

Integration and Extension of the Effects of Gratitude Expression in Organiza- tions^{*}

2026-08-14

ChinaRxiv

Abstract

Gratitude expression is a common interpersonal interactive behavior in organizational contexts and is generally regarded as conveying positive social signals and producing various beneficial psychological and behavioral effects. However, existing research has found that gratitude expression may yield differentiated outcomes across different contexts, and its underlying mechanisms still lack systematic integration and explanation. Based on a systematic review of relevant empirical studies, this paper constructs a classification framework along two dimensions: scope of effect (intrapersonal vs. interpersonal) and valence of effect (positive vs. negative). It integrates the effects of gratitude expression on expressers, recipients, and observers, and accordingly identifies four types of effects: intrapersonal positive effects, interpersonal positive effects, interpersonal negative effects, and intrapersonal negative effects. On this basis, drawing on social relations theory, this paper proposes an explanatory framework for effect differentiation centered on perceptions of communal relationships or exchange relationships, and classifies contextual cues that influence relationship perceptions into two categories: individual cues and interaction cues, in order to explain how different contextual conditions shape the direction of the effects of gratitude expression. Based on the above integration and explanation, this paper proposes three directions for future research: enriching research on intrapersonal and negative effects, systematizing research on boundary conditions, and extending effect research from a temporal perspective. It thus provides a new theoretical perspective for understanding the complex role of gratitude expression in organizations and offers a systematic research agenda for future studies.

Full Text

Integration and Extension of the Effects of Gratitude Expression in Organizations*

Cao Limei¹ Cheng Xiang² Yao Yuewei² Yin Rui² Chen Weihua¹ Qin Xin²

(1 School of Tourism, Sun Yat-sen University, Zhuhai 519082)

(2 School of Management, Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou 510275)

Abstract Gratitude expression is a common interpersonal interaction behavior in organizational contexts. It is generally believed to transmit positive social signals and to generate beneficial psychological and behavioral effects in multiple respects. However, existing research has found that gratitude expression may produce differentiated outcomes across different contexts, and its underlying mechanisms still lack systematic integration and explanation. On the basis of a systematic review of relevant empirical studies, this paper constructs a classification framework along two dimensions—effect scope (intrapersonal vs. interpersonal) and effect valence (positive vs. negative)—integrates the effects of

gratitude expression on expressers, recipients, and observers, and accordingly identifies four types of effects: intrapersonal positive effects, interpersonal positive effects, interpersonal negative effects, and intrapersonal negative effects. Building on this foundation, and drawing on social-relations theory, this paper proposes an explanatory framework for effect differentiation centered on perceptions of communal relationships or exchange relationships. It further classifies contextual cues that influence relationship perceptions into individual cues and interaction cues, in order to explain how different contextual conditions shape the direction of the effects of gratitude expression. Based on the above integration and explanation, this paper proposes three future research directions: enriching research on intrapersonal and negative effects, systematizing research on boundary conditions, and extending effect research from a temporal perspective. In doing so, it provides a new theoretical perspective for understanding the complex role of gratitude expression in organizations and offers a systematic research agenda for future studies.

Keywords gratitude, gratitude expression, positive effects, negative effects, context

1 Introduction

Gratitude felt in the heart is repaid through action. Gratitude is a universal emotion that transcends temporal and cultural boundaries. From the ancient Roman philosopher Cicero's statement that "gratitude is the root of virtue" to the Confucian saying that "a drop of kindness should be repaid with a gushing spring," gratitude has always been engraved in the spiritual map of human civilization. As the division of labor in modern society has become increasingly refined, organizations have provided an institutionalized context for frequent and sustained interpersonal interactions among individuals. Against this background, gratitude is not only manifested as an internal personality trait or emotional experience within individuals, but is also increasingly manifested as an outward interpersonal interaction behavior. In organizations, individuals often convey their inner gratitude—including genuine or non-genuine gratitude—to others through verbal and nonverbal cues (Locklear et al., 2023). This behavior is referred to as gratitude expression. As an interpersonal interaction behavior that carries information about social relationships, gratitude expression can not only transmit positive emotions, but may also influence how both parties in an interaction understand relationships, resources, and social norms. It has therefore gradually become an important topic in organizational behavior and social psychology.

Over the past two decades, scholars have conducted a large body of research on gratitude (Cregg & Cheavens, 2021; Ma et al., 2017; Wood et al., 2010). Existing reviews have mainly focused on trait gratitude and state gratitude, emphasizing their functional effects for individuals themselves. These studies generally find that the experience of gratitude helps enhance individuals' own psychological

Manuscript received: 2026-03-16

* National Natural Science Foundation of China project (72502250), Guangdong Provincial Natural Science Foundation General Program (2026A1515011276), China Postdoctoral Science Foundation General Program (2025M780678), and Sun Yat-sen University Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities—Young Faculty Development Program (2025qntd67).

Corresponding author: Qin Xin, E-mail: qinxin@sysu.edu.cn

health, subjective well-being, and social adaptability, and can promote prosocial behavior, thereby improving the quality of interpersonal relationships with others. By comparison, although a certain body of empirical research has accumulated on individuals' behavior of expressing gratitude to others in interactions, the relevant literature still lacks systematic integration.¹ For example, some studies show that gratitude expression can strengthen social bonds, stimulate organizational citizenship behavior, and improve job performance (Grant & Gino, 2010; Komase et al., 2019; Ritzenhöfer et al., 2017). Other studies provide preliminary evidence indicating that, in certain contexts, gratitude expression may trigger unintended consequences such as social comparison, strategic use, and even ethical bias (Cai & Wang, 2025; Lee et al., 2018; Lv et al., 2026). These findings suggest that gratitude expression does not always bring positive outcomes; in some contexts, it may also produce negative consequences.

However, although existing research has preliminarily revealed the positive and negative influences of gratitude expression, the literature remains insufficiently integrated at the theoretical level. First, existing studies mostly revolve around a single outcome or a specific target, lacking an overall framework that simultaneously integrates positive and negative effects, and therefore making it difficult to present a comprehensive picture of gratitude-expression effects. In particular, different studies have separately focused on the responses of expressers, recipients, or observers, but lack an integrated framework that incorporates the perspectives of all three types of actors, thereby limiting an overall understanding of the cross-actor effects of gratitude expression. At the same time, although some studies have preliminarily found that gratitude expression may produce negative consequences under specific conditions, a theoretical framework capable of explaining why it leads to different outcomes has not yet taken shape. To address these shortcomings, this article integrates and extends the effects of gratitude expression in organizational contexts on the basis of a systematic review of existing empirical research. First, this article constructs a classification framework from two dimensions—the scope of effects (intrapersonal vs. inter-

¹The influence of gratitude on individuals differs from the intrapersonal effects of gratitude expression. The former takes trait gratitude or state gratitude as the independent variable, with the influence process occurring within the individual; the latter takes the behavior of gratitude expression as the independent variable and examines the influence of overt expressive behavior on the expresser's own psychology and behavior.

personal) and the valence of effects (positive vs. negative)—and, on this basis, summarizes four types of effects with theoretical distinctiveness. Second, this article integrates social-relational theory with the existing literature and proposes an effect-differentiation explanatory framework centered on relationship perception, clarifying how gratitude expression leads to different consequences by strengthening perceptions of communal relationships or by making perceptions of exchange relationships salient in specific contexts, and further identifying key contextual cues that influence this process. Finally, on this basis, this article proposes three future research directions: enriching research on the intrapersonal and negative effects of gratitude expression, systematizing research on boundary conditions, and extending effects research from a temporal perspective.

2 Integration of the Effects of Gratitude Expression

When systematically reviewing the literature on the effects of gratitude expression, the use of a classification framework has important methodological value (Klev et al., 2025). The current literature on gratitude expression is characterized by broad outcome variables, diverse effect mechanisms, and scattered research orientations. Traditional linear or thematic narrative reviews have difficulty grasping the full picture of this field, whereas a classification framework can organize heterogeneous findings through structured key dimensions, thereby revealing the theoretical logic and internal connections behind the effects of gratitude expression. Based on a systematic synthesis of the existing literature, this study starts from two relatively independent and highly complementary analytical dimensions—the scope of effects (intrapersonal vs. interpersonal)² and valence (positive vs. negative)—and constructs a classification framework for the effects of gratitude expression in organizations (see Figure 1), thereby providing a more explanatory integrative perspective for future research. Specifically, on the one hand, intrapersonal effects focus on the influence of gratitude expression on the expresser themselves, whereas interpersonal effects focus on the influence of gratitude expression on others (e.g., recipients or observers). On the other hand, positive eff-

²Given that current research on gratitude expression at the collective level remains very limited (Fehr et al., 2026), the empirical studies reviewed in this article mainly focus on the individual level. On this basis, considering that gratitude expression is, in essence, an interpersonal interaction behavior that may involve different interaction roles (such as expressers, recipients, and observers), this article further distinguishes between intrapersonal effects and interpersonal effects in order to characterize the direction in which the effects of gratitude expression are transmitted among different actors. In terms of operational definition, this article distinguishes the intrapersonal and interpersonal effects of gratitude expression based on the behavioral actor corresponding to the outcome variable. When the outcome variable is manifested as the expresser's own psychological or behavioral response, it is defined as an intrapersonal effect; when the outcome variable is manifested as the psychological or behavioral response of others (such as recipients or observers), it is defined as an interpersonal effect. It should be further noted that, in interpersonal effects, although the behavioral actor is the recipient or observer, the target of that behavior may act on the actor themselves, or may be directed toward the expresser or a third party.

