

**The Influence of Relationship Quality at Work on the Association between
Confidentiality Requirements and Emotional Exhaustion**

Emily Belger

S5465117

Department of Psychology, University of Groningen

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Supervisor: prof. dr. Anita Keller

Second evaluator: Aljoscha Rimpler, MSc

In collaboration with: Bente Boersma, Elja Bregman, Emma Dubel, Soner Peker, Merel Weits

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Abstract

In a multitude of professions signing confidentiality agreements is a part of daily work. While secrets in private life have been researched, work-related confidentiality remains an underdeveloped avenue of investigation. Previous research suggests that stress is caused by work-related secrecy, indicating the importance of understanding confidentiality to avoid additional work burden that could lead to burnout. In this study it was hypothesized that confidentiality requirements would increase emotional exhaustion and that this association would be moderated by relationship quality with colleagues. Further analysis investigated the idea that people high on extraversion may systematically have higher quality relationships with others at work. To advance understanding of the field, we examined 118 participants of age 21 to 69 and multiple nationalities regarding variables related to confidentiality, their work and personal characteristics. Nevertheless, data gathered via self-reported answers on a questionnaire could not support the mentioned hypotheses. This suggests that confidentiality requirements may not be experienced as burdening or that the utilized framework is unsuitable. Due to this, additional research is necessary to establish how confidentiality requirements function within the workplace and discover what consequences they may have.

Keywords: Confidentiality, Emotional Exhaustion, Relationship Quality, Work, Extraversion

The Influence of Relationship Quality at Work on the Association between Confidentiality Requirements and Emotional Exhaustion

Lawyers, healthcare workers and government employees all have one thing in common: they must keep secrets regarding their work. Signing confidentiality and non-disclosure agreements is common practice among a variety of career paths (Thomas et al., 2014). *Confidentiality agreements* are contracts that specify requirements to protect personal information from being disclosed to third parties outside the agreement. In this way, they aim to safeguard the privacy and security of people and their sensitive data (Onabajo & Jahnke, 2006).

By mandating the concealment of specific information, confidentiality is not unlike personal secrecy. *Secrecy* is generally conceptualized as the intention to not reveal certain information to particular individuals (Slepian et al., 2017). While personal and organizational secrecy may be similar, they are not identical because the consequences of revealing secrets differ between the circumstances. Sharing personal secret with, for instance, friends, often leads to increased social support and an increased ability to cope through this newfound support (Slepian, 2024). However, when employees share organizational secrets with people outside the confidentiality agreement, it can result in formal sanctions and other costs for the secret sharer (Slepian et al., 2024). Thus, organizational and personal secrets do not function equally and require separate attention.

Nevertheless, the emotional impacts of organizational secrets on stress measures and well-being are similar to consequences of personal secret-keeping (Slepian, 2024). Emotional consequences of personal secrecy are increased rumination, heightened anxiety and a variety of negative emotional states, like shame and feelings of inauthenticity (Slepian, 2024). Likewise, organizational secrets have also been associated with adverse consequences, such as heightened levels of stress and lower well-being due to isolation (Slepian et al., 2024).

Since organizational secrets are associated with increased stress levels (Slepian et al., 2024), and stress often leads to stress responses (Dorsey et al., 2022), measuring such stress reactions may offer new insights into the effects of confidentiality. One such consequence of the demands that come with confidentiality is emotional exhaustion (Jin et al., 2020; Slepian et al., 2024). Secrets are often experienced as an emotional burden (Bedrov & Gable, 2025; Jin et al., 2020) which further increases their potential to induce this exhaustion.

Previous investigation has shown that relationships with colleagues play a pivotal role in well-being and positive affect through providing relevant resources for coping with stressors (Colbert et al., 2016). However, when individuals perceive interactions as burdening, which may happen when monitoring themselves to not reveal secrets, the relationship quality with others suffers (Bedrov & Gable, 2025). High quality relationships may be important in buffering stress caused by the burden of confidentiality because through these people experience less of a need regulate emotions due to feelings of safety in the connection (Carmeli et al., 2008).

