

# How many friends at work are too many? The nonlinear association between the number of friends, social support and mental well-being

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – We grounded this study in the Too-Much-of-a-Good-Thing (TMGT) meta-theoretical framework to disentangle the costs and benefits associated with workplace friendship in a military setting.

**Design/methodology/approach** – We collected data cross-sectionally through self-reports from 287 employees from the Romanian Air Force.

**Findings** – The number of friends had an inverted U-shaped association with perceived social support. Our results show that as the number of friends increases from 9 to 10, so does the social support. However, as the number of friends further increases above 10, social support tends to decrease rather than increase. Furthermore, we found that social support and all dimensions of mental well-being (emotional, social and psychological well-being) were positively associated. Moreover, social support mediated the relationship between the number of friends and the three dimensions of mental well-being.

**Research limitations/implications** – Our findings can help human resources policies in military organizations foster an organizational climate that cultivates friendship ties between employees, which is crucial for their social support and overall mental well-being.

**Originality/value** – This work provides additional information about the specific mechanisms through which the effects of workplace friendships on mental well-being occur.

**Keywords** Workplace friendship, Social support, Mental well-being, Military organizations

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Friendship is one of humanity's fundamental values (Wright, 1984) and it spans various social domains including the workplace (Methot, Lepine, Podsakoff, & Christian, 2016). Friendship at work describes close and informal interpersonal relations based on mutual



interest and reciprocated instrumental and emotional support (Pillemer & Rothbard, 2018). Employees usually expect to develop friendships by sharing and exchanging valuable benefits, resources and interests with peers and supervisors (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Cropanzano, Anthony, Daniels, & Hall, 2017). Such social exchanges are grounded in the reciprocity principle, according to which time, effort and attention offered to friends will eventually be reciprocated. However, the exact terms of reciprocity in social exchanges are diffused and ill-defined (Blau, 1964). Moreover, the research emphasizes that having workplace friends lowers stress and eases social isolation, especially in situations where one works and lives far from home, or in jobs like the military where opportunities for friendships outside the workplace are limited (Hinojosa & Hinojosa, 2011; Russell *et al.*, 2016; Kohan, Safari, & Teimouri, 2018; Alonso, Porter, & Cullen-Lester, 2021).

Despite these benefits, engaging in friendship at work may also incur costs as both parties engaged in the social exchange are expected to contribute to the relationship. To date, literature has chiefly focused on the resource provision role of friendship and ignored the resource depletion associated with engaging in and maintaining such close social relationships at work, especially in military settings. A growing body of research identified the downsides of workplace friendship in terms of employee job-related attitudes and behaviors (Berman, West, & Richter, 2002; Sias, Heath, Perry, Silva, & Fix, 2004; Ingram & Zou, 2008; Methot *et al.*, 2016; Pillemer & Rothbard, 2018).

In line with the Too-Much-of-a-Good-Thing (TMGT) meta-theoretical framework (Grant & Schwartz, 2011; Pierce & Aguinis, 2013), we argue that the interplay between the friendship benefits and costs leads to a nonlinear association with perceived social support. We built on the social exchange theory (SET) (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano *et al.*, 2017) to argue that in line with the reciprocity in social relations, friendship brings benefits in the form of social support. To explain the friendship-related relational costs, we built on the Investment Model of Commitment Processes (Rusbult, Agnew, & Arriaga, 2012). We also built on the recommendations from Meyer (2009) for motivating curvilinear effects and argue that as the number of friends increases from low to average the friendship-related benefits dominate over the costs, while as the number of friends further increases from average to high, the friendship-related relational costs exceed the relational benefits.

We decided to test this nonlinear hypothesis in military settings, a heavily regulated organizational context that creates strong situational constraints for military employees (Cooper & Withey, 2009). We expected that in such contexts, the ambivalence of friendship would be salient. On the one hand, comradery is a key relational value, because, in the most extreme situations, military employees lay their lives in the hands of their comrades (Siebold, 2007; Verweij, 2007; Du Preez, Sundin, Wessely, & Fear, 2012). On the other hand, friendships might interfere negatively with the hierarchical structure of work relationships in military settings. If employees have too many friends, it could overshadow the crucial organizational hierarchy, especially in military settings. In other words, we expect that in military settings, friendship brings both relational benefits of friendship as well as costs to the formal work relations. We first considered perceived social support as a proxy for relational resources derived from reciprocal social exchanges (Jolly, Kong, & Kim, 2021) and in line with the TMGT framework (Meyer, 2009; Grant & Schwartz, 2011; Pierce & Aguinis, 2013), we argue that the relational benefits of friendship are overshadowed by costs when the number of friends is too high. Thus, we expect that the social support perceived by military employees is lowest when the number of friends is either too low or too high. Second, we examined the relationship between perceived social support and mental well-being encompassing emotional, social and psychological aspects of human functioning (Keyes, 2002). In doing so, we answered several calls in the literature for more substantial support for research on the TMGT effect in psychology (Grant & Schwartz, 2011) and management (Pierce & Aguinis, 2013; Busse, Mahlendorf, & Bode, 2016) by expanding the existing understanding on the mixed effects of

