

Strategic HRM as process: how HR system and organizational climate strength influence Chinese employee attitudes

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In contrast to the high-performance work systems literature that focuses on HR practices, we follow Bowen and Ostroff in examining human resource management (HRM) processes, specifically the strength of an HR system (its distinctiveness, consistency, and consensus) and its contribution to the organizational climate (employees' shared perceptions of the HR system). Based on 810 employees within 64 units in three Chinese hotels, we examine how employee perceptions of HRM system strength and organizational climate are associated with employees' work satisfaction, vigor, and intention to quit. The distinctiveness of an HRM system was found to be related to the three employee work attitudes, and high climate strength increases both the positive relationship between consensus and work satisfaction, and the negative relationship between consensus and intention to quit. We draw on aspects of Chinese society to interpret these findings. Several important research and HR practice implications are highlighted and discussed.

Keywords: China; high-performance work system; human resource practices; organizational climate; strategic HRM; work attitudes

Introduction

An interest in the effects of high-performance work systems (HPWS) on employees in service industries has been growing in recent years (Batt 2002; Boxall and Macky 2007). HPWS is usually defined as a set of human resource (HR) practices aimed at increasing employees' abilities, motivation, and opportunity to participate in decision making (Tsui and Wang 2002; Guest 2007; Sun, Aryee and Law 2007). HPWS, like high-commitment Human Resource Management (HRM) (Benkhoff 1997; Agarwala 2003) and high-involvement work systems (Xiao and Bjorkman 2006; Macky and Boxall 2008), assumes that various types of HR practices interact to improve employees' work attitudes, ultimately contributing to positive employee behaviors and organizational effectiveness (Boxall and Macky 2009). Despite some skepticism (Wood and Wall 2007), the weight of empirical evidence favors this assumption (Hailey, Farndale and Truss 2005; Combs, Liu, Hall and Ketchen 2006; Boxall and Macky 2009).

Rather than focusing on HR practices or *the content* of HRM, some academics (Bowen and Ostroff 2004; see also Patterson, Warr and West 2004; Neal, West and Patterson 2005;

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Nishii, Lepak and Schneider 2008) have recently turned their attention to HRM *process*, in particular, the way HR policies and practices are communicated to employees. Bowen and Ostroff (2004) identify a *strong HRM system* as comprising three features: distinctiveness, consistency, and consensus. They suggest that these features contribute to a strong *organizational climate* defined as the shared perceptions of the organization in terms of practices, policies, procedures, routines, and rewards (Bowen and Ostroff 2004: 205). The establishment of a strong organizational climate builds on an individual's psychological climate, defined as an experientially based *perception* of what people 'see' and report happening to them as they make sense of their environment (pp. 205).

When HR practices are perceived by employees as distinctive, consistent with each other, and applied by key policy makers in a similar way, individual perceptions are likely to converge and will tend to be reinforced by the collectivity. In other words, feelings of well-being will lead to higher performance through 'motivating employees to adopt desired attitudes and behaviors that in the collective, help achieve the organization's strategic goals'. (Bowen and Ostroff 2004, p. 204)

In this article, we test Bowen and Ostroff's key ideas by examining the effects of the three features of an HRM system and shared perceptions regarding HPWS on three commonly used measures of employee work attitudes: *work satisfaction*, *vigor*, and *intention to quit*.¹ In addition, we examine the moderating effects of organizational climate on the relationships between features of an HRM system and employee work attitudes. Our contribution is to subject a leading theory of strategic HRM process to empirical test and by so doing advance our understanding of the mechanisms linking HR systems to employee attitudes. In pursuing this path, we improve on a previous study by Sanders, Dorenbosch and de Reuver (2008) by using three dependent variables rather than a single measure (affective commitment), and by employing a more convincing measure of consensus based on employee perceptions of HR policy and practice implementation rather than the extent of agreement as reported by line and HR managers (Fiske and Taylor 1984; Boxall and Macky 2007; see also Sanders et al. 2008). Employee surveys in three five star-hotels located in comparable urban areas in China provide the data for our study. Focusing on a single industry segment helps to minimize the influence of labor and product markets, and other environmental characteristics (Baron and Kreps 1999; Wright and Haggerty 2005). HPWS is relevant to these workplaces, because, compared to other privately-owned organizations in China (Zhu 2005, Zhu, Thomson and Cieri 2008), five-star Chinese hotels have been eager to adopt advanced HRM practices including extensive training and formalized performance appraisal systems (Sun et al. 2007).

The remainder of this article is organized in four sections. First, we outline our key concepts and theoretical framework followed by a discussion of motivating hypotheses. Second, we describe the data and methodology. Third, we report our results that are discussed in a fourth section that identifies some of the limitations of the study and considers the implications for further research and HR policy and practice.

The research framework

As mentioned above, the key concepts in our study are features of an HRM system and employee attitudes. The research framework is summarized in Figure 1, followed by an outline of our hypotheses.