Further, certain individuals are more likely to experience these potentially beneficial high-quality relationships with colleagues since certain personality characteristics tend to produce specific reactions in one's environment (Scarr & McCartney, 1983). Consequently, personality might be a suitable starting point for identifying who is more prone to experiencing good connections that could buffer the experience of stress. Specifically, extraversion stood out because people with this personality trait are consistently more likely to seek out and establish relationships with the people around them (Srivastava et al., 2008), thus creating more opportunities for higher quality relationships.

Finding support for these ideas would show that the transactional stress framework, as used in this paper, is able to be employed in future research to examine confidentiality. Investigating the influence of the quality of work relationships may indicate possibilities to

negate stress consequences that could result in burnout. If relationship quality with colleagues has an impact on the connection between confidentiality and emotional exhaustion, this may reveal ways to develop highly tailored and thus superior stress interventions. These could target relationship quality between coworkers for workplaces with high confidentiality requirements, such as healthcare workers, where up to 70% of acting healthcare professionals have reported stress linked to their work (Rink et al., 2023) or attorneys, out of which close to 50% report overwhelm (Wiley et al., 2023). Therefore, determining whether confidentiality requirements add to the occupational burden and finding ways to manage and reduce stress and stress outcomes, like emotional exhaustion, is crucial. Being unaware of the possible toll of confidentiality may lead to misattributions of these repercussions to other, more common, work demands. In this way, the mechanisms within the workplace may remain unclear, and employees may continue to lack adequate interventions for coping with their environment.

Confidentiality and Emotional Exhaustion

Research investigating secret keeping in the workplace shows a link between confidentiality requirements and experiences of stress (Slepian et al., 2024). This finding is accounted for by the framework of the *transactional stress model* by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). The model states that stress results from the relationship and interaction between a person and their environment and is shaped by an individual's assessment of their own resources to navigate the situation. This evaluation happens through a process of primary and secondary appraisal. During primary appraisal a situation is given a value judgement, such as stressful, irrelevant or positive. In secondary appraisal, the individual evaluates their own assets to cope with the circumstances. Therefore, stress does not occur due to the presence of one specific stimulus but is the result of an individual's interpretation of a situation in its context. Keeping secrets is often experienced as burdensome and taxing (Bedrov & Gable,

2025; Slepian, 2024), as secrets add to existing work burden. Thus, due to heightened confidentiality demands, the primary appraisal of the situation is likely to be stressful.

This process of perception may translate into stress responses (Dorsey et al., 2022). These reactions could be cognitive, emotional, behavioral or physical (Attia et al., 2022). However, confidentiality, as a stressor, is likely to induce emotional consequences, specifically *emotional exhaustion*, because keeping secrets requires people to overly regulate their emotions (Bianchi et al., 2024). Defined as an individuals' feeling of depletion in emotional and physical capacities (Pasman et al., 2022; Reis et al., 2015), emotional exhaustion is one of three symptoms of burnout, a syndrome that often occurs in stressful jobs or high demand settings (Khammissa et al., 2022). The intention to withhold a secret, like mandated in confidentiality requirements, may present such a stressful burden (Slepian et al., 2024), demanding the secret-keeper to attentively monitor for environmental cues to evaluate whether the given situation requires the individual to hide certain information (Bianchi et al., 2024). When the circumstances necessitate concealment of the secret, inhibition and emotional suppression become crucial (Bianchi et al., 2024). Both of these emotion regulation behaviors can lead to increased feelings of fatigue in emotional functioning (Slepian et al., 2018), as they are resource-demanding (Gross & Levenson, 1997), thus contributing to the perception of emotional exhaustion. Following, confidentiality requirements may trigger emotional exhaustion through emotion regulation (Bianchi et al., 2024) which depletes one's available energy (Gross & Levenson, 1997). Within the transactional stress model this would indicate that confidentiality requirements function as a stressor that leads to negative primary appraisal and followingly pronounced stress responses.

These findings together motivate the first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Confidentiality requirements have a positive relationship with emotional exhaustion.