workplace friendship. We intended to provide empirical support to recent perspectives that have highlighted the potential “dark side” of workplace friendship (Pillemer & Rothbard, 2018) by identifying the optimal number of friends at work in a military organization.

### Theoretical framework

Literature defines friendship at work as the “nonexclusive workplace relations that involve mutual trust, commitment, reciprocal liking and shared interests or values” (Berman *et al.*, 2002, p. 218). The existing literature reveals debates about the advantages and disadvantages of building and maintaining close interpersonal relationships at work (Bridge & Baxter, 1992; Riordan & Griffeth, 1995; Sias & Cahill, 1998). Friendship at work is a source of instrumental and emotional support. Thus, it ultimately fosters job performance (Colbert, Bono, & Purvanova, 2016; Methot *et al.*, 2016). In military settings, comradery is an important relational value (Siebold, 2007; Verweij, 2007; Du Preez *et al.*, 2012) and we expected friendship to be an important relational resource for military employees.

Contrastingly, research has shown that friendship drawbacks might outweigh its benefits, as the key motivations for forming a friendship at work could be divergent from those required by a professional relationship (Pillemer & Rothbard, 2018) and the excessive focus on workplace friendships can diminish effectiveness in professional life (Sias *et al.*, 2004). Such arguments are especially valid in military settings that impose strong situational constraints (Cooper & Withey, 2009) on employees. In military organizations, hierarchical relations are key to work organization and performance as they regulate interpersonal interactions and, thus, shape social exchanges among employees.

The Investment Model of Commitment Processes (IMCP) (Rusbult *et al.*, 2012) posits that establishing and maintaining close interpersonal relations, such as friendship, requires substantial investment of personal resources (time, effort, support and care) based on interdependence and reciprocity norms of social exchanges. The commitment to a relationship is influenced by three different factors including the satisfaction level, the alternatives’ quality and the investment size (Rusbult, 1983; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998; Rusbult *et al.*, 2012). In line with the IMCP, relational investments increase the perceived cost of ending the relationship (Goodfriend & Agnew, 2008). Thus, people tend to preserve relationships in which they overinvest. In line with the equity norms in social exchange, if an individual perceives that s/he benefits more from the friendship than the other (i.e. over benefitting), the distress associated with the inequity has implications for relational satisfaction and may lead to relational dissolution (Utne, Hatfield, Traupmann, & Greenberger, 1984). Based on such arguments, we state that both over-benefiting and overinvesting in close interpersonal relations are suboptimal relational strategies. In line with these arguments, employees with a very high number of friends at work may feel they invest more in relationships than they get back, resulting in lower perceived social support compared to those with fewer work friends.

Building on the arguments derived from the IMCP and SET and in line with the TMGT effect (Grant & Schwartz, 2011), we argue that the relationship between the number of friends and perceived social support from peers and supervisors is nonlinear. Perceived support from peers and supervisors refers to the accumulated relational resources stemming from reciprocated relational exchanges (Ng & Sorensen, 2008). Thus, social support is a proxy for relational resources at work. We used Meyer’s (2009) suggestions on understanding curved connections in management research to propose that as the number of friends increases from low to average, the advantages linked to mutual exchanges increase. This results in the accumulation of personal resources, such as perceived social support. However, as the number of friends further increases from average to high, the relational costs associated with friendship overshadow the benefits and employees fail to derive the relational resources from social exchanges with their friends at work. Thus, we hypothesized:

*H1.* The number of friends has a decreasing positive association with the perceived social support from supervisors and peers.