Positive effects should refer to the beneficial or constructive impacts produced by the expression of gratitude, whereas negative effects refer to harmful or destructive impacts.

The cross-combination of these two dimensions yields four theoretically distinguishable types of effects of gratitude expression: intrapersonal positive effects, interpersonal positive effects, interpersonal negative effects, and intrapersonal negative effects. These types differ in their functional manifestations and mechanisms of action (as shown in Table 1) and constitute the key analytical units for systematically integrating the existing literature on the effects of gratitude expression.

Figure 1. Classification framework for the effects of gratitude expression

Diagram labels: vertical axis—top, intrapersonal effects; bottom, interpersonal effects. Horizontal axis—left, positive effects; right, negative effects. Quadrants: I intrapersonal positive effects; II interpersonal positive effects; III interpersonal negative effects; IV intrapersonal negative effects.

Table 1. Four types of effects of gratitude expression

Type	Representative mechanisms	Representative literature
Intrapersonal positive effects	Resource replenishment, emotion regulation, physiological responses	(Adair et al., 2020); (Chan, 2013); (Gu et al., 2022); (Kaplan et al., 2014); (Ki, 2009); (Komase et al., 2019); (Neumeier et al., 2017)

Type	Representative mechanisms	Representative literature
Interpersonal positive effects	Emotional triggering, resource gains, need satisfaction, cognitive inference	(Ahmadi & Fakhimi, 2021); (Converso et al., 2015); (Fehr et al., 2025); (Hu et al., 2024); (Imai, 2024); (Jazaieri & O' Neill, 2025); (Lee & Johnson, 2025); (Liu et al., 2022); (Mckeen et al., 2020); (Namkoong et al., 2024); (Ni et al., 2022); (Nicuță et al., 2024); (Ritzenhöfer et al., 2019); (Sheridan et al., 2025); (Starkey et al., 2019); (Tang et al., 2022); (Tremblay, 2024); (Lv et al., 2026); (Zhang et al., 2025); (Lü Xiaoyi & Bai Xinwen, 2019); (Wang Qiqi et al., 2021); (Zhu Fuhao et al., 2023)
Interpersonal negative effects	Emotional comparison, self-serving processing, signal authenticity	(Cai & Wang, 2025); (Cao et al., 2023); (Lee et al., 2018); (Wang et al., 2024); (Lv et al., 2026)
Intrapersonal negative effects	Self-justification	(Ksenofontov & Becker, 2020)

2.1 Intrapersonal Positive Effects

2.1.1 Overview of the Effects

Intrapersonal positive effects refer to the positive impacts that gratitude expression has on the expresser' s own psychology, physiology, and behavior. As an early direction in research on the effects of gratitude expression, this line of work broke through the limitations of earlier gratitude literature, which focused only on trait gratitude and state gratitude, and extended the research perspective to the overt expressive behavior of gratitude. It emphasizes the self-enhancing effects elicited by gratitude expression—that is, the positive shaping role that expressing gratitude plays in the expresser' s own state and behavioral performance. Existing studies have mainly focused on occupational groups such as medical personnel, teachers, and university staff (Chan, 2013; Kaplan et al.,

2014; Ki, 2009), and have generally found that expressing gratitude has contributes to improving expressers' psychological and physiological health and enhancing their performance (as shown in Figure 2), for example by reducing expressers' depression (Ki, 2009) and threat-type physiological responses (Gu et al., 2022), and by increasing their satisfaction with work-life balance (Adair et al., 2020) and short-term job performance (Komase et al., 2019). These studies indicate that the positive intraindividual effects of gratitude expression mainly operate through three types of mechanisms: resource replenishment, emotion regulation, and physiological responses.

Figure 2. Distribution of the literature on the effects of gratitude expression based on a 2×2 framework

- **Axes**
 - Left: **Positive effects**
 - Right: **Negative effects**
 - Top: **Intraindividual effects**
 - Bottom: **Interindividual effects**
- **I. Positive intraindividual effects**
 - **Expressers' behavioral responses**
 - * · Life satisfaction
 - * · Work-life balance
 - * · Subjective satisfaction with career success
 - * · Well-being
 - * · Positive emotions
 - * · Gratitude emotions
 - * · Challenge-type physiological responses
 - * – Depression level
 - * – Negative emotions
 - * – Sleepiness-related absenteeism
 - * – Emotional exhaustion
 - * – Psychological distress
 - * – Threat-type physiological responses
 - * · Self-efficacy
 - * · Short-term job performance
- **II. Positive interindividual effects**
 - **Recipients' behavioral responses**
 - * · Sleep quality and sufficiency
 - * · Intention to eat healthily
 - * · Challenge-type physiological responses
 - * · Work engagement
 - * · Work motivation
 - * · Job satisfaction
 - * · Adaptation to crises
 - * · Deep acting
 - * · Resilience and perseverance

- * — Headache
- * — Job burnout
- * — Threat-type physiological responses
 - * · Perceived prosocial impact
 - * · Donation intention
 - * · Prosocial behavior
 - * · Helping behavior
 - * · Prosocial resource allocation toward the expresser
 - * · Organizational citizenship behavior toward the organization
 - * · Organizational citizenship behavior toward the leader
 - * · Helping behavior toward the leader
 - * · Willingness to co-create value with customers
 - * · Customer-oriented organizational citizenship behavior
- * — Aggressive denigration of the expresser by power holders whose own competence is threatened
- * — Evasive knowledge hiding
 - * · Organizational support
 - * · Affective organizational commitment
 - * · Supervisor support
 - * · Relationship-based family role performance
 - * · Positive attitudes toward the organization
 - * · Attachment to and closeness with the expresser
 - * · Satisfaction with the leader
 - * · Trust in the leader
 - * · Loyalty to the organization
 - * · Positive followership behavior toward the leader
 - * · Leader empowering behavior
 - * · Subordinate voice behavior
 - * · Relationship quality
- * — Turnover intention
- * — Intention to leave the leader
- * — Negative followership behavior
- * — Liking
 - * · Personal accomplishment
 - * · Proactive service behavior
 - * · Service quality
 - * · Job performance
 - * · Task performance
 - * · Innovation performance
 - * · Proactive work behavior
 - * · Informal learning behavior
 - * · Tips for the expresser
 - * · Evaluation of the expresser' s leadership effectiveness
 - * · Seeking job-performance feedback from the expresser
- **Observers' behavioral responses**
 - * · Partner' s family satisfaction

- * · Citizenship behavior toward the expresser
- * · Affiliative citizenship behavior toward the recipient
- * · Tendency to seek job-performance feedback from the expresser
- **III. Negative interindividual effects**
 - **Recipients' behavioral responses**
 - * · Selfish behavior toward the expresser
 - * · Pro-leader unethical behavior toward the expresser
 - * · Exploitative behavior toward the expresser
 - * · Rationalized knowledge hiding
 - * · Workplace deviant behavior
 - **Observers' behavioral responses**
 - * · Social undermining behavior toward the recipient
- **IV. Negative intraindividual effects**
 - **Expressers' behavioral responses**
 - * – Protest against higher-power members who first violate moral rules and then provide help
- **Legend:** Health; Ethics; Relationships; Performance

Note: In the figure, “+” indicates an increase, and “–” indicates a decrease.

2.1.2 Mechanisms

First, the resource-replenishment perspective, drawing on the job demands-resources model and the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, emphasizes the positive role of gratitude expression in immediate resource recovery (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) and long-term resource accumulation (Fredrickson, 2001). On the one hand, by guiding individuals to attend to the support and goodwill already present in their lives and work, expressing gratitude can immediately replenish emotional and relational resources, thereby accumulating the resources needed to cope with stress and challenges (Komase et al., 2019). On the other hand, when individuals express gratitude, the positive emotions they experience—such as warmth, love, satisfaction, and appreciation—can broaden the scope of their attention to the environment, enhance cognitive flexibility, and make them more inclined to cope with stress in creative, open, and constructive ways.

and challenges (Chen et al., 2022; Ki, 2009). Overall, gratitude expression not only buffers stress and improves performance through the immediate replenishment of resources, but also strengthens individuals' adaptability through the long-term building of resources, thereby providing sustained support for their mental health and career development.