Relationship Quality as Moderator

While the perception of a stressor influences primary appraisal, secondary appraisal of a situation is based on a person's perceived capability to handle the situation they find themselves in, according to the transactional stress model (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). By influencing secondary appraisal, so that the person judges themselves as more capable of dealing with the circumstances, one may be able to reduce stress responses that would usually follow the stressor (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

A good social support network is often interpreted as being helpful in dealing with stressors (Hostinar & Gunnar, 2015). However, not every relationship in a network is equally beneficial (Karabay & Asi, 2021). One important aspect that shapes this distinction in perception is relationship quality (Campbell et al., 2008; Kenny & Acitelli, 2001).

Relationship quality refers to the evaluation a person has of the connection, importantly, whether it is positive or negative (Morry et al., 2010). A high-quality relationship is one that is beneficial for both parties (Colbert et al., 2016) through reciprocated responsiveness (Canevello & Crocker, 2010) and heightened perceptions of well-being (Farooqi, 2014). Both of these factors induce positive evaluations regarding the connection and the people involved (Campbell et al., 2008).

The mechanism by which high relationship quality gains its meaning and role is through its potential for cultivating perceptions of psychological safety (Carmeli et al., 2008). Feelings of psychological safety often flow from higher quality relationships because manifestations of relationship quality commonly signal safety (Carmeli et al., 2008).

Psychological safety is defined as a soothing feeling of ease in showing up as the authentic version of oneself due to the reassurance that there will be no undesirable repercussions that could harm important aspects of one's self-concept (Kahn, 1990). The ability to be genuine without fear of harm, due to the knowledge that one is liked, is the

definition of *friendship* (Niven et al., 2012), which is a function common in high quality relationships according to Colbert et al. (2016). These two definitions overlap significantly which highlights how psychological safety is easily signaled within better quality relationships.

Moreover, relationships of higher quality usually have a greater emotional carrying capacity, meaning that there will be a high level of display of both positive and negative feelings within the relationship (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). High emotional carrying capacity, in combination with positive regard, a sense of connectedness through contact and feeling known (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003), will likely signal to the people that they are free to express their feelings without emotion regulation. In this manner, high quality relationships offer *emotional support* to people in all kinds of circumstances and situations (Colbert et al., 2016; Hua, 2024). Similarly, knowing that no judgement will follow often helps people feel comfortable asking for help (Edmondson, 2004; Stephens et al., 2011). Thus, *task assistance* is more likely in connections where people feel safe, namely high-quality relationships (Colbert et al., 2016; Stephens et al., 2011).

Taken together, aspects of friendship, task assistance and emotional support, which are all manifestations of high relationship quality (Colbert et al., 2016), increase individual's perceptions of psychological safety. Feeling safe, individuals have less need to engage in emotion regulation because they are aware the relationship can carry the burden of fluctuating emotions without judgement (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Kahn, 1990; Edmondson, 2004). Through this, secondary appraisal will be positive and buffer perceptions of stress.

These points give rise to the second hypothesis of:

Hypothesis 2: The relationship between confidentiality and emotional exhaustion is moderated by the quality of relationship with colleagues such that higher quality relationships

with people at work weakens the relationship between confidentiality and emotional exhaustion.

Extraversion and Relationship Quality

Furthermore, relationship quality may be systematically influenced by personality predispositions. This can be explained by the *evocative genotype-environment correlation* proposed by Scarr and McCartney (1983). It suggests that specific personal characteristics evoke a matching behavioral response from the environment (Scarr & McCartney, 1983). Thus, higher relationship quality may be a factor being elicited through a certain subset of behaviors displayed by a person. These behaviors in turn are based on the individual's personal characteristics. *Extraversion*, as measured as the personality dimension describing the tendency to seek out social interactions and social attention according to the five-factor model (McCrae & John, 1992), links to many aspects of social relationships. For example, extraverts tend to seek out and participate more consistently in social interactions (Srivastava et al., 2008), they perceive higher levels of social support (Boyraz et al., 2012) and most importantly, that they tend to have higher quality relationships due to their higher capability of producing more positive experiences in social situations (Harris et al., 2017). This may be because extraverts have an easier time meeting new people and spending time with others while enjoying themselves fully, compared to their more introverted counterparts (Harris et al., 2017). This presents abundant opportunities to build and strengthen connections that could be viewed as beneficial for both parties (Srivastava et al., 2008), heightening chances for higher quality relationships.