Relationships between HRM system features and employee attitudes

Based on attribution theory (Kelley 1973), the process view of HRM explains how HR practices shape an individual's psychological climate (Ostroff and Bowen 2000; Bowen

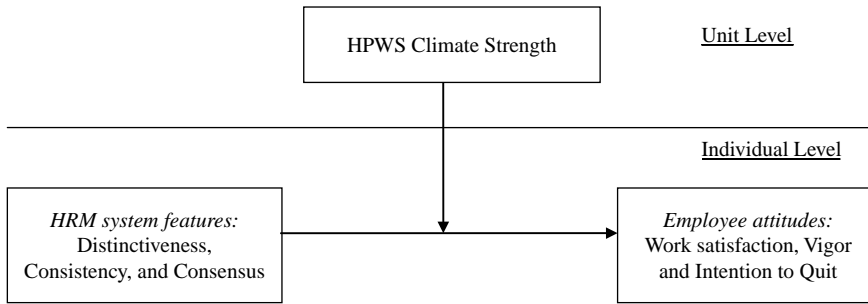


Figure 1. Hypothesized relationships linking HRM system features, HPWS climate strength and employee outcomes.

and Ostroff 2004). Employees use HRM messages as communication signals from management to make sense of their work situation (Guzzo and Noonan 1994; Schneider 2000). This sense-making process is facilitated by individual attributions about cause–effect relationships (Nishii et al. 2008). When employees become increasingly confident in making such cause–effect inferences, a strong psychological climate is likely to emerge. As noted earlier, three features of an HRM system that contribute to a strong climate are distinctiveness, consistency, and consensus (Bowen and Ostroff 2004).

Distinctiveness refers to an HRM system being visible, understandable, legitimate, and relevant to employees' goals (Kelley 1973; Bowen and Ostroff 2004; Sanders et al. 2008). When the HRM process clearly captures attention, employees are more likely to attribute HR messages to a purposeful management. *Consistency* refers to the features of an HRM system being internally aligned. This means that HR practices reinforce one another synergistically and are more likely to be viewed as a causal bundle having distinctive effects ultimately attributable to management across contexts and time (Sanders et al. 2008, p. 414). *Consensus* refers to the extent to which there is agreement among policy makers – typically HR and line managers – in the way HR practices are implemented. Thus, when HRM policy implementation, including procedures, are seen as highly consensual among decision makers, employees are more likely to agree that these emanate from management, i.e. that there is a cause–effect relationship. According to Bowen and Ostroff (2004), when an HRM system is high in the three features referred to above, employees will tend to have a clearer view of cause (HRM)–effect (a purposeful management) relationships and are likely to be strongly influenced by these system properties, especially where it conveys positive messages. This conjecture is largely but not entirely supported by the only empirical study we are aware of that has tested Bowen and Ostroff's key ideas. Sanders et al. (2008) used multi-actor data (671 employees, 67 line-managers, and 32 HR managers) from 18 departments in four Dutch hospitals to analyze the relationships between HRM system features and employees' affective commitment. Distinctiveness and consistency were found to be positively related to affective commitment, but consensus (measured as the deviance score of the perceptions of line and HR managers concerning HR practices) did not predict affective commitment.

As noted above, in this study, we focus on three employee attitudes: work satisfaction, vigor, and intention to quit rather than affective commitment as our dependent variables and following Bowen and Ostroff (2004) we hypothesize that:

Employees' perceptions of the distinctiveness, consistency, and consensus of the HRM system are positively related to their work satisfaction (H1) and vigor (H2), and are negatively related to intention to quit (H3).

Shared perceptions: the moderating effects of HPWS climate strength

Bowen and Ostroff (2004, p. 204) propose organizational climate as a mediator in the relationship between HRM system strength and organizational performance. Sanders et al. (2008) suggest that the concept of strong organizational climate used by Bowen and Ostroff (2004) refers to *climate strength* rather than *climate level*. Although climate level represents the convergent ratings of perceptions of a specific facet of the work situation such as safety, service, or HRM (Schneider 1990, 2000; Klein, Conn, Smith and Sorra 2001; Schneider, Salvaggio and Subirats 2002) and is usually measured by the mean of individual perception scores, climate strength refers to the extent of agreement about the climate. It is measured by homogeneity statistics relating to the aggregation of members' perceptions, such as standard deviation and within-group correlations (Klein et al. 2001; Luria 2008). Thus, the concept of climate strength more closely represents Bowen and Ostroff's (2004) concept of organizational climate as employees' shared perceptions.