Second, the emotion-regulation perspective, grounded in adaptation theory (Appley, 1971), focuses on how the activation of positive emotions supports mental health. After individuals experience positive events, their emotions usually return to a neutral state within a short period of time; gratitude expression,

however, can prompt individuals to refocus on and re-experience these positive events, thereby prolonging the duration of positive emotions (Watkins et al., 2004). Such sustained positive experience helps alleviate tension caused by role conflict (e.g., between work and family), and enables individuals to develop stronger psychological resilience and recovery capacity when facing daily stressors or health challenges (Adair et al., 2020). Overall, this perspective reveals that gratitude expression, as a positive emotion-regulation strategy, can help individuals maintain attention to the support and goodwill they have received, thereby enhancing mental health and promoting positive interactions between work and family.

Third, the physiological-response perspective is based on the biopsychosocial model of challenge and threat, and focuses on how physiological health can be improved by shaping a positive psychological state (Blascovich & Mendes, 2010). This perspective holds that when individuals face important and uncertain situations, they evaluate external demands and their own resources, thereby generating different physiological responses. When resources are sufficient, individuals tend to produce a challenge response, manifested as higher cardiac output and lower total peripheral resistance; when demands exceed resources, a threat response is more likely to occur, manifested as the opposite physiological characteristics (Blascovich & Mendes, 2010). Expressing gratitude can encourage expressers to form the cognitive belief that their resources are sufficient, optimize their evaluation of the ratio between resources and demands, and thus make them more likely to enter a challenge state rather than a threat state (Gu et al., 2022). Overall, this perspective reveals the process by which gratitude expression promotes positive physiological responses by altering the pathway of resource appraisal, and further improves individuals' level of physiological health.

2.2 Positive Interpersonal Effects

2.2.1 Overview of Effects

Positive interpersonal effects refer to the cross-individual diffusion of the positive influence generated by gratitude expression through interpersonal interaction, thereby extending that influence to other individuals beyond the expresser. This is the richest and most extensive category in research on the effects of gratitude expression. Its major contribution lies in extending the intrapersonal effects of gratitude expression to the level of interpersonal interaction, revealing how gratitude expression produces positive influence in multiple dyadic interpersonal interactions, including those between service beneficiaries and service providers (such as patients and healthcare personnel, customers and frontline employees; Converso et al., 2015; Jazaieri & O' Neill, 2025; Zhang et al., 2025), between leaders and subordinates (Zhu Zheng et al., 2022; Ritzenhöfer et al., 2019), and between coworkers (Imai, 2024). In addition, positive interpersonal effects occur not only in direct interaction contexts, but may also produce extended effects through cross-context psychological processing (Hu et al., 2024). Positive in-

terpersonal effects operate broadly across multiple domains, including health, ethics, relationships, and performance (as shown in Figure 2). For example, they can improve recipients' sleep quality (Starkey et al., 2019), stimulate organizational citizenship behavior among recipients or observers (Fehr et al., 2025; Ritzenhöfer et al., 2019; Lv et al., 2026; Zhang et al., 2025), promote recipients' trust in the expresser (Ritzenhöfer et al., 2017) and support for the expresser (McKeon et al., 2020), and enhance recipients' job performance (Lü Xiaoyi and Bai Xinwen, 2019; Wang Qiqi et al., 2021; Ni et al., 2022) and voice behavior (Sheridan et al., 2025). These positive interpersonal effects mainly operate through four types of psychological processes: emotional triggering, resource gain, need satisfaction, and cognitive inference.

2.2.2 Mechanisms of Action

First, the emotional-trigger perspective is grounded in affective events theory and affective appraisal theory, emphasizing that positive events at work can elicit positive emotional experiences (Scherer et al., 2001; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). When recipients perceive an expression of gratitude as a positive work event, it can evoke positive emotions. The generation of positive emotions not only improves individuals' psychological states, but also stimulates more positive work attitudes and behavioral performance (Lv et al., 2026; Zhang et al., 2025). In sum, this perspective reveals how gratitude expression functions as a trigger of positive emotions, thereby providing motivation for subsequent positive behaviors.

Second, the resource-gain perspective is based on conservation of resources theory, the job demands-resources model, and the work-family resources model, emphasizing that when individuals face environmental stressors, they maintain physical and mental health and behavioral performance by accumulating and preserving resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Hobfoll, 1989; Ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012). As an important social resource, gratitude expression can enhance recipients' reserves of psychological and relational resources, enabling them to cope effectively with stress and challenges in work and life (Converso et al., 2015; Starkey et al., 2019; Tang et al., 2022). Overall, this perspective suggests that gratitude expression improves individuals' physical and mental states through the preservation and replenishment of resources, thereby enhancing their overall performance.

Third, the need-satisfaction perspective is grounded in self-determination theory and focuses on how gratitude expression satisfies individuals' basic psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2017), thereby strengthening their ability to cope with environmental challenges. By conveying recognition and respect, gratitude expression makes individuals feel that their behaviors are acknowledged, their competence is affirmed, and they are accepted by others, thereby strengthening autonomy, enhancing competence, and increasing a sense of belonging (Ma Yueru & Hu Yuxin, 2023; Nicuță et al., 2024). These forms of psychological satisfaction stimulate individuals' intrinsic motivation, prompting them to in-

vest in work more proactively and persistently (Ma Yueru & Hu Yuxin, 2023; Nicuță et al., 2024). In sum, this perspective indicates that gratitude expression effectively enhances individuals' engagement, work investment, and adaptability by satisfying basic psychological needs.

Fourth, the cognitive-inference perspective is grounded in moral emotion theory, social exchange theory, emotion-as-social-information theory, the Find-Remind-and-Bind Theory, and social information processing theory, among others (Algoe, 2012; Blau, 1964; Fischer & Manstead, 2008; Fiske et al., 2007; Gecas, 1982; McCullough et al., 2001; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978; Van Kleef, 2009). It covers moral-signal interpretation, inferences about others' intentions, and judgments of self-worth, emphasizing how gratitude expression, as a carrier of social information, influences recipients' cognition and social behavior. First, gratitude expression is a socially meaningful moral signal; it not only strengthens recipients' awareness of social norms and moral obligations, but also promotes cycles of prosocial reciprocation in relationships (Imai, 2024; Lee & Johnson, 2025; Tremblay, 2024). Second, recipients can infer the expresser's attitudes and intentions from gratitude expression; when it is interpreted as a signal of recognition and cooperation, it helps establish and maintain social relationships (Wang Qiqi et al., 2021; Fehr et al., 2025; Kong & Belkin, 2019; Liu et al., 2022). Third, as positive social feedback (Zhu Yanghao et al., 2023; Grant & Gino, 2010; Ni et al., 2022), gratitude expression enables recipients to perceive the effectiveness and social value of their own behavior, thereby enhancing their self-identification, work investment, and prosocial influence (Ni et al., 2022). In sum, this perspective shows how gratitude expression promotes more positive psychological states and behavioral performance through moral information, cognitive inference, and self-value affirmation.

2.3 Interpersonal Negative Effects

2.3.1 Overview of Effects

Interpersonal negative effects refer to the negative psychological and behavioral reactions that gratitude expression elicits in recipients or observers during interpersonal interactions.

This line of research challenges the traditional view that expressions of gratitude bring only positive consequences, revealing the unexpected negative outcomes they may trigger in particular interactional contexts. Such effects often occur in organizational settings characterized by power asymmetry, and are especially pronounced in interactions between leaders and subordinates (Xu & Yao, 2025). They are mainly manifested as threats to organizational ethics (as shown in Figure 2), such as inducing employees' selfish behavior (Lee et al., 2018), exploitative behavior (Cai & Wang, 2025), social undermining behavior (Lv et al., 2026), and workplace deviance (Cao et al., 2023). In addition, although the behavioral agents in such effects are recipients or observers, the effects not only act on recipients and observers but may also feed back onto the expresser, forming

a complex interactional cycle. For example, recipients high in Machiavellianism may exploit the expresser after receiving an expression of gratitude (Cai & Wang, 2025). At the same time, gratitude expressions made after external prompting may lead observers and recipients to form negative evaluations of the expresser and place the expresser at a disadvantage in resource allocation (Wang et al., 2024). These negative interpersonal effects mainly operate through three types of psychological processes: emotional comparison, self-interested processing, and signal authenticity.

2.3.2 Mechanisms

First, the emotional-comparison perspective is grounded in appraisal theories of emotion and emphasizes how the emotional experiences generated by personally experiencing or observing expressions of gratitude, together with appraisals of their meaning, can trigger adverse cognitive and behavioral consequences (Scherer et al., 2001). The valence of emotional experience depends on individuals' subjective interpretation of the stimulating event and on individual differences in sensitivity to the stimulus (Lv et al., 2026). When individuals observe others receiving expressions of gratitude—especially from leaders—they may regard this as a signal of preferential resource allocation or advantaged status, thereby triggering social comparison (Lv et al., 2026). If they perceive their own status or interests to be threatened, they may experience negative emotions such as envy (Lv et al., 2026), which in turn can generate resistance toward, or negative judgments of, the advantaged party. In sum, this perspective reveals that individuals' emotional appraisals of the meaning of events and their social-comparison processes may cause expressions of gratitude to elicit unexpected negative effects in specific contexts.