In line with the relational regulation theory (RRT) (Lakey & Orehek, 2011), as recipients of relational resources, military employees can more effectively regulate their affect and adapt better to stressful work situations. Cohesive military units provide social support to the employees and buffer the negative mental health consequences of military deployment in highly stressful situations (Du Preez *et al.*, 2012).

One of the most prominent models that explain general well-being as an indicator of mental health is the Mental Health Continuum Model (Keyes, 2002). This model distinguishes between the emotional, social and psychological components of well-being. Emotional well-being comprises satisfaction and happiness with life and positive affect (Keyes, 2002). Psychological well-being is a multidimensional construct that consists of six distinct facets, each important in determining the extent to which one will become a better person and realize one's potential (Ryff, 1989). These facets are self-acceptance, positive relationships with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life and personal growth. Social well-being is how someone personally assesses their life circumstances and functioning within society (Keyes, 1998) and includes social integration, social contribution, social acceptance, social actualization and social coherence.

Individuals can achieve optimal mental well-being when they have strong, supportive relationships with others (Turner, 1981; Ryff, 1989; Diener & Seligman, 2002). Previous studies revealed that employees who perceived social support from their peers and supervisors reported higher subjective well-being, including strong positive emotions, decreased negative mood and increased life satisfaction (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2009; Ferguson, Carlson, Zivnuska, & Whitten, 2012; Colbert *et al.*, 2016; Kim, Moon, & Shin, 2018). When individuals, including employees, lack social connections and are socially isolated, their health and general well-being suffer (Lam & Lau, 2012; Holt-Lunstad, Smith, Baker, Harris, & Stephenson, 2015) and researchers observe such effects in military settings (Du Preez *et al.*, 2012). In line with Ryan and Deci's (2000) work, social support can be a unique element and resource at the workplace, contributing to all dimensions of mental well-being and, in particular, to social well-being. Past research thoroughly explored workplace social support in relation to negative aspects of overall well-being and work-related well-being emotional strain (Viswesvaran, Sanchez, & Fisher, 1999; Rousseau, Salek, Aubé, & Morin, 2009), burnout (Baruch-Feldman, Brondolo, Ben-Dayan, & Schwartz, 2002), or emotional exhaustion (Pluut, Iliés, Curşeu, & Liu, 2018). In a sample of 175 military employees, Carvalho and Chambel (2018) found that work-family conflict and work-family enrichment mediated the relationships between job demands and supervisor support as job characteristics and well-being at work (i.e. burnout and engagement). Furthermore, scarce research connected social support at work with overall mental well-being in military settings. Jackman, Henderson, Clay and Coussens (2020) found that police officers who perceived higher levels of available support and support received from colleagues had greater odds of increased mental well-being including hedonic and eudaemonic aspects, positive affect, satisfying interpersonal relationships and positive functioning. Considering the previous arguments, we hypothesized.

*H2.* Perceived social support has a positive association with psychological, social and emotional well-being.

Literature has also investigated the direct relationship between workplace friendship and employees' work-related and general well-being (Winstead, Derlega, Montgomery, & Pilkington, 1995). However, research provides inconsistent findings regarding the relationship between workplace friendship and employees' general well-being. For instance, Craig and Kuykendall (2019) found that having a supportive friend at work

enhances employees' work-related well-being by boosting organizational-based self-esteem. Instead, supportive non-work friends impacted both general and work-related well-being through self-esteem and organizational-based self-esteem. In contrast, in two time-lagged studies, Zhang, Sun, Shaffer, and Lin (2021) found that workplace friendship prevalence increased work-related well-being (i.e. job satisfaction) and general subjective well-being (i.e. employees' general life satisfaction, positive and negative affect).

From the perspective of SET (Blau, 1964), positive relationships at work, such as friendship, serve as important resources for emotional and instrumental support for employees (Lawler & Thye, 1999). Subsequently, social support at work can positively contribute to mental well-being. In line with these results, we claim that social support explains the relationship between workplace friendship and mental well-being. Existing empirical evidence suggests this possible mediating role of social support. For instance, building on and extending the Social Support Resource Theory (Hobfoll, Freedy, Lane, & Geller, 1990), Craig and Kuykendall (2019) found that having social support from work friends enhances employees' work-related well-being through organizational-based self-esteem but not general subjective well-being (i.e. general life satisfaction, positive affect and negative affect). In another study, Yang and Wong (2020) found that practical help from coworkers partly explained the connection between friendships on social network sites (like Facebook) and job-related results, such as job embeddedness and job satisfaction. Based on the above reasoning, we hypothesized:

- H3. The association between the number of friends and psychological, social and emotional well-being is mediated by the perceived social support from supervisors and peers.

