, we selected two representative items for this study. The items included: "Promotions in your department are influenced by personal guanxi" and "Promotions in your department are often determined by the guanxi closeness" ($\alpha = 0.96$).

6.3.2 | Contempt

To assess contempt, we utilized the three-item scale from Li et al. (2022), consistent with those used in Study 1 ($\alpha = 0.96$).

6.3.3 | Envy

To assess envy, we utilized the four-item scale developed by Moran and Schweitzer (2008), consistent with those used in Study 1 ($\alpha = 0.94$).

6.3.4 | Ostracism

To assess ostracism, we utilized the three-item scale from Quade et al. (2019), consistent with those used in Study 2 ($\alpha = 0.95$).

6.3.5 | Superficial Harmony

To assess superficial harmony, we utilized the eight-item scale developed by Leung et al. (2011), consistent with those used in Study 1 ($\alpha = 0.94$).

6.3.6 | Control Variables

In addition to demographic variables, we controlled for general positive and negative affect using the simplified ten-item scale developed by Mackinnon et al. (1999), consistent with the measure used in Study 2 (PA, $\alpha = 0.93$; NA, $\alpha = 0.93$). Given that contempt and envy are other-directed negative emotions, we also controlled for anger and resentment toward beneficiaries, which are negative emotions typically elicited by perceived moral transgressions (Miranda and Welbourne 2023). Anger was measured using a three-item scale developed by Grappi et al. (2013); a sample item was “You feel angry at your colleague Qi Li” ($\alpha = 0.95$). Resentment was measured using a four-item scale developed by Ferguson et al. (2016); a sample item was “You feel resentful toward your colleague Qi Li” ($\alpha = 0.96$).

6.4 | Results

6.4.1 | Manipulation Check

The independent samples *t*-test indicated that the extent to which promotions were influenced by guanxi in the high leaders' guanxi HRM practices group ($M = 6.27$, $SD = 0.57$) was significantly higher than in the low group ($M = 2.18$, $SD = 1.07$), $t(165.24) = 35.44$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 4.77$, indicating that leaders' guanxi HRM practices were successfully manipulated.

6.4.2 | Confirmatory Factor Analysis

This study conducted a confirmatory factor analysis using Mplus 8.3 to assess the discriminant validity of four focal constructs—contempt, envy, superficial harmony, and ostracism—as well as four control variables: positive affect, negative affect, anger, and resentment. Model fit indices indicated that the eight-factor model ($\chi^2/df = 1.79$, TLI = 0.95, CFI = 0.95, SRMR = 0.04, RMSEA = 0.06) demonstrated a significantly better fit than all alternative models, indicating strong discriminant validity among the key constructs.

6.4.3 | Hypothesis Testing

To test Hypotheses 1a–4, we conducted independent samples *t*-test and OLS regression using SPSS 26.0 and the PROCESS Macro (Hayes 2017). Hypothesis 1a proposed that leaders' guanxi HRM practices significantly predict victims' contempt toward beneficiaries. Results showed that victims in the high guanxi condition reported significantly higher levels of contempt ($M = 5.22$, $SD = 1.45$) than those in the low guanxi condition ($M = 2.05$, $SD = 0.86$), $t(183.43) = 19.98$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 2.66$, supporting Hypothesis 1a. Similarly, Hypothesis 1b predicted that leaders' guanxi HRM practices significantly predict victims' envy. Victims in the high guanxi condition reported

significantly higher envy ($M = 5.40$, $SD = 1.19$) than those in the low condition ($M = 2.62$, $SD = 1.14$), $t(221) = 17.75$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 2.39$, supporting Hypothesis 1b.