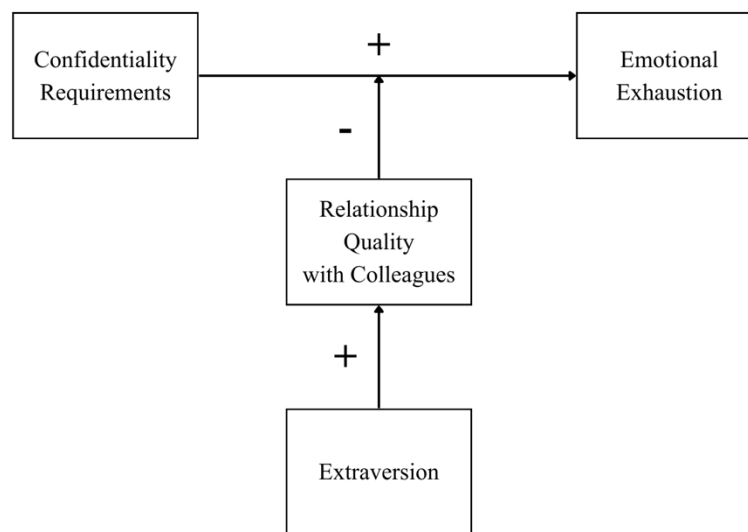
Put together, this leads to the last hypothesis of:

Hypothesis 3: Higher levels of extraversion relate to higher quality relationships at work.

All three hypotheses can be combined in one research model, presented in Figure 1, that will guide the present study.

Figure 1

Path Analysis Model of The Relationship between Confidentiality Requirements and Emotional Exhaustion



Note. The path analysis model shows a hypothesized association between confidentiality requirements and emotional exhaustion in which relationship quality with colleagues acts as a moderator weakening the connection between the two. Additionally, a relationship between extraversion and relationship quality is expected. The manner of association is presented as (+) for a positive relationship or (-) for a negative relationship.

Method

Participants

A total of 131 respondents participated in this study. However, only 118 were able to be used for analysis as 13 people ended participation early and their answers for the relevant scales were missing. The remaining participants consisted of 88 men and 30 women with an

age range of 21 to 69 years and a mean age of $M = 43.42$ years ($SD = 13.95$ years).

Participants represented various nationalities, including Dutch (81.4%), German (16.1%), Italian, Swiss and Indonesian.

The most common work sectors were the healthcare sector (46.6%) and the service industry (13.6%), while education (6.8%) and the financial industry (5.9%), among multiple other sectors, were also represented. Most of the participants had high levels of education with more than half earning a doctorate degree (67.8%) or a (technical) secondary school diploma (11.0%). Only 6.8% reported their highest level of education to be secondary school and no respondents had primary school as their highest completed education.

Participants' work experience ranged from 0 to 50 years, with a mean of $M = 19.68$ years ($SD = 13.47$ years). The average time people had been working at their current workplace was 8.36 years ($SD = 8.95$ years), overall, ranging between 0 to 35 years and people held their current function between 0 and 38 years, with a mean of $M = 9.71$ years ($SD = 9.17$ years). Respondents' working hours ranged between 20 to 60 hours a week, averaging $M = 35.98$ hours ($SD = 7.81$ hours).

Procedure and Design

Participants were required to be at least 18 years old and work more than 30 hours per week. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation, and no compensation was offered for partaking.

Before collection began, the study was registered with the Ethics Committee of Psychology of the University of Groningen (PSY-2526-S-0063). For the data collection, an online questionnaire was administered via Qualtrics survey software (Qualtrics, 2025). A cross-sectional correlational survey design was carried out for the variables of interest. The project examined multiple workplace variables through self-reported data at a single point in time. Convenience sampling was used and the questionnaire was distributed via an

anonymous link and QR code on platforms such as Whatsapp, LinkedIn and other social media. Methodologically, this represents a snowball sample, as each of the group members were asked to recruit participants.