Second, the self-interested-processing perspective is based on the emotion-as-social-information theory and the theory of reciprocity imbalance in social exchange. It emphasizes that, driven by self-interested motives, individuals selectively interpret and strategically respond to expressions of gratitude (Blau, 1964; Molm et al., 1994; Van Kleef, 2009). This is reflected specifically in two aspects: situational fit and trait-driven tendencies. On the one hand, in competitive or resource-scarce contexts, recipients may interpret gratitude expressions as signals that the expresser is tolerant in personality, lower in status, or prone to compromise, and thus adopt exploitative strategies in social exchange to obtain greater personal benefits (Lee et al., 2018). On the other hand, individuals with dark personality traits—such as high Machiavellianism—are more inclined to view expressions of gratitude as symbols of submission and recognition, thereby rationalizing their own exploitative behavior (Cai & Wang, 2025). In sum, this perspective reveals how self-interested interpretation can transform gratitude expressions into information that serves one's own needs and ultimately leads to asymmetric outcomes.

Third, the signal-authenticity perspective emphasizes how individuals infer the underlying motives and authenticity of a behavior on the basis of contextual cues

surrounding its occurrence, thereby influencing subsequent evaluations and decisions (Wang et al., 2024). As a social signal, the effect of gratitude expression depends to a large extent on recipients' understanding of the source of its motivation. When an expression of gratitude occurs under external reminders or normative prompts, recipients are more likely to attribute it to compliance with social norms rather than to the natural expression of inner emotion, thereby reducing their perception of its authenticity (Wang et al., 2024). This interpretation of the signal as non-spontaneous weakens the positive social meaning conveyed by the gratitude expression, making the expresser more likely to be viewed as a strategic or perfunctory interaction partner, which in turn elicits more negative social evaluations and places the expresser at a disadvantage in resource allocation. In sum, this perspective indicates that the effects of gratitude expression do not depend on the behavior itself,

rather, it depends on the motivational meaning attributed to it and on judgments of its authenticity.

2.4 Intra-Individual Negative Effects

2.4.1 Overview of the Effect

The intra-individual negative effect refers to the inhibitory or adverse psychological and behavioral influence that expressing gratitude can have on the expresser under specific conditions. As an emerging line of research, its main contribution lies in introducing the perspective of ethical criticism and a new explanatory mechanism, extending the study of the negative effects of gratitude from the social responses of recipients or observers to the psychological consequences for expressers themselves. At present, relevant research remains highly limited (as shown in Figure 2). The few findings available indicate that gratitude expression may have side effects in contexts of unequal social structure (Ksenofontov & Becker, 2020). Specifically, in situations where high-power groups first commit moral transgressions (Transgressions, such as discriminatory behavior or long-standing structural injustice) and then provide compensatory help, low-power group members' expressions of gratitude may weaken their critical awareness of the high-power group members' prior moral transgressions, thereby suppressing their protests for legitimate rights and interests and, in turn, unintentionally reinforcing the stability of unjust relational structures (Ksenofontov & Becker, 2020). This study suggests that the intra-individual negative effect of gratitude expression may arise through a continuous psychological process from a self-rationalization perspective.

2.4.2 Mechanism of Action

The self-rationalization perspective integrates the psychological processes of forgiveness and system justification, revealing how gratitude expression, through mechanisms of internal emotional regulation and cognitive integration, leads expressers to produce self-soothing rationalization responses when facing injus-

tice (Ksenofontov & Becker, 2020). As a self-regulatory strategy, forgiveness can help individuals repair the symbolic threat caused by others' wrongdoing (Wenzel & Okimoto, 2010), thereby restoring their sense of justice in the world and interpersonal trust. System justification, in turn, is the cognitive choice through which individuals rationalize social injustice in order to maintain cognitive consistency and psychological order (Jost et al., 2004). In contexts where high-power groups first overstep boundaries and then provide help, low-power members' expressions of gratitude toward such high-power groups may release symbolic signals of forgiveness to the expressers themselves, gradually diluting their indignation toward and criticism of injustice, and further creating the misperception that the injustice has been corrected or that the social relational structure has become balanced (Ksenofontov & Becker, 2020). In sum, this mechanism reveals how gratitude expression, through the continuous operation of emotional forgiveness and cognitive justification, prompts expressers to form self-rationalizing cognitions about injustice, thereby weakening their critical awareness and motivation to resist.

3 Explanatory Framework for the Divergence of Gratitude-Expression Effects

Although existing literature generally emphasizes the positive functions of gratitude expression (Locklear et al., 2023), the integrative findings in the preceding sections of this article show that gratitude expression does not always produce positive effects. Under specific circumstances, the positive role of gratitude expression may be weakened and may even lead to unexpected negative consequences. For example, Grant and Gino (2010) found that receiving gratitude expression promoted recipients' helping behavior toward expressers, whereas Lee et al. (2018) found that receiving gratitude expression promoted recipients' exploitative behavior toward expressers. These seemingly contradictory results stem precisely from different interpretations of the relational meaning conveyed by gratitude expression among interacting actors in different contexts: in the former case, recipients interpret gratitude expression as a signal of sincerity, recognition, and relational connection; in the latter, recipients in a competitive context interpret gratitude expression as an exchange signal indicating that the expresser may be exploitable. This suggests that the effects of gratitude expression are not determined entirely by the behavior itself, but depend partly on how interacting actors interpret the relational meaning it conveys, and this interpretive process is systematically driven by contextual cues. Based on this, this article argues that the key to understanding the divergence of gratitude-expression effects lies in

...the relational perception formed by the interacting parties. When an expression of gratitude is processed and interpreted as strengthening the perception of a communal relationship, it usually promotes positive outcomes; whereas when an expression of gratitude, driven by particular contextual cues (such as a competitive context), makes salient the perception of an exchange relationship, it

may elicit unexpected negative consequences. The following sections will explain, in turn, how these two kinds of relational perception shape the direction of effects through different mechanisms, and which contextual cues drive the differentiation of relational perception.

3.1 How Relational Perception Shapes the Direction of Effects

Social relations theory holds that interpersonal interactions generally follow two types of norms: communal relationships and exchange relationships (Clark & Mills, 1979). Communal relationships emphasize unconditional giving based on care and connection: individuals provide benefits to others out of responsiveness to their needs or concern for their welfare, without expecting equivalent returns. Exchange relationships, by contrast, emphasize reciprocal calculation based on returns and benefits: individuals provide benefits to others in order to obtain corresponding repayment (Chen et al., 2001; Clark & Mills, 1979; Clark & Mills, 1993; Miller et al., 2014; Wan et al., 2011). As a form of interpersonal interactive behavior, gratitude expression can, under the influence of different contextual cues, respectively strengthen or make salient these two types of relational perception, and thereby generate positive or negative effects through different psychological mechanisms.

When gratitude expression strengthens the perception of a communal relationship, it produces positive effects. When an expression of gratitude is interpreted as a signal of relational connection conveying recognition, respect, and care, the interacting parties' perception of a communal relationship is reinforced. Under the dominance of communal relationship perception, gratitude expression not only signifies a sincere response to prior beneficial behavior, but also conveys an intention to maintain the relationship and attend to the welfare of others. For example, for expressers, expressing gratitude strengthens their internal affirmation of relational value (Lambert et al., 2010), and improves psychological well-being and performance through mechanisms of resource replenishment and emotion regulation. For recipients, gratitude expression conveys a signal that their behavior has been seen and valued (Grant & Gino, 2010), and enhances self-worth, work engagement, and prosocial behavior through mechanisms of emotional activation, need satisfaction, and cognitive inference. For observers, gratitude expression, as a demonstrative signal of prosocial relational connection, can likewise stimulate their prosocial behavior toward the interacting parties through a cognitive inference mechanism (Fehr et al., 2025). Overall, the strengthening of communal relationship perception constitutes the common relational basis of the positive intrapersonal and interpersonal effects summarized above. Its core logic is that gratitude expression defines the interaction as a caring, non-exchange-based social connection, thereby strengthening positive emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses.

When gratitude expression makes salient the perception of an exchange relationship, it produces negative effects. Driven by particular contextual cues, individuals may interpret gratitude expression as a signal related to resource

calculation, obligation repayment, or relational imbalance, thereby activating the perception of an exchange relationship. Under the dominance of exchange relationship perception, the parties become more concerned with the balance between resource investment and return in the interaction, and their cognitive and behavioral responses accordingly shift toward strategic benefit calculation. For example, for recipients in a competitive context, the salience of exchange relationship perception makes them tend to interpret gratitude expression as a signal of the expresser's resource dependence or status disadvantage, and thus to rationalize subsequent selfish behavior through a self-interested processing mechanism (Lee et al., 2018). For observers, when they observe others receiving gratitude while they themselves do not receive similar recognition, this perception of inequality in resource allocation triggers an exchange-relationship logic centered on benefit equivalence, which then produces envy and social undermining behavior through an affective comparison mechanism (Lv et al., 2026). It should be emphasized that such negative effects are not ordinary outcomes of gratitude expression, but rather contextualized outcomes that arise when exchange relationship perception is activated under the influence of particular contextual cues. Overall, the salience of exchange relationship perception constitutes the common relational basis of the negative intrapersonal and interpersonal effects summarized above. Its core logic is that, in specific contexts, gratitude expression is endowed with implications of interest exchange or

the meaning of relational imbalance, thereby transforming positive interpersonal behavior into a signal that triggers negative cognitive evaluations and behavioral responses.