To test the mediating hypothesis, we first conducted OLS regression analyses using SPSS 26.0 to estimate the path coefficients (see Figure 5). After controlling for positive and negative affect, gender, age, education, position, and tenure, leaders' guanxi HRM practices significantly predicted victims' contempt ($B = 3.00$, $p < 0.001$) and envy ($B = 2.59$, $p < 0.001$). In turn, both contempt ($B = 0.44$, $p < 0.001$) and envy ($B = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$) significantly predicted victims' ostracism. We then used PROCESS Model 4 with 5000 bootstrap samples to test the indirect effects. Results showed that the unstandardized indirect effect of leaders' guanxi HRM practices on victims' ostracism through contempt was significant (effect = 1.31, 95% CI = [0.76, 1.89]), supporting Hypothesis 2a. Similarly, the unstandardized indirect effect through envy was also significant (effect = 0.72, 95% CI = [0.28, 1.23]), supporting Hypothesis 2b.

To test the robustness of our model, we conducted a supplemental analysis to rule out two alternative mediating mechanisms—anger and resentment. When controlling for victims' anger and resentment, the significance of the mediating roles of contempt (effect = 0.68, 95% CI = [0.03, 1.40]) and envy (effect = 0.47, 95% CI = [0.02, 1.00]) remained unchanged, thereby demonstrating the unique contribution of contempt and envy to the relationship between leaders' guanxi HRM practices and victims' ostracism. It is worth noting that the unstandardized indirect effect of leaders' guanxi HRM practices on victims' ostracism via anger was significant (effect = 0.50, 95% CI = [0.10, 0.99]), whereas the unstandardized indirect effect via resentment was not (effect = 0.32, 95% CI = [−0.10, 0.82]).

To test the moderating hypothesis, we mean-centered contempt, envy, and ostracism, then created interaction terms and conducted OLS regression (see Table 8). The results showed a significant negative interaction between superficial harmony and contempt ($B = -0.13$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < 0.01$), supporting Hypothesis 3a. However, the interaction between superficial harmony and envy was not significant ($B = 0.01$, $SE = 0.04$, $p > 0.05$), so Hypothesis 3b was not supported. To illustrate the moderation effect of superficial harmony on the contempt–ostracism link, we plotted simple slopes at one standard deviation above and below the mean (see Figure 6). Simple slope analysis revealed that contempt significantly predicted ostracism both when superficial harmony was low ($B = 0.52$, $t = 7.56$, $p < 0.001$) and high ($B = 0.20$, $t = 2.11$, $p < 0.05$). The effect of contempt on ostracism was significantly attenuated at higher levels of superficial harmony, further supporting Hypothesis 3a.

To test the moderated mediation hypothesis, we used Process Model 14 with 5000 bootstrap samples (see Table 9). For victims with low superficial harmony, the mediation effect via contempt was significant (unstandardized indirect effect = 1.56, 95% CI = [1.03, 2.12]). For those with high superficial harmony, the effect was not significant (unstandardized indirect effect = 0.59, 95% CI = [−0.24, 1.35]). The difference between high and low groups was significant (difference = −0.97, 95% CI = [−1.74, −0.15]), supporting Hypothesis 4a. Notably, the mediation effect via envy was significant at both low (unstandardized indirect effect = 0.94, 95%

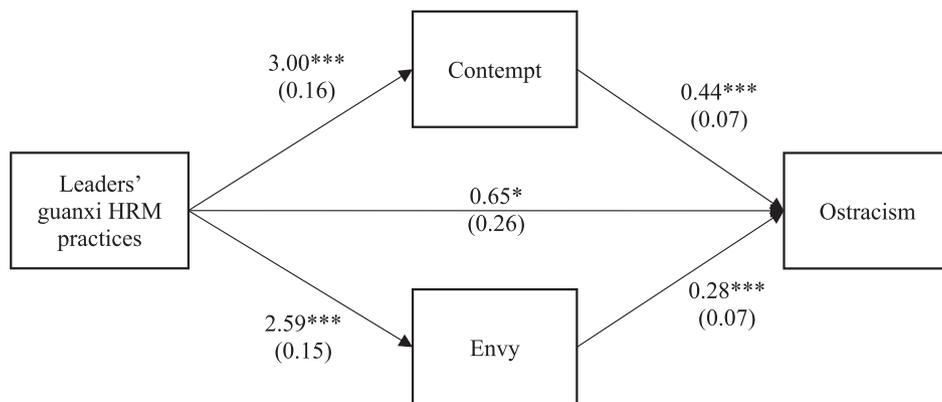


FIGURE 5 | Unstandardized coefficients for the mediation effect (Study 3). $N = 223$; * $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$; standard errors in parentheses; dashed lines indicate non-significant results, solid lines indicate significant results.