Respondents were invited to take part voluntarily and provided with a description stating the aim of the study, the information that participation was anonymous, and the information that the survey would take 15 to 20 minutes to complete. Before beginning, participants had to give their consent to participate and were informed of their right to terminate participation at any time without having to specify a reason. Data was collected between 10 and 27 November 2025.

Measures

A questionnaire was used that contained established and validated scales to measure the variables: confidentiality requirements, emotional exhaustion, relationship quality and extraversion, along with a few other variables. For scales where either an official Dutch or German version was not available yet, a procedure of translation and back-translation was used to ensure that the scales' translations were accurate and appropriate in both Dutch and German.

Confidentiality Requirements

To measure confidentiality requirements, a mixture of a self-developed measure, constructed by Prof. Dr. Anita Keller, and a measure developed by Slepian et al. (2024) were used, reaching a total of four questions. Both scales were combined to properly assess whether participants had confidentiality requirements as part of their work, and if so, to what extent confidentiality applied. An example item of the Slepian-developed scale is: "Have you signed a non-disclosure agreement as part of your work?", whereas an example of the self-developed measure is: "Does your job involve access to information that you cannot share with others outside of the organization?".

The items from both the closed questions of self-developed measure and the measure by Slepian et al. (2024) were assessed on a 0 or 1 coding standing for “Yes” (0) and “No” (1). Thus, the more often a participant responded “No” (1), the closer they were to having little to no confidentiality requirements. An index was created from this, where high scores indicated low confidentiality requirements. The mean of the index was $M = 0.27$ ($SD = 0.27$), showing that the average participant answered “Yes” to three out of four confidentiality requirement questions. Respondents that indicated “No” to all four items did not see further questions about work secrets but were only shown questions about other work aspects.

Emotional Exhaustion

The exhaustion subscale of the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI) by Demerouti et al. (2003) was used to investigate the variable of emotional exhaustion. An example item is: “During my work, I often feel emotionally drained.”. The subscale consists of a total of eight items, all of which were included. Answers were recorded via a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly disagree” (1) to “Strongly agree” (5). The reliability of the scale in the current research was $\alpha = .867$, indicating the items are closely related, very likely measuring the same construct.

Relationship Quality

As a measure of relationship quality, parts of the Relationship Functions Inventory by Colbert et al. (2016) were used. To lower dropout and the number of questions in the study, not all items of the original Relationship Functions Inventory were included. Only the most relevant subscales: friendship, task assistance and emotional support, were included based on their relative importance to the research question as explained above.

Examples of the chosen subscales are: “My coworkers are my friends” for friendship, “My coworkers help me get my work done” for task assistance and “My coworkers help me cope with stress” for emotional support. Each subscale included three items, totaling nine

items to investigate the construct of relationship quality. The answers to the items were collected via a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging between “Does not apply” (1) to “Applies very much” (7). With the current items, the scale of this study shows a good reliability of $\alpha = .878$, meaning the items are strongly related and measure one construct.

Extraversion

Extraversion was measured as a trait of the Big Five, thus the extraversion-specific items of the Big Five Scale by Donnellan et al. (2006) were used. An example of an item is: “I am the life of the party”. The responses to the four statements were recorded via a 5-point Likert scale with coding ranging from “Strongly disagree” (1) to “Strongly agree” (5). This measure had an internal consistency of $\alpha = .703$, which is in the acceptable range, indicating that these items are related and most likely measure the same concept, extraversion.

Analytic Strategies

The software JASP (JASP Team, 2024) was used for conducting all steps of the data analysis. The moderation analysis used the PROCESS module (Hayes, 2022) available in JASP.

Firstly, hypothesis one was tested by computing a regression model between the variables of confidentiality and emotional exhaustion. This allowed examination of whether there is a significant relationship between the variables and the direction of the association. Secondly, the proposed moderating effect of relationship quality of hypothesis two was assessed via a process model. Confidentiality requirements served as the independent variable, emotional exhaustion as the dependent variable and relationship quality as the process variable in the moderation. Mean-centered variables were used to ease the interpretation of the data. The process model permitted inspection of a potential interaction and conditional effects through relationship quality. Lastly, to investigate whether

extraversion could predict relationship quality at work, as proposed in hypothesis three, another linear regression was conducted.