3.2 How Situational Cues Influence Relational Perception

Existing research indicates that communal relationships and exchange relationships are not mutually exclusive; rather, they vary in salience across different contexts (Johnson & Grimm, 2010). This article summarizes the key situational cues that drive the differentiation of relational perception into individual cues and interaction cues. By influencing individuals' orientations in information processing, these two types of cues further determine the relative salience of communal relationship perception or exchange relationship perception.

3.2.1 Individual Cues

Individual cues mainly refer to the relatively stable characteristics possessed by individuals in an interactional context. These characteristics influence their initial tendency, when processing information conveyed through expressions of gratitude, to focus on relational connection or interest-based calculation, thereby determining whether communal relationship perception or exchange relationship perception is more likely to be strengthened or made salient. First, personality traits affect individuals' basic assumptions about others' behavior. For example, individuals with a stronger prosocial orientation are more likely to interpret expressions of gratitude as signals conveying goodwill and relational connection,

thereby strengthening communal relationship perception. By contrast, individuals with a stronger self-interested tendency (such as psychological entitlement) or dark personality traits (such as high Machiavellianism) are more inclined to interpret others' behavior from the perspectives of strategy and interest, and are more likely to regard expressions of gratitude as signals that can be exploited (Cai & Wang, 2025), thereby making exchange relationship perception salient. Second, cognitive orientation (such as regulatory focus) affects the focus of individuals' information processing. Individuals with a stronger promotion focus pay more attention to opportunities for growth and positive relational outcomes, and therefore are more likely to extract meanings of relational connection and support from expressions of gratitude. Individuals with a stronger prevention focus, however, pay more attention to responsibilities, obligations, and potential losses, and are more likely to associate expressions of gratitude with responsibility-taking or pressure to reciprocate, thereby making exchange relationship perception salient (Ma Yueru, Hu Yuxin, 2023; Wang Qiqi et al., 2021). Overall, by influencing the internal attentional biases of information processing, individual cues cause different individuals to exhibit differences in the degree to which communal relationship perception and exchange relationship perception become salient when they encounter the same expression of gratitude, thus providing an individual-level basis for effect differentiation.

3.2.2 Interaction Cues

Interaction cues refer to the observable information provided by the behavior of expressing gratitude itself and by the context in which it is embedded. By influencing individuals' judgments about the nature of gratitude expressions, such information determines whether communal relationship perception or exchange relationship perception is more likely to be strengthened or made salient. First, the degree of effort reflected in the form of expression is an important cue affecting relational perception. High-effort expressions of gratitude (such as combining a message of thanks with the giving of a gift, or spending more time on written expression) usually imply higher behavioral costs (Cardon & Wong, 2024; Thomas et al., 2023). Therefore, recipients are more likely to interpret them as signals arising from genuine emotion and relational care, and communal relationship perception is strengthened accordingly. By contrast, low-effort or formalized expressions of gratitude (such as expressions made after an external reminder) lack signals of investment and are therefore more likely to have their authenticity questioned (Wang et al., 2024), thereby weakening the communal-relationship meaning and making exchange relationship perception salient. Second, the overall contextual atmosphere in which gratitude expressions are embedded affects the relational perception framework of both interacting parties. In organizational contexts characterized by a stronger atmosphere of goodwill and weaker competitiveness, expressions of gratitude are more likely to be interpreted as the natural manifestation of genuine care, thereby strengthening communal relational bonds (Jia et al., 2025). In instrumental or competitive contexts, however, the same expression of gratitude is

more likely to be interpreted as strategic or normative behavior, thereby weakening its communal-relationship meaning and strengthening exchange relationship perception (Lee et al., 2018). In summary, by providing key information about whether a behavior reflects genuine relational investment, interaction cues systematically influence individuals' relational categorization of gratitude expressions, thereby promoting the relative salience of communal relationships or exchange relationships, and ultimately influencing their effect direction.

4 Discussion and Future Directions

This paper systematically integrates and extends the effects of gratitude expression in organizations. On the one hand, it proposes a two-dimensional classification framework for the effects of gratitude expression, systematically identifying four types of effects: intrapersonal positive effects, interpersonal positive effects, interpersonal negative effects, and intrapersonal negative effects. This provides a structured theoretical landscape for understanding the diversified influence of gratitude expression. Compared with existing reviews (Locklear et al., 2023), this paper, while systematically integrating positive effects, explicitly distinguishes the conceptual boundaries between interpersonal negative effects and intrapersonal negative effects, as well as their distinct psychological mechanism pathways, thereby advancing research on gratitude expression from a one-directional positive narrative toward a more balanced and complete theoretical understanding. On the other hand, this paper proposes an explanatory framework for effect differentiation grounded in social-relational theory. Innovatively, it establishes the differential activation of strengthened communal relationships and salient exchange relationships as a unified explanatory principle for the differentiation of positive and negative effects generated by gratitude expression, thereby answering the core question of why gratitude-expressing behavior produces differentiated effects across different contexts. This framework not only provides a theoretical basis for integrating existing scattered findings, but also offers a clear logic of theoretical prediction for the future systematic testing of boundary conditions of effects.

Although empirical findings on gratitude expression have continued to accumulate, the literature integration and explanatory framework in this paper jointly reveal two types of deficiencies in research on gratitude expression. From the perspective of literature distribution, existing studies have covered interpersonal effects and positive effects relatively sufficiently (Adair et al., 2020; Fehr et al., 2025; Hu et al., 2024; Neumeier et al., 2017), whereas research on intrapersonal effects—especially negative effects—is seriously insufficient. This imbalance constrains understanding of the complete effect landscape of gratitude expression. From the perspective of the explanatory framework, the framework proposed in this paper can provide a unified explanation for the logic underlying the differentiation of positive and negative effects; however, which contextual conditions systematically determine whether gratitude expression follows a posi-

tive or negative pathway, and how this effect direction evolves over time in repeated interactions, still lack systematic exploration. In response to these deficiencies, this paper proposes three interrelated directions for future research. First, future research should explore what other effects exist, in order to extend pathways of intrapersonal effects and negative effects that have not yet been sufficiently studied. Second, future research should explore when effects differentiate, thereby constructing a systematic boundary-condition framework based on five types of contextual features. Third, future research should explore how effects evolve, thereby revealing the dynamic accumulation and transformation patterns of relational perceptions in repeated interactions. In sum, these three research directions will help future studies answer more comprehensively such key questions as: for whom gratitude expression may produce which positive and negative consequences; under what contextual conditions it follows different pathways; and how this effect direction transforms with changes in time and context.

4.1 Direction One: Enriching Research on the Intrapersonal and Negative Effects of Gratitude Expression

According to the results of the literature integration in this paper, the existing literature on the effects of gratitude expression exhibits structural imbalance. In terms of the scope of effects, existing studies are dominated by interpersonal effects (Imai, 2024; Jazaieri & O' Neill, 2025; Lee & Johnson, 2025), with insufficient attention paid to intrapersonal effects on the expresser themselves. In terms of effect valence, existing studies are dominated by positive effects (Chan, 2013; Gu et al., 2022; Kaplan et al., 2014), while exploration of negative effects remains extremely limited. This imbalance reflects the long-standing research assumption in this field that gratitude expression is a universally beneficial, positive interpersonal behavior, thereby leading to the systematic neglect of the diverse consequences that may exist along intrapersonal-effect and negative-effect pathways. However, gratitude expression is not only an overt interpersonal behavior, but also a psychological process through which expressers internally interpret the relational meaning of their own behavior. This process has an independent shaping effect on the expresser's own cognition, emotions, and motivation. Similarly, if attention is paid only to the positive side of gratitude expression, theoretical explanations will overemphasize its relationship-enhancing function and will be unable to explain why gratitude expression, in certain contexts, generates stress, alienation, or even ethical ri-

risks. Therefore, deepening research on intraindividual effects and negative effects is a necessary prerequisite for constructing a complete theoretical picture of gratitude expression.