In this study, we define HPWS climate strength as the extent of shared perceptions of HPWS in an organization. Where this is high, established norms induce conformity in terms of responses and foster skills that facilitate appropriate attitudes and behavior (Mischel 1973, 1977; Mischel and Peake 1982; Bowen and Ostroff 2004; Johns 2006). According to organizational climate research, climate strength usually has a moderating effect on outcomes (Gonzalez-Roma, Peiro and Tordera 2002; Schneider et al. 2002; Ehrhart 2004). Specifically, the relationship between antecedents and outcomes is stronger in a strong situation than in a weak one. Reflecting the convergence of group members' perceptions regarding climate level, strong climate strength implies that associated relationships of antecedents and outcomes are inclined to be interpreted in a similar way by group members (Mossholder, Bennett and Martin 1998; Schneider et al. 2002; Yang, Mossholder and Peng 2007). Moreover, contra Bowen and Ostroff (2004), Sanders et al. (2008) found that organizational climate moderated rather than mediated the relationship between consistency and affective commitment, this relationship being stronger when employees had more similar perceptions concerning the existence of high commitment work systems within their department. Accordingly, we expect that HPWS climate strength has a moderating rather than mediating effect on the relationship between the features of the HRM system and employee attitudes. In a situation where HPWS climate strength is high, implying that employees share perceptions regarding HPWS (HRM content), employees will be more confident about attributing this as having benign effects on their work experience. Thus, it can be hypothesized that:

HPWS climate strength moderates the relationships between key features of an HRM system (distinctiveness, consistency and consensus) and work satisfaction (H4), vigor (H5), and intention to quit (H6) such that these relationships are stronger when HPWS climate strength is high.

Method

Sample and procedures

Data were collected from three five-star hotels, located in three urban cities (Shanghai, Ningbo and Dongguan) in China. Each hotel has at least 200 rooms and is more than 4 years old. Each is privately owned and one is managed by an international hotel group. Management was approached through personal contacts, which is useful in doing research in China (Easterby-Smith and Malina 1999). Surveys were distributed to each participating hotel. Sealed completed questionnaires were returned first to the hotel's HR manager and then to a researcher. For all three hotels, 810 valid responses of frontline employees (90% response rate) were collected. This high response rate has been observed

in several Chinese management studies (see Cooke 2009). The dataset included 484 (59.8%) female and 326 (40.2%) male employees, with an average of 25.5 (SD = 7.9) years of age and an average tenure in the organization of 26.6 months (SD = 37.15). Over two-thirds of employees (68%) had obtained qualifications from vocational or high schools and earned higher salaries than their counterparts in other local hotels.²

Each hotel consists of several service departments, such as catering, reception, and security. Within each department, there are several work units. For example, the catering department of one hotel includes banqueting, beverage, restaurants, and room service units. Our dataset comprising the three hotels included 64 units.

Measures

The questionnaire was administered in Mandarin after initially being developed in English. Two bilingual researchers back-translated the survey independently (Brislin 1980). In addition, a pilot study was conducted on a group of frontline employees; these were subsequently excluded from the final dataset. The questionnaire was finalized with a few changes in wording.

For the items of all scales, we used six-point rather than five-point Likert scales. This was done in order to address Chinese people's tendency to conceal positive emotions and hence select midpoints of a range (Lee, Jones, Mineyama and Zhang 2002). Response items ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree.

Work satisfaction (Cammann, Fichman, Jenkins and Klesh 1983) was measured by a three-item scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.81$). Two illustrative items were: 'All in all, I am satisfied with my job' and 'In general, I like working here'. *Vigor* (Schaufeli and Bakker 2004) was measured by a five-item scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.74$). Example items included 'At my work, I feel bursting with energy' and 'When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work'. *Intention to quit* (Firth, Mellor, Moore and Loquet 2004) was measured by a three-item scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.84$). For example, 'I often think about quitting my job' and 'I am starting to ask my friends/contacts about other job possibilities'.

High-performance HR practices was measured by a 17-item scale, modified from the scale specifically developed by Sun et al. (2007) to study Chinese hotel employees. This covered five HR practices related to training, internal promotion, employee participation, results-oriented pay, and job security. Items included 'I have had sufficient job-related training' and 'My job allows me to make decisions on my own'. Each HR practice demonstrated good reliability (Cronbach's α ranged from 0.70 to 0.88). Assuming that the system of HR practices rather than a single practice reflects an organization's investment in employees and influences the organization's performance beyond the sum of such practices (Rousseau 1995; Delery and Doty 1996; Allen, Shore and Griffeth 2003; Whicker and Andrews 2004; Guest 2007), a *HPWS index* was developed along lines similar to other scholars (Ramsay, Scholarios and Harley 2000; Batt 2002; Beugelsdijk 2008; Doellgast 2008). The sum of the item scores for each of the five HR practices mentioned earlier was averaged and then an average was calculated across the five practices (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.72$). Confirmatory factor analysis suggested a good fit with the data as indicated by the fit statistics ($\chi^2(109) = 424.30$; $\chi^2/df = 3.89$; $p < 0.001$; TLI = 0.92; CFI = 0.94; RMSEA = 0.06).