TABLE 8 | Moderating effect of the superficial harmony (Study 3).

Variables	Victims' ostracism toward beneficiaries			
	Model 1		Model 2	
	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>B</i>	SE
Intercept	1.42	0.86	1.85*	0.79
Gender	-0.23	0.15	-0.13	0.14
Age	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02
Tenure	0.01	0.03	-0.004	0.02
Education	0.31*	0.13	0.12	0.13
Position	-0.21*	0.09	-0.17*	0.08
Positive affect	0.10	0.08	0.13	0.08
Negative affect	0.06	0.08	0.07	0.08
Leaders' guanxi HRM practices	0.66*	0.26	0.59*	0.24
Contempt	0.44***	0.07	0.36***	0.07
Envy	0.28***	0.07	0.38***	0.07
Superficial harmony			-0.24***	0.06
Contempt × Superficial harmony			-0.13**	0.04
Envy × Superficial harmony			0.01	0.04
R^2	0.71		0.76	
ΔR^2	0.71***		0.05***	
F	51.33***		50.74***	

Note: $N = 223$.
 * $p < 0.05$.
 ** $p < 0.01$.
 *** $p < 0.001$.

CI = [0.54, 1.50]) and high (unstandardized indirect effect = 1.03, 95% CI = [0.42, 1.71]) levels of superficial harmony. However, the difference between groups was not significant (difference = 0.08, 95% CI = [-0.64, 0.69]), so Hypothesis 4b was not supported.

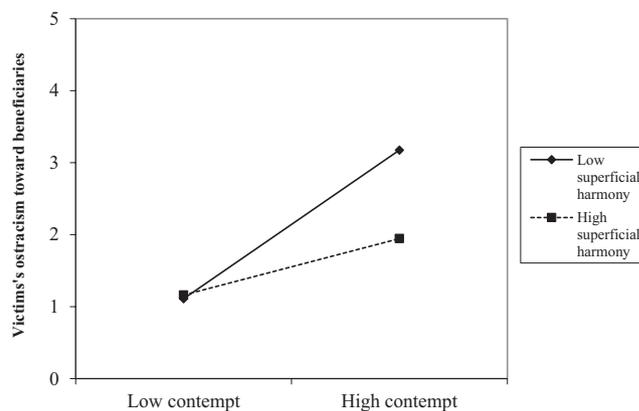


FIGURE 6 | Moderating effect of the superficial harmony on the relationship between victims' contempt and their ostracism toward beneficiaries (Study 3).

6.5 | Discussion

Study 3, using experimental scenarios different from those in Study 2, reaffirmed the mediating roles of contempt and envy, as well as the moderating effect of victims' superficial harmony on the relationship between contempt and ostracism and on the indirect effect of leaders' guanxi HRM practices on ostracism through contempt. However, superficial harmony did not significantly moderate the relationship between envy and ostracism. We will further discuss possible reasons for this finding in the limitations and future directions section.

7 | General Discussion

Based on theories of social comparison and dual-system self-control, this paper explores the underlying mechanisms and boundary conditions linking leaders' guanxi HRM practices to victims' ostracism toward beneficiaries. Using a two-wave survey and two scenario-based experiments, our findings reveal that leaders' guanxi HRM practices evoke victims' contempt—rooted in downward social comparisons—and envy—stemming from upward comparisons—both of which positively predict victims' ostracism. Moreover, victims' superficial harmony weakens the effect of contempt on ostracism and the associated

TABLE 9 | Moderated mediation effect (Study 3).