With regard to intraindividual effects, existing research has mainly found that gratitude expression has positive influences on expressers' health (e.g., reduced depression and improved physiological responses) and performance (e.g., improved work efficiency) (Ki, 2009; Komase et al., 2019), but has scarcely ad-

dressed its positive consequences in areas such as relationships and ethics. According to the relational-perception framework of this article, when communal relational perception is strengthened, expressers should not only experience improvements in health and performance, but also feel deeper relational bonds with others and stronger moral self-identity; however, these positive outcomes have not yet been systematically explored. At the same time, when exchange relational perception becomes salient, gratitude expression may also lead expressers to experience negative consequences such as the accumulation of emotional labor, persistent feelings of indebtedness, or distortions in self-identity. At present, only one study by Ksenofontov and Becker (2020) has examined the inhibitory effect of gratitude expression on expressers' critical awareness under conditions of structural inequality; other intraindividual negative consequences still lack empirical exploration. In terms of negative effects, existing research on interpersonal negative effects has mainly focused on ethical outcomes, such as exploitative behavior, social undermining behavior, and workplace deviance (Cai & Wang, 2025; Cao et al., 2023; Lv et al., 2026), whereas insufficient attention has been paid to the possible negative consequences of gratitude expression for relationships, health, and performance. According to the relational-perception framework, the salience of exchange relational perception may not only drive ethical deviance, but may also cause recipients to experience persistent obligation pressure and relational alienation, lead observers to form negative evaluations of team fairness, and thereby damage team cohesion and the organizational climate. Future research should systematically extend the outcome variables of intraindividual effects and negative effects to domains not yet touched by existing studies, and examine how expressers, recipients, and observers form different relational perceptions through mechanisms such as cognitive appraisal, emotion regulation, and motivational activation, thereby producing diverse psychological and behavioral responses. This would construct a more comprehensive and balanced theoretical picture for research on gratitude expression, and would also provide a more complete practical basis for organizations to dialectically understand and manage gratitude-expression behavior.

4.2 Direction Two: Systematic Research on the Boundary Conditions of Gratitude-Expression Effects

According to the literature review and the relational-perception framework in this article, the differentiation of the effects of gratitude expression depends on what kinds of subjects in the interaction are activated and what kinds of relational perceptions are formed; this activation process is systematically influenced by multiple types of situational cues. Although this article has preliminarily summarized the individual cues and interaction cues suggested by the existing literature, systematic research is still lacking to comprehensively explain when gratitude expression produces double-edged-sword effects (e.g., Cardon & Wong, 2024; Thomas et al., 2023). In fact, existing studies have mostly regarded gratitude expression as a single, decontextualized characteristic behavior, lacking attention to its highly contextualized features and therefore ignoring situation-

related boundary conditions. As a form of interpersonal communication behavior, gratitude expression can be systematically described from five dimensions based on the communication perspective (Braddock, 1958; Lasswell, 1948): who (subject factors, i.e., factors related to the expresser), for what purpose (motivational factors, i.e., factors related to purpose and motivation), in what context (environmental factors, i.e., factors related to time and setting), through what medium (media factors, i.e., factors related to the form of expression and the communication channel), and what content is expressed (content factors, i.e., factors related to the content transmitted). These five types of contextual factors, by influencing individuals' understanding and evaluation of the meaning of the interaction, systematically determine whether communal relational perception or exchange relational perception is more likely to be strengthened or made salient, and thereby shape the direction of the effects.

Taking subject factors as an example, when emotional trait levels are relatively high, individuals are more likely to accurately perceive their own emotions and regulate emotional responses. Thus, when expressing gratitude, they are better able to choose a manner that fits the situation, thereby strengthening communal relational perception. Conversely, individuals with relatively low emotional trait levels have weaker abilities to perceive and regulate their own emotions; therefore, when expressing gratitude, they may be more likely to use a mode of expression that does not match their own emotions or the situation, leading to an imbalance in the exchange relationship. In terms of motivational factors, gratitude expression driven by sincere motives makes recipients more

They tend to interpret it as a signal of genuine emotion, and perceptions of communal relationships are thereby strengthened; by contrast, expressions of gratitude driven by strategic motives or normative pressure are more likely to lead recipients to make utilitarian attributions, thereby making perceptions of exchange relationships more salient. In terms of environmental factors, immediate expression can strengthen the perceived causal linkage between behavior and relational response, helping to activate perceptions of communal relationships. However, delayed expressions of gratitude may increase temporal distance and thus weaken the psychological clarity of causal association. This can easily prompt expressers to form cognitive evaluations that they have failed to meet their own or others' expectations, and trigger perceptions of imbalance in exchange relationships (Walsh et al., 2022). In terms of media factors, media with high information richness can transmit information through multiple channels, such as vocal tone, facial expressions, and bodily movements, thereby strengthening emotional resonance between the expresser and the recipient and further enhancing perceptions of communal relationships. In contrast, media with low information richness weaken emotional resonance because they lack nonverbal cues, making relational perceptions more likely to shift toward an exchange orientation (Daft & Lengel, 1986). In terms of content factors, gratitude expressions that focus on the event process can enhance the psychological connection between expresser and recipient regarding the effort invested by providing concrete actions and contextual details, thereby activating percep-

tions of communal relationships. Conversely, gratitude expressions that focus on event outcomes weaken this connection because they lack detailed process information and emotional cues. In sum, future research can systematically explore and test how different features of communication contexts—namely, the expresser, motive, environment, medium, and content—shape the differentiated consequences of gratitude expression by influencing the activation direction of relational perceptions. This would not only help move research on gratitude expression from universal conclusions toward contextualized interpretation, but also suggest that organizations should not regard gratitude expression merely as a universally beneficial positive behavior. Instead, they should guide employees to express gratitude more sincerely, appropriately, and with proper measure according to the expresser, motive, environment, medium, and content, so as to promote trust and cooperation while effectively avoiding relational imbalance and ethical risks.

4.3 Direction Three: Extending Research on the Effects of Gratitude Expression from a Temporal Perspective

According to the literature review in this article, most existing studies on the effects of gratitude expression adopt cross-sectional designs. They mainly examine the immediate effects of gratitude expression from a static perspective, paying relatively little attention to its dynamic changes over time and its long-term influence (e.g., Imai, 2024; Lee & Johnson, 2025). However, interpersonal relationships in organizations are characterized by relative stability, sustained interaction, and repeated contact. Gratitude expression is not an isolated, one-time behavior; rather, it recurs in daily collaboration, superior-subordinate interaction, and team communication (Fehr, 2017). Therefore, this limitation is not merely a methodological issue, but also reflects a theoretical blind spot: when gratitude expression occurs continuously in organizations, the direction of effects observed in a single interaction does not necessarily represent the pattern of long-term interaction. Positive effects may accumulate and deepen with repeated expression, but they may also gradually shift toward negative effects as contextual conditions change. If this dynamic process is ignored, theory will have very limited explanatory power regarding the long-term influence of gratitude expression, and it will also be unable to provide effective guidance for organizations' sustained relationship management.

The influence of gratitude expression may depend not only on a particular act of expression itself, but also on its overall level, change trend, and fluctuation pattern over time, as well as on how these temporal features systematically affect the accumulation and evolution of relational perceptions. Specifically, the overall level of gratitude expression may reflect the degree of long-term mutual assistance and recognition among organizational members; its change trend may indicate the strengthening, weakening, or redirection of relationship quality; and its short-term fluctuations may become important cues by which employees judge relationship status, interaction expectations, and changes in

team climate. For example, in long-term interaction, sustained and moderate gratitude expression may continuously strengthen perceptions of communal relationships, thereby promoting the accumulation of trust, helping behavior, and willingness to cooperate among employees. However, if gratitude expression occurs too frequently, if responses between the two interacting parties are unequal, or if it is gradually institutionalized as an organizational management requirement, its signal of authenticity will weaken over time. Perceptions of communal relationships may gradually be replaced by perceptions of exchange relationships, causing emotional labor, obligation pressure, and relational [[unclear: text continues off page]]

a sense of imbalance consequently arises. In addition, in long-term and stable working relationships, whether fluctuations in expressed gratitude become important cues for employees to judge changes in coworker relationships, superior-subordinate trust, and team climate—and further influence their willingness to cooperate, helping behaviors, and work engagement—is also worthy of further exploration in future research. Therefore, future studies need to adopt research designs such as longitudinal research and experience sampling methods to examine how the effects of expressed gratitude accumulate and transform over time. Extending research on the effects of expressed gratitude from a temporal perspective, on the one hand, responds to calls for enriching time-related research in organizational behavior (Dong Xiaowei et al., 2021), and also breaks through the limitations of existing research on expressed gratitude, which has tended to emphasize static and immediate effects; on the other hand, it can also help organizations understand the processes through which expressed gratitude accumulates, fluctuates, and transforms in long-term workplace interactions, thereby enabling them to more accurately grasp the cumulative effects and dynamic patterns of expressed gratitude in long-term management practice, and to provide more temporally sensitive practical guidance for optimizing organizational culture building and employee relationship management.

5 Conclusion

This paper explored why expressed gratitude in organizational contexts produces differentiated psychological and behavioral effects. By systematically integrating existing empirical studies, this paper constructed a two-dimensional classification framework centered on effect scope and effect valence (as shown in Figure 1), thereby revealing four types of effects that expressed gratitude may generate in different contexts and their representative psychological mechanisms. On this basis, drawing on social relationship theory, this paper proposed an explanatory framework for effect differentiation centered on relational perception, and classified the contextual cues that influence relational perception into two categories: individual cues and interaction cues. Finally, based on the above integration and explanation, and under the guidance of the relational-perception framework, this paper proposed three future research directions: enriching re-

search on intraindividual and negative effects, systematizing research on boundary conditions, and extending effect research from a temporal perspective. In doing so, it provides an actionable theoretical roadmap for subsequent research in the field of expressed gratitude.