Following several climate studies (Luria 2008; Sanders et al. 2008), *climate strength of HPWS* was calculated as the inverse standard deviation of the HPWS index at the unit level.

Regarding the HRM system, *distinctiveness* was measured by a shortened five-item scale developed by Frenkel, Li and Restubog (in press) with good reliability (Cronbach's

$\alpha = 0.84$). Example items included ‘HR practices here help me to achieve the company’s goals’ and ‘HR practices here make me feel much more confident in my ability to do my job well’. *Consistency* (Sanders et al. 2008) was assessed by within-respondent agreement in relation to the HPWS index, operationalized as the inverse average deviation for each HR practice for each respondent (consistency-based approach, Burke, Finkelstein and Dusig 1999). *Consensus* (Delmotte, Winne, Gilbert and Sels 2007) was measured by a modified four-item scale (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.86$), with items such as ‘HR practices are delivered by mutual agreement between HR management and line management’ and ‘Management unanimously supports HR policies’. Confirmatory factor analysis demonstrated that a two-factor (distinctiveness and consensus) structure ($\chi^2(26) = 183.33$; $\chi^2/df = 7.05$; $p < 0.001$; TLI = 0.94; CFI = 0.97; RMSEA = 0.08) fits the data better than a one-factor structure ($\chi^2(27) = 322.63$; $\chi^2/df = 11.95$; $p < 0.001$; TLI = 0.89; CFI = 0.93; RMSEA = 0.11).³ Therefore, although distinctiveness and consensus were strongly related (see later), they were analyzed as two variables.

Based on the proposition that employees’ personal and employment characteristics are likely to influence the three dependent variables, the following characteristics were included as controls: age, gender, type of labor contract (permanent vs. temporary), educational level (from junior middle school to master degree and above), and workplace tenure.

Most measures were based on self-report data collected at one point in time. The analysis may, therefore, be vulnerable to the problem of common method variance (CMV) (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee and Podsakoff 2003). Spector (2006) suggests that CMV caused by a single data source (a single rater rather than multi-raters) should be distinguished from CMV caused by the same measurement techniques (such as item formats, data collection procedures, key methods). Regarding the data source, as addressed by many researchers, information on employee perceptions and attitudes is difficult to measure accurately using methods other than self-reports (Frese and Zapf 1988; Spector 2006). One way to confirm the accuracy of the self-report measures is to link them with data from other sources. In Table 1, we attempted to compare the self-report measures from the survey with information obtained from hotels and an industry report. As shown in the table, the ranking of turnover rate for the three hotels accords with the intention to quit ranking. Assuming a positive relationship between employee attitudes and performance (Boxall and Macky 2009), employee self-reported work satisfaction and vigor match well with the hotel performance ranking. Thus, it can be concluded that bias introduced by a single source is likely to be limited.

Regarding CMV attributed to common method (survey), most of the correlations between independent and dependent variables were significantly related ($-0.43 \leq r \leq 0.52$). This raises the possibility that the observed relationships were inflated. In order

Table 1. A comparison of self-reported measures and industry data.

Organization	Means of measured variables			Objective figures	
	Work satisfaction	Vigor	Intention to quit	Turnover in 2008 (%)	Rankings of city-level hotel performance (by average revenue per available room) ^a
1. Hotel A	4.57	4.28	2.73	21	1
2. Hotel B	4.22	3.80	3.08	30	2
3. Hotel C	4.17	3.83	3.42	42	3

Source: ^aChina Hotel Industry Study report (CHIS 2008).

to rule out the possibility that CMV is so large that this alters the key results, we conducted a method-variance–marker-variable analysis proposed by Lindell and Whitney (2001). The rationale for this is to compare the original correlations between independent and dependent variables with those after controlling a theoretically irrelevant marker-variable obtained by the same method. If the correlations stay significant and non-zero, the original correlations observed cannot reasonably be accounted for by a common method factor. In our study, individual prevention self-regulatory focus, defined as the extent to which individuals use prevention strategies to reach their goals (Kark and Van Dijk 2007), was used as a marker-variable. A partial correlation analysis, as reported in Table 2, shows that the relationships between independent and dependent variables continue to have significant and non-zero coefficients. Hence, it can be concluded that the bias originating from the same method has limited influence on the relationships in this study.

Data analysis

The data consist of employees ($n = 810$) nested in units ($n = 64$), which are situated in three hotels. As the variance in the three employee attitude measures is only slightly related to the hotel level (intra class correlations (ICC(1)'s) are below 0.05), this level was not taken into account (LeBreton and Senter 2008). This means that the data can be conceptualized at two levels: employee (level 1) and unit (level 2). Level 1 refers to individual employee information in each unit (work satisfaction, vigor, and intention to quit and independent variables). Level 2 captures the variance between units (climate strength). Accordingly, it is appropriate to employ hierarchical two-level modeling, which allows simultaneous analysis of the effects of both within- and between unit-levels (Raudenbush and Bryk 2002). Parameter estimates and chi-square information based on this analysis is analogous to beta coefficients and R -square indicators in regression analysis. The deviance in chi-square of two models can be used to judge whether there is significant model improvement. The cross-level interactions needed to test the hypotheses H4–H6 were calculated by the interactions of mean-centered perception of the HRM system features (level 1) and climate strength (level 2) in order to eliminate nonessential correlations between the interaction terms and their component variables (Aiken and West 1991).