Path	Superficial harmony	Unstandardized indirect effect	Standard error	95% CI
X → M1 → Y	Low	1.56	0.28	[1.03, 2.12]
	High	0.59	0.40	[−0.24, 1.35]
	Difference	−0.97	0.40	[−1.74, −0.15]
X → M2 → Y	Low	0.94	0.24	[0.54, 1.50]
	High	1.03	0.33	[0.42, 1.71]
	Difference	0.08	0.33	[−0.64, 0.69]

Note: X, M1, M2, and Y represent leaders' guanxi HRM practices, contempt, envy, and ostracism, respectively.

mediation. This research elucidates the dynamic interaction processes among participants engaged in guanxi practices in the East Asian organizational context, and offers targeted recommendations for managers to effectively navigate decisions related to guanxi practices.

7.1 | Theoretical Implications

This paper makes multiple theoretical contributions. First, this paper contributes to SHRM scholarship by framing leaders' guanxi HRM practices within the process perspective of SHRM, which highlights the central role of line managers in HR practice implementation. Because HRM practices operate within social and cultural contexts, guanxi HRM practices reflect a culturally shaped mode of implementation rooted in Confucian guanxi norms (Ren et al. 2024). From this perspective, leaders' guanxi-based decisions constitute a distinctive way in which line managers enact HRM (Kehoe and Han 2020). Our findings show that leaders' guanxi HRM practices provoke victims' ostracism toward beneficiaries, creating negative interpersonal consequences among employees and generating variation in the enacted effects of HRM systems across units. This demonstrates why and how leaders' discretionary actions—such as relying on guanxi when making HRM decisions—produce significant differences in HR practice implementation, underscoring their critical role as key implementers of HRM systems.

Second, this paper extends the existing literature on guanxi HRM practices. In response to calls to explore the consequences of guanxi HRM practices for guanxi stakeholders (Chen et al. 2024), this paper examines the other-directed consequences of these practices for victims from the perspective of interactions between victims and beneficiaries. Our findings reveal that leaders' guanxi HRM practices provoke victims' ostracism toward beneficiaries. This nuanced approach provides deeper insights for a more comprehensive understanding of guanxi HRM practices (Chen et al. 2004) and advances the exploration of interaction mechanisms among various stakeholders. While prior research has mainly focused on the self-directed negative effects of leaders' guanxi HRM practices for victims (Yang et al. 2021, 2018, 2025), our study shifts the focus from the intrapersonal to the interpersonal level. This shift offers a new lens for understanding the broader implications of guanxi HRM practices—not merely inducing passive coping responses among victims, but prompting them to actively express dissatisfaction

and undermine peer relationships. This finding also provides a more balanced view, suggesting that beneficiaries' shortcut advantages lead to unforeseen drawbacks. In doing so, it extends previous research (Chen et al. 2011; Ren et al. 2024; Yang and Wei 2022), which has primarily emphasized the positive outcomes of guanxi HRM practices for beneficiaries.

Third, this paper contributes to the literature on ostracism. While unfair resource allocation has long been identified as a key trigger of interpersonal ostracism, prior studies have primarily focused on leader-member exchange differentiation (LMXD) (Xu et al. 2024). In contrast, the impact of guanxi HRM practices remains largely underexplored. Notably, guanxi HRM practices differ from LMXD in their underlying exchange logic: LMXD typically reflects fairness-based, performance-driven differentiated resource distribution, whereas guanxi HRM practices involve biased resource allocation driven by affective commitment and moral obligation rooted in the principle of renqing (Chen et al. 2024). By uncovering how leaders' guanxi HRM practices lead to victims' ostracism of beneficiaries, this paper reveals a distinct pathway in the formation of ostracism through the lens of Confucian guanxi, offering novel insights into the antecedents of ostracism (Breidenthal et al. 2020; Cheng et al. 2024).