References

- Dong, X., Qin, X., Chen, C., Huang, M., Deng, H., Zhou, H., & Song, B. (2021). Time-related research in organizational behavior and future directions. *Advances in Psychological Science*, 29(4), 747-760.
- Lü, X., & Bai, X. (2019). Reciprocal gratitude expression improves employees' job performance. *Journal of Zhejiang University (Science Edition)*, 46(5), 641-650.
- Ma, Y., & Hu, Y. (2023). The influence of customer gratitude expression on frontline employees' proactive service behavior. *East China Economic Management*, 37(7), 120-128.
- Wang, Q., Li, Z., & Liu, J. (2021). The influence and mechanism of customer gratitude expression on employees' job performance. *Foreign Economics & Management*, 43(8), 121-137.
- Zhu, Y., Long, L., & Liu, W. (2023). Can leader gratitude expression enhance employees' followership behavior? The role of authenticity of emotional expression. *Acta Psychologica Sinica*, 55(7), 1160-1175.
- Zhu, Z., Chen, X., Liu, J., Fan, X., & Xu, B. (2022). The influence of leader gratitude expression on employees' turnover intention: From the perspectives of "self" and "relationship." *Nankai Business Review*, 25(2), 80-89.
- Adair, K. C., Rodriguez-Homs, L. G., Masoud, S., Mosca, P. J., & Sexton, J. B. (2020). Gratitude at work: Prospective cohort study of a web-based, single-exposure well-being intervention for health care workers. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 22(5), Article e15562. <https://doi.org/10.2196/15562>
- Ahmadi, A., & Fakhimi, S. (2021). Expressing gratitude versus empathetic apology: Which one is better to use as an initial recovery strategy after a service failure? *Journal of Contemporary Marketing Science*, 4(3), 341-361.
- Algoe, S. B. (2012). Find, remind, and bind: The functions of gratitude in everyday relationships. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 6(6), 455-469.
- Appley, M. H. (Ed.). (1971). *Adaptation-level theory: A symposium*. Academic Press.
- Bakker, A. B., & Demerouti, E. (2007). The job demands-resources model: State of the art. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 22(3), 309-328.

- Blascovich, J., & Mendes, W. B. (2010). Social psychophysiology and embodiment. In Fiske, S. T., Gilbert, D. T., & Lindzey, G. (Eds.), *Handbook of social psychology* (Vol. 1, 5th ed., pp. 194-227). Wiley.
- Blau, P. M. (1964). Justice in social exchange. *Sociological Inquiry*, 34(2), 193-206.
- Braddock, R. (1958). An extension of the "Lasswell Formula" . *Journal of Communication*, 8(2), 88-93.
- Cai, Y., & Wang, Y. (2025, July). *Exploring unintended outcomes of employee expressions of gratitude on leader workplace exploitation*, Paper presented at the 85th Annual Meeting of the Academy of Management, Copenhagen, Denmark.
- Cao, L., Zhou, H., Chen, C., Bi, K., Lei, Y., & Qin, X. (2023, August 4-8). *Investigating when and why customer-expressed gratitude leads to employees' deviance*, Paper presented at the 83rd Annual Meeting of the Academy of Management, Boston, MA.
- Cardon, P. W., & Wong, J. (2024). Quality gratitude expressions and happiness at work. *International Journal of Business Communication*, 61(4), 783-804.
- Chan, D. W. (2013). Counting blessings versus misfortunes: Positive interventions and subjective well-being of Chinese school teachers in Hong Kong. *Educational Psychology*, 33(4), 504-519.
- Chen, C., Ma, L., Chen, Z., & Wen, P. (2022). Gratitude expression to supervisors and subjective career success of civil servants: Evidence from China. *Public Personnel Management*, 51(1), 48-70.
- Chen, S., Lee-Chai, A. Y., & Bargh, J. A. (2001). Relationship orientation as a moderator of the effects of social power. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 80(2), 173-187.
- Clark, M. S., & Mills, J. (1979). Interpersonal attraction in exchange and communal relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 37(1), 12-24.
- Clark, M. S., & Mills, J. (1993). The difference between communal and exchange relationships: What it is and is not. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 19(6), 684-691.
- Converso, D., Loera, B., Viotti, S., & Martini, M. (2015). Do positive relations with patients play a protective role for healthcare employees? Effects of patients' gratitude and support on nurses' burnout. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 6, Article 470. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00470>
- Cregg, D. R., & Cheavens, J. S. (2021). Gratitude interventions: Effective self-help? A meta-analysis of the impact on symptoms of depression and anxiety. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 22(1), 413-445.

- Daft, R. L., & Lengel, R. H. (1986). Organizational information requirements, media richness and structural design. *Management Science*, 32(5), 554-571.
- Fehr, R., Fulmer, A., Awtrey, E., & Miller, J. A. (2017). The grateful workplace: A multilevel model of gratitude in organizations. *Academy of Management Review*, 42(2), 361-381.
- Fehr, R., Heng, Y. T., Wang, Y., & Guo, Y. (2025). They do not deserve your thanks! Witness reactions to leader-directed expressions of gratitude. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 110(2), 197-219.
- Fehr, R., Heng, Y. T., & Fulmer, A. (2026). The psychology of gratitude: Implications for organizations. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 13, 489-511.
- Fischer, A. H., & Manstead, A. S. R. (2008). Social functions of emotion. In M. Lewis, J. M. Haviland-Jones, & L. F. Barrett (Eds.), *Handbook of emotions* (3rd ed., pp. 456-468). Guilford Press.
- Fiske, S. T., Cuddy, A. J., & Glick, P. (2007). Universal dimensions of social cognition: Warmth and competence. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 11(2), 77-83.
- Fredrickson, B. L. (2001). The role of positive emotions in positive psychology: The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. *American Psychologist*, 56(3), 218-226.
- Gecas, V. (1982). The self-concept. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 8, 1-33.
- Grant, A. M., & Gino, F. (2010). A little thanks goes a long way: Explaining why gratitude expressions motivate prosocial behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 98(6), 946-955.
- Gu, Y., Ocampo, J. M., Algoe, S. B., & Oveis, C. (2022). Gratitude expressions improve teammates' cardiovascular stress responses. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 151(12), 3281-3291.
- Hobfoll, S. E. (1989). Conservation of resources: A new attempt at conceptualizing stress. *American Psychologist*, 44(3), 513-524.
- Hu, J. J., Kim, D., & Lanaj, K. (2024). The benefits of reflecting on gratitude received at home for leaders at work: Insights from three field experiments. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 109(9), 1461-1488.
- Imai, T. (2024). Impacts of expressed gratitude and apologies on Japanese university students' and workers' perceived closeness: Mediating roles of responsiveness and predicted outcome values. *Communication Studies*, 75(6), 985-1004.
- Jazaieri, H., & O' Neill, O. A. (2025). Thanks in advance: The social function of gratitude expressions to employees in distress. *Academy of Management Discoveries*, 11(1), 61-95.

- Jia, Y., Gao, S., Gao, L., Gao, J., & Wang, T. (2025). Gratitude expression in the sharing economy: A perspective of interactive marketing communication between peer service providers and consumers. *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing*, 19(4), 527–548.
- Johnson, J. W., & Grimm, P. E. (2010). Communal and exchange relationship perceptions as separate constructs and their role in motivations to donate. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 20(3), 282–294.
- Jost, J. T., Banaji, M. R., & Nosek, B. A. (2004). A decade of system justification theory: Accumulated evidence of conscious and unconscious bolstering of the status quo. *Political Psychology*, 25(6), 881–919.
- Kaplan, S., Bradley-Geist, J. C., Ahmad, A., Anderson, A., Hargrove, A. K., & Lindsey, A. (2014). A test of two positive psychology interventions to increase employee well-being. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 29(3), 367–380.
- Ki, T. P. (2009). *Gratitude and stress of health care professionals in Hong Kong* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. City University of Hong Kong.
- Komase, Y., Watanabe, K., Imamura, K., & Kawakami, N. (2019). Effects of a newly developed gratitude intervention program on work engagement among Japanese workers: A pre-and posttest study. *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, 61(9), 378–383.
- Kong, D. T., & Belkin, L. Y. (2019). Because I want to share, not because I should: Prosocial implications of gratitude expression in repeated zero-sum resource allocation exchanges. *Motivation and Emotion*, 43(5), 824–843.
- Krlev, G., Hannigan, T., & Spicer, A. (2025). What makes a good review article? Empirical evidence from management and organization research. *Academy of Management Annals*, 19(1), 376–403.
- Ksenofontov, I., & Becker, J. C. (2020). The harmful side of thanks: Thankful responses to high-power group help undermine low-power groups' protest. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 46(5), 794–807.
- Lambert, N. M., Clark, M. S., Durtschi, J., Fincham, F. D., & Graham, S. M. (2010). Benefits of expressing gratitude: Expressing gratitude to a partner changes one's view of the relationship. *Psychological Science*, 21(4), 574–580.
- Lasswell, H. D. (1948). The structure and function of communication in society. In L. Bryson (Ed.), *The communication of ideas* (pp. 37–51). Harper and Brothers.
- Lee, K. K., Yip, J. A., Chan, C., & Brooks, A. W. (2018). Thanks for nothing: Expressing gratitude invites exploitation by competitors. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 46, 677–678.
- Lee, S. H., & Johnson, M. D. (2025). Emotional signaling: How helpers' emotional expressions affect attributions of motives, relationship quality, and reciprocation. *Academy of Management Journal*, 68(6), 1266–1299.