Results

Table 3 reports the means, standard deviations, and correlations between all variables at the employee level. As shown in the table, distinctiveness and consensus between line and HR were positively related to work satisfaction ($r = 0.52$, $p < 0.01$ and $r = 0.42$, $p < 0.01$ respectively) and vigor ($r = 0.43$, $p < 0.01$ and $r = 0.38$, $p < 0.01$,

Table 2. Partial correlations among key variables after controlling for a marker-variable.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Distinctiveness					
2. Consensus	0.63**				
3. Work satisfaction	0.48**	0.37**			
4. Intention to quit	-0.41**	-0.31**	-0.66**		
5. Vigor	0.39**	0.36**	0.43**	-0.34*	

Note: $n = 810$; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$; individual prevention self-regulatory focus measured in the same survey was controlled.

Table 3. Means, standard deviations, reliabilities, and correlations between variables.

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Age (in years)	25.45	7.97												
2. Gender	1.60	0.49	-0.01											
3. Education level	2.87	0.78	-0.01	0.04										
4. Contract type	1.54	0.89	-0.02	0.16**	0.13**									
5. HPWS index	4.42	0.70	0.14**	-0.07*	-0.01	-0.11**	(0.72)							
6. Distinctiveness	4.33	0.89	0.19**	-0.03	-0.06	-0.05	0.55**	(0.84)						
7. Consistency	2.33	1.77	-0.01	-0.04	0.05	-0.08*	0.16**	0.05						
8. Consensus	4.29	0.98	0.25**	-0.02	0.01	-0.07	0.56**	0.66**	0.12**	(0.86)				
9. Work satisfaction	4.32	1.12	0.18**	-0.06	-0.09*	-0.19**	0.47**	0.52**	0.06	0.42**	(0.81)			
10. Intention to quit	3.09	1.35	-0.24**	0.03	0.03	0.18**	-0.32**	-0.43**	-0.06	-0.34**	-0.66**	(0.84)		
11. Vigor	3.00	1.11	0.21**	-0.11**	0.06	-0.10**	0.39**	0.43**	0.03	0.38**	0.45**	-0.36**	(0.74)	
12. Climate strength	1.63	0.41	-0.16**	0.11**	-0.02	-0.07	-0.02	-0.06	0.13**	-0.10**	-0.02	0.04	-0.08	-

Note: $n = 810$; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$; SD means standard deviation; reliabilities are presented within the parentheses.

respectively), and were negatively related to intention to quit ($r = -0.43, p < 0.01$ and $r = -0.34, p < 0.01$, respectively).

Table 4 reports the results of multi-level analyses, testing hypotheses H1–H6. Model 1 shows that several controls – most notably, age, and type of labor contract – had significant effects. The (chi-square) deviance reported for Model 1 compared this model to a model with no predictors. The significant chi-square decrease indicates that the control variables significantly improved the model.

Model 2 examines the relationships between the three features of an HRM system and the dependent variables. As anticipated, we found significant relationships between the HPWS index and work satisfaction ($0.38, p < 0.01$), vigor ($0.27, p < 0.01$), and intention to quit ($-0.26, p < 0.05$). This means that a one unit increase in the independent variable – in this case HPWS – is associated with increases in work satisfaction, vigor, and intention to quit of the order of 0.38, 0.27, and -0.26 of a unit, respectively. For work satisfaction, distinctiveness showed a significant effect ($0.45, p < 0.01$). Consistency and consensus did not have significant influences on work satisfaction. Thus, the results partially confirm H1.

For vigor, distinctiveness had a significant effect ($0.27, p < 0.01$). Consistency and consensus did not have significant influences. The results indicate partial support for H2. For intention to quit, distinctiveness showed a negative effect ($-0.50, p < 0.01$) and consistency showed a positive effect ($0.28, p < 0.05$), while consensus had no significant influence. Thus, H3 was also partially supported.

Considering the three dependent variables together, the predicted relationships between HRM system features and employee attitudes (H1–H3) were partially confirmed. Distinctiveness in particular, demonstrated a strong influence on all three dependent variables.

In Model 3, we explored the mediating effect of HPWS climate strength. Sanders et al. (2008) hypothesized a positive relationship between climate strength and affective commitment, and in line with Bowen and Ostroff (2004), a mediating effect for climate strength. In an exploratory analysis, we tested the mediating effect of climate strength on the three dependent variables in Model 3. This occurs when climate strength has significant effects on the dependent variables and when the significant relationships that exist between the HRM features and the dependant variables (shown in Model 2) disappear (Baron and Kenny 1986). The results indicate that there was no significant effect of climate strength on the three employee attitudes' variables, nor do the results of the HRM system features differ compared to Model 2.