## Method

### *Participants and procedure*

Our sample included 287 employees from the Romanian Air Force. Participants' age ranged from 20 to 61 years ( $M = 35.07$ ;  $SD = 8.67$ ). Most of the participants were men (235; 81.9%). Our study used a cross-sectional design. Once we got approval from the military organizations to gather data, all participants willingly agreed to participate in this study and signed informed consent. We collected data in August 2020 in paper-and-pencil format.

### *Instruments*

*Workplace friendship.* We asked participants to report the number of friends they have in their work group as well as the workgroup size. On average, after excluding the outliers (participants who reported several friends larger than their workgroup), the number of friends reported was 5.10 ( $SD = 5.02$ ).

*Perceived social support.* We evaluated perceived social support at work with four items adapted from Muntean, Curseu, and Tucaliuc (2022). The items were: "If I encounter task-related problems at work, I get directions from my leader," "If I encounter task-related problems at work, I get directions from team members of the military unit," "If I experience relational issues at work, I get support from my leader." "If I experience relational issues at work, I get support from my team members of the military unit" ( $\alpha = 0.83$ ). We used the procedure and macros presented by Hayes and Coutts (2020) to compute the omega index for this scale (0.83). All four items load significantly in a single dominant factor of social support.

*The emotional, social and psychological dimensions of the mental well-being.* We evaluated emotional, social and psychological well-being with the Mental Health Continuum-Short Form (MHC-SF) (Keyes, 2005). Participants had to indicate how they felt during the last month using a six-point Likert scale, ranging from never (0) to everyday (5). Three items measured emotional well-being (e.g. "happy;"  $\alpha = 0.75$ ). We measured social well-being with five items (e.g. "That you had something important to contribute to society;"  $\alpha = 0.72$ ). Finally, we measured psychological well-being using six items (e.g. "That you liked most parts of your

personality;  $\alpha = 0.69$ ). We used the mean score for each dimension of the mental well-being in the subsequent data analyses.

**Results**

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations and correlations.

Our third hypothesis focused on an indirect association between the number of friends and well-being. Thus, we used the MEDCURVE procedure to test the nonlinear mediation (Hayes & Preacher, 2010). Using this procedure, we could also test the first two hypotheses for the partial regressions presented in the mediation analyses. We first tested the mediation model with no control variables (including just the number of friends and the squared number of friends as predictors) and then we added age, gender and group size as control variables. Table 2 presents the results of these regressions.

None of the control variables had a significant association with perceived social support. As indicated in Table 1, the quadratic term, probing the nonlinear association between the number of friends and the perceived social support was significant ( $B = -0.003$ , standard error (SE) = 0.001,  $p = 0.03$ ), while the main effect of the number of friends was also significant ( $B = 0.06$ , SE = 0.01,  $p = 0.01$ ). We obtained the same pattern of results with and

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Gender	0.18	0.39	1						
2. Age	35.07	8.67	-0.07	1					
3. Work group size	8.21	7.13	-0.10	-0.12*	1				
4. Number of friends	5.10	5.02	-0.16**	-0.06	0.55**	1			
5. Social support	5.01	1.26	-0.06	-0.03	-0.05	0.06	1		
6. Emotional WB	4.21	0.76	0.08	-0.14*	0.02	0.09	0.18**	1	
7. Social WB	3.32	0.99	0.03	-0.07	-0.01	0.02	0.14*	0.55**	1
8. Psychological WB	3.91	0.75	0.10	-0.01	-0.05	0.10	0.15**	0.57**	0.63**

**Note(s):** Gender was coded as a dummy variable with 0 = men, 1 = women; WB = well-being

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$  \*\* $p < 0.01$ , and \* $p < 0.05$