Fourth, this paper also contributes to social comparison literature relating to emotions. Our findings reveal that leaders' guanxi HRM practices lead to victims' ostracism toward beneficiaries through the mediating effects of victims' contempt and envy. This is consistent with our expectations based on social comparison theory (Buunk and Gibbons 2007)—leaders' guanxi HRM practices convey comparative cues regarding beneficiaries' relative advantages or disadvantages, triggering contempt through downward moral comparisons and envy through upward resource comparisons. Both emotions subsequently drive victims to ostracize beneficiaries. By simultaneously exploring contempt and envy, which may seem like opposing negative emotions but can coexist, the study extends the micro-level emotional mechanisms of social comparison theory (Matta and Van Dyne 2020) and highlights the complexity of victims' emotional experiences under guanxi-based favoritism. This also addresses the limitations of past studies that focused solely on a single comparative emotion (Breidenthal et al. 2020). Our findings regarding the envy pathway align with evidence from favoritism in Western contexts (Mohd Shamsudin et al. 2024), which suggests that unfair resource allocation can provoke envy among

disadvantaged employees, leading to ostracism. Meanwhile, the contempt pathway echoes recent findings by Miranda and Welbourne (2023), showing that downward moral comparisons can fuel contempt. Notably, contempt significantly differs from other hostile emotions such as anger and disgust (Greenbaum et al. 2020; Hutcherson and Gross 2011), yet remains underexplored in the workplace. Our study advances the limited literature on workplace contempt by examining its antecedents and consequences in guanxi-based contexts.

Finally, this paper contributes to the literature on both superficial harmony and self-control. Our findings show that victims high in superficial harmony regulate their contempt more effectively, reducing their likelihood of ostracizing beneficiaries. This is consistent with expectations derived from the dual-system model of self-control (Hofmann et al. 2009; Strack and Deutsch 2004), which posits that a cool, reflective system can inhibit negative outcomes generated by a hot, impulsive system, thereby preventing self-control failure. This deepens our understanding of superficial harmony by revealing that its role as a conflict-avoidance strategy operates through self-control processes. This finding also aligns with Liu et al. (2018), which found that employees high in superficial harmony are less likely to engage in interpersonal conflict when facing unfair treatment. Notably, our findings reveal that the moderating effect of superficial harmony was not significant for envy, suggesting that its regulatory function may be emotion-specific. By introducing superficial harmony—a cultural value in interpersonal interactions—into the context of guanxi HRM practices, this paper not only offers a more nuanced understanding of how such practices operate within the East Asian cultural context, but also extends the boundary conditions of social comparison theory. Prior research on social comparison has primarily focused on boundary conditions related to the trait and motivation characteristics of both the comparator and the comparison target (e.g., prosocial motivation, Sun et al. 2021; social comparison orientation, Tse et al. 2013), as well as the organizational characteristics (e.g., cooperative climate, Campbell et al. 2017; procedural fairness climate, Tse et al. 2018). However, there has been limited exploration of how self-control-related cultural values affect the comparators' behavioral responses. This paper addresses this gap by placing superficial harmony within a self-control framework.

7.2 | Practical Implications

This paper offers significant practical implications. First, it highlights the practical need for organizations to curb favoritism in HRM practices. Our findings reveal that leaders' guanxi HRM practices can provoke ostracism from victims toward beneficiaries. While such practices may temporarily enhance beneficiaries' access to valued resources, excessive favoritism undermines interpersonal harmony and harms long-term career prospects of both victims and beneficiaries. As Eastern organizations increasingly adopt fairness and contractual principles from Western management, leaders should implement recruitment, promotion, and performance evaluations based on merit rather than personal guanxi. To support this shift, organizations should strengthen the

standardization and transparency of line managers' HRM execution, provide targeted HR and ethics training, and monitor guanxi networks to ensure fair and consistent HR practice implementation. Meanwhile, employees with close ties to leaders should consciously avoid leveraging personal guanxi for improper advantage. In a competitive workplace where self-interest often prevails, fostering a healthy and ethical attitude toward guanxi is essential to prevent it from becoming a tool for opportunism.