In Model 4, we examined the moderating effects of HPWS climate strength on the relationships between the HRM system features and the dependent variables. As illustrated in Model 4, the interaction of climate strength and consensus had significant effects on work satisfaction and intention to quit. For work satisfaction, the positive relationship between the interaction and work satisfaction indicates that when climate strength was higher, the effects of consensus on work satisfaction were stronger. This is depicted in Figure 2, partially confirming H4.

For vigor, none of interaction effects were found to be significant, thus disconfirming H5. Intention to quit had a significant and negative relationship between interaction of climate strength and consensus. As illustrated in Figure 3, this suggests that when climate strength was higher, the effect of consensus on intention to quit was stronger. This partially supports H6.

Together, Model 4 shows that H4–H6, which predict the moderating effects of climate strength on relationships between HRM system features and employee work attitudes,

Table 4. Results of hierarchical linear modeling analysis for work satisfaction, vigor, and intention to quit.

Models	Work satisfaction				Vigor				Intention to quit				Affective commitment in Sanders et al. (2008) study			
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
<i>Individual level</i>																
Distinctiveness/Relevance ^a			0.45**	0.46**			0.27**	0.27**				0.27**				
Consistency			-0.10	-0.14			-0.13	-0.12				-0.12				
Consensus ^b			-0.03	-0.05			0.07	0.06				0.02				
Unit level																
Climate			0.45	0.40			-0.04	-0.02				-0.16				
strength (CS)																
<i>Cross-level</i>																
Interactions																
CS X distinctiveness				-0.69				-0.48								
CS X consistency				-0.55				0.41								
CS X consensus				0.73*				0.33								
<i>Individual-level control variables</i>																
Age	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01*	0.01*	0.01*	0.01*	-0.03**	-0.02**	-0.02**	-0.02**	0.01**	0.01**	0.02**	0.02**
Gender	-0.16 [#]	-0.10	-0.11	-0.10	-0.30**	-0.25**	-0.25**	-0.26**	0.09	0.04	0.05	0.07	-0.04	-0.04	-0.05	-0.04
Type of contract	0.14	0.10	0.10	0.10	0.05	0.09	0.08	0.09	-0.26*	-0.17*	0.16*	0.16*	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.02
Educational level	-0.06	-0.04	-0.04	-0.03	0.06	0.09*	0.09*	0.09*	0.01	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01	-0.09**	-0.07*	-0.05*	-0.10**
HPWS index	0.38**	0.38**	0.38**	0.38**	0.27**	0.27**	0.27**	0.27**								
(constant)	4.6**	2.6**	2.9**	2.9**	3.9**	2.2**	2.2**	2.3**	3.4**	5.7**	5.6**	5.5**	30.1**	20.7**	20.7**	10.1*
χ^2	2023.3	1744.9	1743.5	1738.7	1748.6	1606.9	1606.6	1604.8	2272.6	2060.1	2059	2054.5	908	870	869	837
($\Delta\chi^2$ (Δdf) ^c)	215(4)**	278(4)**	1.4(1)	4.8(3)*	378(4)**	141(4)**	0.3(1)	1.8(3)	275(4)**	212(4)**	0.3(1)	5.3(3)*	44(5)**	38(5)**	1(1)	30(4)**

Note: Unit $n = 64$; [#] $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

^a In Sanders et al. (2008), distinctiveness was referred to as relevance.

^b In Sanders et al. (2008), consensus was measured based on HR and line managers' reports.

^c The deviance reported for Model 1 compared this model to a model with no predictors. Workplace tenure was shown to have no significant effect and was therefore excluded from the models.

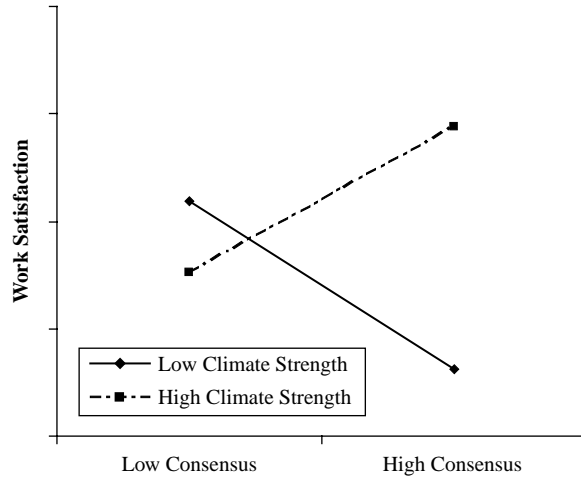


Figure 2. Effects of interaction between climate strength and consensus on work satisfaction.

were partially confirmed. The interaction of climate strength and consensus in particular showed a strong influence on work satisfaction and intention to quit.