**Source(s):** Authors' own elaboration

**Table 1.** Means, standard deviations and correlations

Variable	Social support	Social support	Emotional WB	Social WB	Psychological WB
Constant	5.03***	5.49*** (0.34)	4.09*** (0.27)	2.05*** (0.37)	3.53*** (0.27)
Gender		-0.15 (0.19)	0.18 (0.12)	0.09 (0.15)	0.25* (0.12)
Age		-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01* (0.005)	-0.01 (0.007)	0.001 (0.005)
Work group size		-0.02 (0.01)	-0.004 (0.007)	-0.003 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.007)
Number of friends (NoF)	0.05* (0.02)	0.06* (0.02)	0.02 (0.01)	0.006 (0.01)	0.03* (0.01)
NoF squared	-0.003* (0.001)	-0.003* (0.001)			
Social support			0.10** (0.04)	0.11* (0.05)	0.09* (0.04)
N	287	287	287	287	287
R <sup>2</sup>	0.02	0.03	0.06	0.03	0.06
F-statistic	3.27*	1.92†	3.83**	1.42	3.45**

**Note(s):** Unstandardized regression coefficients are shown with standard errors between parentheses; gender was coded as a dummy variable with 0 = men and 1 = women

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$  \*\* $p < 0.01$  and \* $p < 0.05$ . † $p < 0.10$ . NoF = Number of friends; WB = well-being

**Source(s):** Authors' own elaboration

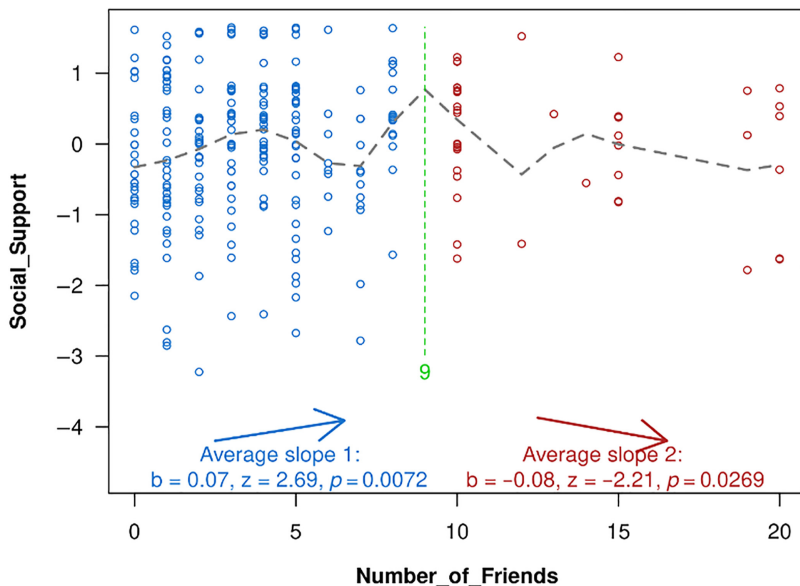
**Table 2.** Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression results

without the control variables. Therefore, the association between the number of friends and social support was decreasingly positive as hypothesized in [Hypothesis 1](#).

Perceived social support was positively and significantly related to all mental well-being dimensions (for emotional well-being,  $B = 0.10$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $p = 0.004$ ; social well-being,  $B = 0.11$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ; psychological well-being,  $B = 0.09$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ). Therefore, the data supported [Hypothesis 2](#).

Finally, based on the MEDCURVE procedure, we estimated the indirect association between the number of friends and the three well-being dimensions at three levels of the independent variable (low, average and high). For emotional well-being, the indirect effect of number of friends mediated by social support was significant for low and average number of friends,  $\theta_{low} = 0.008$ , 95% confidence interval (CI) = [0.001, 0.02],  $\theta_{average} = 0.005$ , 95% CI = [0.001, 0.01], and for the highest level of the independent variable, the confidence interval contained zero  $\theta_{high} = 0.002$ , 95% CI = [-0.001, 0.008]. Therefore, the indirect association was not significant. For psychological well-being, the indirect effect of the number of friends was also significant only at low and average levels of the independent variable:  $\theta_{low} = 0.007$ , 95% CI = [0.004, 0.02],  $\theta_{average} = 0.004$ , 95% CI = [0.002, 0.01] and  $\theta_{high} = 0.002$ , 95% CI = [-0.007, 0.008]. Finally, for social well-being, the mediation effect of social support was significant only at low and average levels of the independent variable:  $\theta_{low} = 0.008$ , 95% CI = [0.002, 0.03],  $\theta_{average} = 0.005$ , 95% CI = [0.002, 0.01], and for high number of friends, the estimated indirect effect contained zero  $\theta_{high} = 0.002$ , 95% CI = [-0.007, 0.008]. Therefore, we did not consider it significant.