Second, leaders should not deliberately avoid addressing these unfair behaviors after engaging in guanxi practices. Instead, they should focus on enhancing emotional management and guidance for victimized employees, thereby actively mitigating conflicts of interest between victims and beneficiaries. Our findings indicate that guanxi victims simultaneously experience contempt toward beneficiaries through downward comparison and envy through upward comparison. Furthermore, both emotions contribute to victims' subsequent ostracism of the beneficiaries. In workplace settings, expressions of contempt and envy are often more subtle and implicit than other negative emotions, such as anger, making them harder to control and regulate. Therefore, leaders should implement measures to enhance victims' emotional management and control abilities through increased communication and dialogue, thereby alleviating their feelings of contempt and envy. Moreover, leaders and beneficiaries can reduce victims' negative emotional responses regarding guanxi HRM practices by providing compensatory strategies for victims, helping to mitigate their feelings of contempt and envy.

Finally, leaders can cultivate employees' superficial harmony as a buffer against the negative consequences of guanxi HRM practices. Our findings suggest that superficial harmony weakens the positive relationship between contempt and ostracism. In East Asian contexts shaped by Confucian values, leaders often find it difficult to reject guanxi demands. In such cases, fostering superficial harmony can serve as a temporary coping mechanism to preserve workplace order and task coordination. However, this surface-level calm is inherently fragile, as it may mask unresolved tensions and hinder genuine relationship quality. Therefore, organizations should not rely solely on employees' self-regulation and self-control to absorb the impact of unfair practices. Instead, leaders should focus on reducing guanxi HRM practices and enhancing procedural fairness and transparency. Additionally, leaders can provide regular conflict management training to equip employees with effective resolution skills and establish dedicated teams to monitor and address conflicts proactively within the organization.

7.3 | Limitations and Future Directions

This paper inevitably has some limitations. First, the moderating effects related to envy were not supported. Studies 1–3 did not confirm that victims' superficial harmony moderated the relationship between envy and ostracism, and the corresponding mediation effect. This does not undermine the role of superficial harmony as a self-regulatory mechanism, but suggests its regulatory effectiveness and strength may vary by the type of emotion.

Contempt, rooted in downward comparisons and moral devaluation, is less self-threatening and thus more easily suppressed. In contrast, envy, triggered by upward comparisons and resource disparities, poses a stronger threat to self-interest and is harder to regulate. Therefore, when regulating both downward and upward comparison processes, superficial harmony is more effective in inhibiting contempt-driven than envy-driven ostracism. This may explain why the moderating effect was significant for contempt-ostracism but not for envy-ostracism. Future research could explore whether other cultural values, such as individual collectivism orientation, more effectively regulate both contempt- and envy-driven ostracism. It would also be valuable to examine alternative moderators, such as organizational conflict management climate, that may shape victims' behavioral responses to these emotions.

Second, potential first-stage moderators were not examined. We propose that the guanxi closeness between beneficiaries and victims may shape victims' emotional responses to leaders' guanxi HRM practices. Studies 2 and 3 used scenario-based experiments that controlled for other potential confounding factors, suggesting that the conclusions are unlikely to be affected by such relational variables. Nevertheless, future research could further explore this boundary condition. High guanxi closeness may foster assimilation rather than contrast during social comparisons between beneficiaries and victims, attenuating negative other-directed emotions, whereas low closeness may amplify perceived unfairness and intensify feelings of contempt and envy. Examining guanxi closeness as a first-stage moderator would provide insight into when leaders' guanxi HRM practices elicit negative emotional reactions among victims.

Third, there is room for improvement in the research design. First, Study 1 relies on single-source data from victims, which raises the possibility of reverse causality—victims' negative outcomes, due to their own poor capabilities or performance, such as failing to obtain promotions, may lead them to attribute blame to leaders' guanxi HRM practices, potentially biasing its measurement. Although Studies 2 and 3 address this experimentally, future research could strengthen causal inference by collecting multi-source data, such as leaders' self-reports alongside employees' perceptions. Second, while Studies 1–3 utilize a two-wave survey and two scenario-based experiments that enhance external validity and causal inference, the sample is limited to the Chinese context. Comparable guanxi-like constructs exist in other East Asian countries, such as Japan and South Korea, suggesting that future research should examine the generalizability of these findings across different cultural contexts.

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During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT and DeepL to translate a manuscript prepared in Chinese into English in order to improve the readability and language of the article. After using these tools, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and took full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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