In sum, based on a study of employees in three five-star hotels in China, our research confirms that employee perceptions of the distinctiveness, consistency, and consensus associated with so-called high-performance HR practices significantly contribute to employees' work satisfaction and vigor, and reduce their intention to quit. Controlling for specific HR practices, these features are in some respects significantly associated with our three measures of employee work attitudes. Specifically, when employees see HR practices as more distinctive, they are more satisfied, more enthusiastic about their work, and less inclined to quit. However, consensus shows no significant effects on the three variables. In contrast to part of H3, consistency has a positive relationship with intention to quit. This means that when employees perceive HR practices as more internally consistent, they are more likely to quit. We address this apparently surprising finding below.

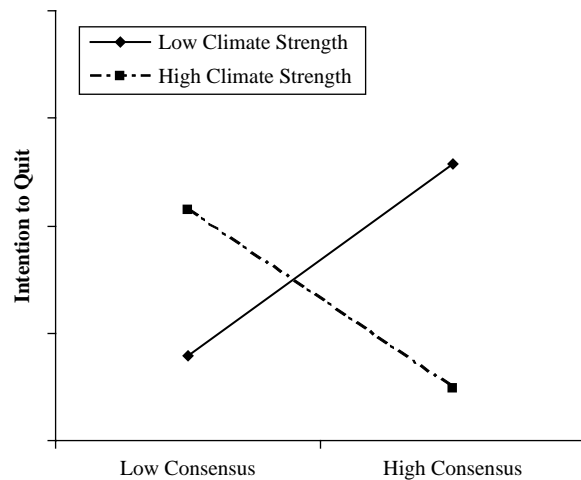


Figure 3. Effects of interaction between climate strength and consensus on intention to quit.

The results also showed that shared perceptions of HR practices (HPWS climate strength) within a unit have a moderating effect on the relationships between perceptions of HRM system features and measures of employee work attitudes. Two cross-level interaction effects were found significant in this study: (1) HPWS climate strength moderates the relationship between consensus and work satisfaction, and (2) HPWS climate strength moderates the relationship between consensus and intention to quit. Both interactions suggest that the relationship between consensus and employee outcomes is stronger when HPWS climate strength is higher.

Discussion and conclusion

In contrast to the HPWS literature that focuses on HR practices, in this study we followed Bowen and Ostroff (2004) in examining HRM processes, specifically the strength of an HR system (its distinctiveness, consistency, and consensus) and its contribution to organizational climate (employees' shared perceptions of the HR system). Comparing the detailed results of our study with those of Sanders et al. (2008), we found both similarities and differences. One similarity is that the HRM system features have main effects on employee work attitudes. In particular, distinctiveness has a strong influence on the three measures of employee attitudes. This suggests that where HRM practices were perceived as distinctive, visible, relevant, and legitimate, their effects on employee work attitudes will be positive regardless of national culture. Both studies failed to find an interaction effect between HPWS climate strength and distinctiveness (one of three HR system features) on the three employee attitudes.

Regarding differences, the effects of consistency on employee attitudes varied in the two studies. In Sanders et al. (2008), a positive relationship was found between consistency and affective commitment for Dutch hospital employees, which would seem to imply a negative relationship with intention to quit. However, as noted earlier, we found a positive relationship between HRM consistency and intention to quit for Chinese hotel employees. One possible explanation is that Chinese people value 'rule-of-man' rather than 'rule-of-law' as a governance system (Jacobs, Gao and Herbig 1995). In other words, they perceive social relationships to be more important than formal rules in management decision making. The notion of 'rule-of-man' presumes that key decision makers are wise and will not abuse their power and so those in higher positions are granted authority to make decisions, which are seldom questioned. Regarding HR practices, this implies variability and perceived inconsistency in relationships between managers and subordinates, particularly when managers use quality of social relationships rather than objective criteria to make important decisions regarding performance evaluation, pay, and promotion. This might explain why, contrary to expectation, there is no relationship between consistency in HR policies and intention to quit. Moreover, according to Jacobs and colleagues (1995), compared to Europeans, 'the Chinese hold a negative attitude towards civil law ... [Because] there was no civil law to protect their interests' (pp. 31). Treating HR policies and regulations as analogous to 'laws', employees may see such regulations as distinctly unsupportive substitutes for personal relationships. This might explain why there is a positive relationship between consistency – in HR policies and procedures – and intention to quit.

This consideration invites an interpretation of a further difference in the two studies. In contrast to the findings of Sanders et al. (2008), and as noted above, consensus was found to have a significant interaction effect in our study. It is likely that a strong positive norm reinforces existing relationships thereby explaining the interaction between HPWS

climate strength and consensus on employee work satisfaction and intention to quit; however, the norm may not be sufficiently strong to impact work vigor because enthusiasm for work is probably related to *individual* opportunities, contributions, and accompanying rewards rather than more general HR policies and practices (Johns 2006).