Overall, these mediation effects supported [Hypothesis 3](#) stating that the association between the number of friends and well-being is mediated by perceived social support. Finally, to determine the inflection point at which the association between the number of friends and social support becomes negative, we used the two-line technique based on an interrupted regression approach presented by [Simonsohn \(2018\)](#). [Figure 1](#) presents the results of this heuristic analysis performed with the two-line test version 0.52.



**Figure 1.**  
The inflection point detected based on the [Simonsohn \(2018\)](#) interrupted regression approach

**Source(s):** The figure was produced using version 0.52 of the Two Lines Test developed by [Simonsohn \(2018\)](#); available at <https://webstimate.org/twolines/>

As indicated in [Figure 1](#), the inflection point based on the two-line test was 9 friends. From 0 to 9 friends, the association between the number of friends and social support was positive ( $B = 0.07, z = 2.64, p = 0.007$ ), while beyond 9 friends, the relationship becomes negative and significant ( $B = -0.08, z = 2.21, p = 0.026$ ). This procedure uses a heuristic search for the point at which the two estimated regression slopes change sign. We based the computed inflection point on the quadratic regression equations:  $B_{NoFriends}/2 * B_{NoFriendsSQ}$  ([Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003](#)). The computed inflection point based on this approach was 9.6 friends. Given the similar estimates obtained from the two procedures, we can conclude that the inflection point ranged somewhere around 9 and 10 friends.

## Discussion

We founded the study on the SET ([Blau, 1964](#)), IMCP ([Rusbult et al., 2012](#)) and TMGT framework ([Grant & Schwartz, 2011](#); [Pierce & Aguinis, 2013](#); [Busse et al., 2016](#)) to disentangle the costs and benefits of friendship at work in a military setting.

As hypothesized, we found that military employees who have too few or too many friends in the workplace are more likely to perceive that they lack social support from their supervisors and coworkers. This is in line with the social capital lens and the tenets of the SET and IMCP. Informal relationships at work, like workplace friendships, help in gaining social capital and support ([Coleman, 1988](#); [Adler & Kwon, 2002](#)), but they also come with related relationship challenges. Furthermore, putting unequal effort or extra effort into having many work friends can turn friendship into a constraint and a liability ([Adler & Kwon, 2002](#)) because, over time, such investments can become exhausting ([Methot et al., 2016](#)). The second explanation for the nonlinear association between the number of friends and social support in military settings is the interference between the informal relational benefits tied to friendship with the formal nature of hierarchical relations in the military. We have identified that the inflection point beyond which friendship at work starts to have deleterious effects is between 9 and 10. Given that we tested our hypotheses in a military sample, we acknowledge that this inflection point cannot be generalized to other organizational settings. However, we firmly believe that the TMGT arguments related to friendship are valid for other organizational (or more generic social) settings as well. Future studies could delve deeper into these two likely mechanisms by directly examining the associated relationship challenges. This includes assessing both the formal-informal relational interferences and multiplex relationships in military settings.

In line with the RRT ([Lakey & Orehek, 2011](#)), our findings suggest that social support benefits military's mental well-being. These findings complement previous studies that have amply highlighted the importance of social support both for military and non-military employees' health and well-being ([Kim et al., 2018](#)), by considering military employees' mental well-being as a multidimensional construct.

Our research emphasizes that social support represents the build-up of relational resources and acts as a mechanism that clarifies the connection between the quantity of workplace friends and employees' mental well-being. These findings corroborate the often posited, but rarely tested, psychological mechanisms underlying the benefits and costs of workplace friendship on individual well-being ([Craig & Kuykendall, 2019](#)).

## Implications

While the literature on workplace friendship has mostly adopted the SET as a theoretical framework ([Methot et al., 2016](#)), we based this study on the TMGT meta-theoretical framework to distinguish between the costs and benefits associated with friendship at work in military organizations. Our study shows that as the number of friends at work increases

from 0 to 9, perceived social support increases proportionally. However, as the number of friends further increases above 10, the perceived social support decreases. We answered the calls for more research into the TMGT effect (Grant & Schwartz, 2011; Pierce & Aguinis, 2013; Busse *et al.*, 2016), the potential benefits of workplace friendship on mental well-being and the mechanisms involved in the occurrence of such benefits (Craig & Kuykendall, 2019) and its downsides (Pillemer & Rothbard, 2018). Our study considered mental well-being from a multidimensional perspective (Keyes, 2002), thus, it complements previous research that focused on the dimensions of overall well-being (Jackman *et al.*, 2020). Last, but not least, our study provides specific insights into the outcomes of having (too many) friends at work in military settings.