- Liu, B., Liu, M., Wang, H., Yang, Y., Ma, Y., & Wei, X. (2022). Can patient gratitude expression boost innovative performance? The role of work meaningfulness and supervisory support. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, Article 1024211. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1024211>
- Locklear, L. R., Sheridan, S., & Kong, D. T. (2023). Appreciating social science research on gratitude: An integrative review for organizational scholarship on gratitude in the workplace. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 44(2), 225–260.
- Lv, B., Xiao, J., Jin, P., Xue, H., Xue, J., & Men, C. (2026). Blessing or curse? Understanding when and how coworkers negatively or positively react to leader gratitude expression. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.70101>
- Ma, L. K., Tunney, R. J., & Ferguson, E. (2017). Does gratitude enhance prosociality? A meta-analytic review. *Psychological Bulletin*, 143(6), 601–635.
- McCullough, M. E., Kilpatrick, S. D., Emmons, R. A., & Larson, D. B. (2001). Is gratitude a moral affect? *Psychological Bulletin*, 127(2), 249–266.
- Mckee, E. J., Trumbull, K. M., & Hughes, J. L. (2020). Supervisors' gratitude and employees' feelings about their supervisor and organization. *Psi Chi Journal of Psychological Research*, 25(3), 272–277.
- Miller, J. G., Bland, C., Källberg-Shroff, M., Tseng, C., Montes-George, J., Ryan, K., ...Chakravarthy, S. (2014). Culture and the role of exchange vs. communal norms in friendship. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 53, 79–93.
- Molm, L. D., Quist, T. M., & Wiseley, P. A. (1994). Imbalanced structures, unfair strategies: Power and justice in social exchange. *American Sociological Review*, 59(1), 98–121.
- Namkoong, M., Park, G., Park, Y., & Lee, S. (2024). Effect of gratitude expression of AI chatbot on willingness to donate. *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction*, 40(20), 6647–6658.
- Neumeier, L. M., Brook, L., Ditchburn, G., & Sckopke, P. (2017). Delivering your daily dose of well-being to the workplace: A randomized controlled trial of an online well-being programme for employees. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 26(4), 555–573.
- Ni, D., Song, L. J., Zheng, X., Zhu, J., Zhang, M., & Xu, L. (2022). Extending a helping hand: How receiving gratitude makes a difference in employee performance during a crisis. *Journal of Business Research*, 149, 967–982.
- Nicuță, E. G., Diaconu-Gherasim, L. R., & Constantin, T. (2024). “Thank you for your good work” : The impact of received gratitude on employees’ work motivation. *The Journal of Psychology*, 158(2), 161–178.

- Ritzenhöfer, L., Brosi, P., Spörrle, M., & Welpe, I. M. (2017). Leader pride and gratitude differentially impact follower trust. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 32(6), 445-459.
- Ritzenhöfer, L., Brosi, P., Spörrle, M., & Welpe, I. M. (2019). Satisfied with the job, but not with the boss: Leaders' expressions of gratitude and pride differentially signal leader selfishness, resulting in differing levels of followers' satisfaction. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 158(4), 1185-1202.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2017). *Self-determination theory: Basic psychological needs in motivation, development, and wellness*. The Guilford Press.
- Salancik, G. R., & Pfeffer, J. (1978). A social information processing approach to job attitudes and task design. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 23(2), 224-253.
- Scherer, K. R., Schorr, A., & Johnstone, T. (Eds.). (2001). *Appraisal processes in emotion: Theory, methods, research*. Oxford University Press.
- Sheridan, S. B., Kong, D. T., Belkin, L. Y., Ambrose, M. L., & Becker, W. J. (2025). More than words: A risk regulation model of supervisor gratitude expression, felt appreciation, and subordinate voice. *Journal of Management*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01492063251383826>
- Starkey, A. R., Mohr, C. D., Cadiz, D. M., & Sinclair, R. R. (2019). Gratitude reception and physical health: Examining the mediating role of satisfaction with patient care in a sample of acute care nurses. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 14(6), 779-788.
- Tang, P. M., Ilies, R., Aw, S. S., Lin, K. J., Lee, R., & Trombini, C. (2022). How and when service beneficiaries' gratitude enriches employees' daily lives. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 107(6), 987-1008.
- Ten Brummelhuis, L. L., & Bakker, A. B. (2012). A resource perspective on the work-home interface: The work-home resources model. *American Psychologist*, 67(7), 545-556.
- Thomas, V., Bock, D., & McCullough, H. (2023). Examining consumer reactions to sincere brands' gratitude expressions: When a simple thank you just won't do. *International Journal of Advertising*, 42(3), 518-541.
- Tremblay, M. (2024). Customer gratitude expressions and FLEs' prosocial behavior: Insights from delighted customers. *Journal of Services Marketing*, 38(7), 857-871.
- Van Kleef, G. A. (2009). How emotions regulate social life: The emotions as social information (EASI) model. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 18(3), 184-188.
- Walsh, L. C., Armenta, C. N., Itzhakov, G., Fritz, M. M., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2022). More than merely positive: The immediate affective and mo-

tivational consequences of gratitude. *Sustainability*, 14(14), Article 8679. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su14148679>

Wan, L. C., Hui, M. K., & Wyer Jr, R. S. (2011). The role of relationship norms in responses to service failures. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 38(2), 260–277.

Wang, J., Chaudhry, S. J., & Koch, A. (2024). Reminders undermine impressions of genuine gratitude. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 126(6), 1084–1102.

Watkins, P. C., Emmons, R. A., & McCullough, M. E. (2004). Gratitude and subjective well-being. In R. A. Emmons & M. E. McCullough (Eds.), *The psychology of gratitude* (pp. 167–192). Oxford University Press.

Weiss, H. M., & Cropanzano, R. (1996). Affective events theory. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 18(1), 1–74.

Wenzel, M., & Okimoto, T. G. (2010). How acts of forgiveness restore a sense of justice: Addressing status/power and value concerns raised by transgressions. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 40(3), 401–417.

Wood, A. M., Froh, J. J., & Geraghty, A. W. (2010). Gratitude and well-being: A review and theoretical integration. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 30(7), 890–905.

Xu, C., & Yao, Z. (2025). Exploring the effect of line manager gratitude expression on employees' knowledge hiding and unethical pro-supervisor behaviors. *Journal of Knowledge Management*, 29(6), 1951–1973.

Zhang, H., Zhou, Z. E., Xiao, J., Liu, Y., & Shi, Y. (2025). A little gratitude goes a long way: How customer gratitude promotes employee customer-oriented organizational citizenship behavior. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 40(1), 82–96.

Integrating and expanding the effects of gratitude expression in organizations

CAO Limei¹, CHENG Xiang², YAO Yuewei², YIN Rui², CHEN Weihua¹, QIN Xin²

(¹ School of Tourism Management, Sun Yat-sen University, Zhuhai 519082, China)

(² School of Business, Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou 510275, China)

Abstract: Gratitude expression is a common form of interpersonal interaction in organizational contexts and is generally considered to convey positive social signals and produce beneficial psychological and behavioral outcomes. However, existing research suggests that gratitude expression may produce different effects across contexts, and its underlying mechanisms have yet to be systematically integrated and explained. Drawing on a systematic review of relevant

empirical studies, we develop a typological framework along two dimensions: the scope of effects (intrapersonal vs. interpersonal) and the valence of effects (positive vs. negative). This framework integrates the effects of gratitude expression on expressers, receivers, and observers and identifies four types of effects: intrapersonal positive effects, interpersonal positive effects, interpersonal negative effects, and intrapersonal negative effects. Building on social relational theory, we further develop an explanatory framework for why the effects of gratitude expression differ across contexts, focusing on whether gratitude expression strengthens perceptions of a communal relationship or makes an exchange relationship more salient. We also categorize the contextual cues that shape relationship perceptions into individual and interactional cues, thereby explaining how different contextual conditions influence the direction of gratitude expression effects. Based on this integrative perspective, we propose three directions for future research: expanding research on intrapersonal and negative effects, systematically examining boundary conditions, and extending research on gratitude expression from a temporal perspective. Overall, we provide a new theoretical perspective for understanding the complex effects of gratitude expression in organizations and offer a systematic research agenda for future studies.

Keywords: gratitude, gratitude expression, positive effects, negative effects, context

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

Source: ChinaXiv. Machine translation. Verify with the original.