Another possible explanation relates to *cultural* differences. Consensus tends to be valued differently in the two cultures. With respect to Hofstede's (1980, 1994) dimension of collectivism, many cross-cultural studies have demonstrated (Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai and Lucca 1988; Verbury, Drenth, Koopman, Muijen and Wang 1999; Vliert, Shi, Sanders, Wang and Huang 2004) that Chinese people are more inclined than their Dutch counterparts to act as members of groups rather as individuals. This suggests that consensus may be more valued in China than in the Netherlands. Therefore, the significant impact of the interaction of climate strength and consensus on work satisfaction and intention to quit in our study can be interpreted as reflecting the importance placed on workplace harmony, i.e. a consensus between employees (climate strength) and between managers (consensus) in maintaining a stable, satisfied workforce. This contrasts with the Netherlands, where, as shown by Sanders et al.'s study, there is no significant relationship between interaction of these variables and affective commitment. These differences in results suggest that future research would benefit by including cultural variables in studies examining employee responses to HRM system features (Aumann and Ostroff 2006).

Finally, it is possible that this variation in the interaction effect of HPWS climate strength on consensus in relation to employee attitudes in the two studies may reflect measurement differences. As noted earlier, we used employee perceptions rather than manager reports to measure this variable. We argued that in contrast to the findings of Sanders et al., this is a more accurate measure, which yields results in accordance with our hypotheses (H3 and H6). Future research will need to address this measurement issue more carefully, an observation that leads us to consider additional implications of our study.

Limitations and implications for research and management practice

Our study has four main limitations that suggest ways in which future research might be pursued. First, although potential problems were addressed earlier, the cross-sectional design and reliance on single informants may nevertheless limit our confidence in explaining the relationships between HRM system features and employee attitudes, and in making cause-effect inferences. Future research would benefit by pursuing multi-source, longitudinal studies. A second limitation is that we evaluated the effects of high-performance HR practices and shared perceptions of employees only in relation to three measures of employee attitudes. These could be extended to include additional variables such as creativity and proactivity. Third, our model is relatively simple. Further elaboration requires incorporation of additional moderator variables (e.g. task interdependence) and clear specification of the mechanisms linking antecedent and moderator variables to employee attitudes (Grant and Parker 2009). Social identity and social exchange theory could prove useful in future model building, which ultimately needs to include behavioral and attitudinal variables. Fourth and finally, our study was restricted to a single industry. In order to generalize, it would be desirable for future studies to include additional service industries.

Regarding implications for management practice, our results suggest that managers should make their HR systems (sets of practices) attractive to employees and communicate this clearly and frequently so that employees appreciate their value (Burton, Lauridsen and Obel 2004; Ngo, Lau and Foley 2008). This is similar to internal employer branding

(Edwards 2010). It implies that employees should be consulted regularly about the distinctiveness and advantages of the organization's HR practices. Problems associated with such practices should be rectified immediately so that employee perceptions remain strongly positive. This might be costly and so the potential benefits in terms of worker satisfaction, work vigor, reduced labor turnover, and probably performance needs to be weighed against these costs. Accordingly, managers may choose to be selective, concentrating HR policy and practices on those aspects deemed to be most significant by employees. Alternatively, they may wish to restrict their attention to those employees who add the most value to the organization. However, this approach risks the possibility of adverse reaction by other employees who perceive inequitable treatment.

HPWS climate strength is important in relation to the influence of intra-management consensus on work satisfaction and intention to quit. This implies that it is important for senior line management, their subordinates, and HR managers to display unity in articulating and implementing HR policy. This unity confers legitimacy on policy and it suggests effective implementation, with all managers knowing, articulating, and implementing the policy in a consistent fashion. This avoids employees perceiving that the policy is being applied selectively or inequitably causing confusion and dissatisfaction. It is not enough that managers act in a united manner, rather than as suggested earlier, this has to be complemented by communication so that HR policies and practices are noticed and appreciated by employees.

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Notes

1. Intention to quit is important for hotel employers because the turnover rates in the hotel industry average over 40% in several countries (Cheng and Brown 1998; Boella, Goss-Turner and Eade 2005). Five-star hotels do their best to limit turnover as they depend on providing consistently high-quality service.
2. Interviews with HR managers and employees at the three hotels suggested that employees' salaries were higher than at other local hotels. Based on official statistics (NBSC 2008), we found that average salaries at each of the hotels were slightly lower than the local, all industry average pay rates as follows: RMB 1000 vs. 1030 (Dongguan), 2400 vs. 2892 (Shanghai), and 2100 vs. 2254 (Ningbo). However, the local all-industry average statistics overstate the salary rates for service workers because they include managers.
3. Consistency is an ipsative measure, derived from the average deviation of several items. Consequently, it is not included in the confirmatory factor analysis.

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