Our findings have some important practical implications. We found that having more than 9 friends at work incurs costs in terms of perceived social support. We acknowledge that this inflection point could differ in other organizations. Thus, we call for additional research to explore the nonlinear association between friendship and relational resources and adaptation in work settings. Our findings underscore the possible downsides of having an excess of informal relationships at work. Having too many friends can exhaust rather than renew relational resources in the workplace. Managers can increase awareness of the deleterious implications of excessive gregariousness at work. Given the beneficial role of social support at work, military organizations can implement actions to increase employees' awareness of the importance of authentically supporting others through daily actions and to help them recognize the value of their role as support providers. People have varying relationship needs and ideas about what qualifies as support in close relationships. Therefore, organizations could encourage military employees to explore and discuss the most important support sources and functions. Moreover, employees could be educated to have a greater understanding of how to build friendly relationships at work to fulfill their own personal needs, as well as the needs of their coworkers.

### Limitations and future research directions

Our study has several limitations. We collected the data through a cross-sectional design, which prevented us from concluding about cause-effect relationships. Moreover, the applicability of our findings is limited since the sample was not representative of the Romanian Air Force, the military, or the overall employee population. Future studies should consider representative samples. As often the case in military settings, most of our participants were men, therefore, we cannot generalize our results to more gender-balanced organizations.

We assessed our variables through self-reports, which might be influenced by biases like social desirability and common method variance (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Future studies may use socio-metric research designs to measure friendship ties (who is a friend with whom) and support (who provides/receives support to/from whom) in a team/work unit. However, when testing interaction or quadratic effects as we did in our study, it is less likely that the interaction effects are overestimated (Siemens, Roth, & Oliveira, 2010).

In this study, we considered only the positive interpersonal relations at work and focused on friendship. Our indicator of friendship relations is coarse as we have assessed friendship using a single item asking participants to report the number of friends in their work group. In the analyses, we used group size as a control variable as it can limit the number of possible friendship ties reported by the participants. However, future research could use a social network approach to assess such interpersonal relations in a more refined and granular manner. Relationships in the workplace often involve the experience of simultaneously positive and negative orientations toward a person, goal, task, or idea (Ashforth, Rogers, Pratt, & Pradies, 2014). Moreover, future research should consider the quality of

interpersonal relations as well as ambivalent relationships at work and their influence on different functions and support sources (from friends, peers, or supervisors) which can later contribute to employees' mental well-being. We focused on the number of friends in the work group as teammates are one of the most proximal sources of social support at work (Jolly *et al.*, 2021). However, concerning friendship, researchers could explore social support more broadly by including friendship relations outside the work group and, also, by exploring friendship across different hierarchical layers in the armed forces.

Our study focused only on individual-level outcomes. We need to fully understand also the factors that influence the formation, maintenance and dissolution of workplace friendships (Nielsen, Jex, & Adams, 2000), especially in military settings in which comradery, is a key interpersonal value (Verweij, 2007). Cross-sectional research suggests that structural factors (e.g. seniority; Mao, 2006) and the workplace's broader social aspects (e.g. group climate, opportunities for interaction) may also influence the stages of friendship (Tse, Dasborough, & Ashkanasy, 2008; Korte & Lin, 2012). As military employees perform their tasks in socially isolated or stressful work environments, future studies could investigate how these employees may benefit in terms of mental well-being from engaging in recovery from work experiences and activities that imply interaction with both work and nonwork friends.

Finally, in our study, we have argued that the balance between the benefits and costs of friendship is key in explaining the non-monotonic relation between the number of friends and perceived social support. However, we did not investigate the relational costs and benefits directly. In line with the SET, perceived social support is an indicator of social exchanges (Jolly *et al.*, 2021), yet future research could assess more directly the costs and benefits of social exchanges associated with friendship at work.

## Conclusions

We adopted the TMGT meta-theoretical lens to highlight the costs and benefits associated with workplace friendship in a military context. We highlighted a nonlinear relationship between the number of friends and the perceived social support. Perceived social support mediates the relationship between the number of friends and psychological, social and subjective well-being. These findings may be of interest to both military organizations and employees as they might inform them to what extent to promote workplace friendship to increase the employees' perceptions of the availability of social support and their mental well-being.

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### Further reading

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