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, Correlations, and Cronbach Alpha for Study Variables

		M	SD	1	2	3	4
1	Confidentiality	0.265	0.274	<i>0.525</i>			
2	Emotional Exhaustion	2.888	0.700	-0.080	<i>0.868</i>		
3	Relationship Quality	4.727	1.142	0.004	-0.147	<i>0.878</i>	
4	Extraversion	3.333	0.710	-0.061	-0.313***	0.125	<i>0.711</i>

Note. N = 118. Confidentiality coded as 0 = Yes and 1 = No. Cronbach alpha in diagonal printed in italics.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Before detailed analysis of the data, various assumptions were checked to ensure the validity of any conclusions from the data. Most assumptions were not violated, however, one was. This, along how it was addressed and the full assumption check, is in Appendix A.

Firstly, the regression model of confidentiality requirements and emotional exhaustion was investigated. It was hypothesized that there would be a positive relationship between confidentiality and emotional exhaustion indicating that confidentiality requirements at work lead to heightened experiences of emotional exhaustion. The results showed a non-significant relationship between the two variables ($\beta = -.08$, $t(116) = -0.87$, $p = .387$, 95% CI [-0.67; 0.26]). Moreover, the model was not significant ($F(1,116) = 0.75$, $p = .387$) and almost no

variance ($R^2 = .01$) of emotional exhaustion could be explained by confidentiality requirements. Thus, there is no support for this hypothesis from the data.

To examine the data for the second hypothesis, a process model was used. It was expected that relationship quality would serve as a moderator, influencing the relationship between confidentiality requirements and emotional exhaustion in such a way that the connection weakens with heightened relationship quality with colleagues. The direct effect of confidentiality requirements on emotional exhaustion was non-significant ($\beta = -.08$, $p = .392$, 95% CI [-0.65; 0.26]). Similarly, the direct effect of relationship quality on emotional exhaustion was not significant ($\beta = -.14$, $p = .115$, 95% CI [-0.20; 0.02]). Finally, the interaction term was non-significant ($\beta = -.06$, $p = .444$, 95% CI [-0.51; 0.22]). The moderation model explained only a small amount of variance ($R^2 = .03$). As the interaction term was insignificant and R^2 indicated little explained variance, no evidence in support of hypothesis two was found.

Lastly, it was examined whether the trait of extraversion predicts relationship quality at work. The expectation was that people high on extraversion would show higher relationship quality. For this investigation, linear regression was used. The results showed that extraversion did not significantly predict relationship quality in this sample ($\beta = 0.13$, $t(116) = 1.35$, $p = .178$, 95% CI [-0.09; 0.49]). The overall model was also non-significant ($F(1,116) = 1.83$, $p = .178$), with extraversion explaining only a small portion of the variance ($R^2 = .02$) that can be observed in relationship quality. Thus, the hypothesis could not be supported by the data.

Post-Hoc Exploration

Post-hoc exploration was conducted to get the most use out of the data. Firstly, singular subscales of the relationship quality questionnaire were investigated to see whether they have different impacts on the relationship between confidentiality requirements and

emotional exhaustion. If this would be the case, it would be possible to see which aspects of relationship quality are most important. To test this, moderation analysis was conducted for each subscale.

The friendship subscale was not found to moderate a relationship between confidentiality and emotional exhaustion significantly. The direct effect of confidentiality requirements on emotional exhaustion was non-significant ($\beta = -.07, p = .462, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.63; 0.29]$). Additionally, the direct effect of friendship on emotional exhaustion was non-significant ($\beta = -.07, p = .445, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.11; 0.05]$). Finally, the interaction term was non-significant ($\beta = -.13, p = .122, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.48; 0.06]$) and the moderation model explained only a small amount of variance ($R^2 = .03$).

Task assistance subscale also does not seem to moderate. No significant direct effect of confidentiality requirements on emotional exhaustion was found ($\beta = -.08, p = .357, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.67; 0.24]$), or of relationship quality on emotional exhaustion ($\beta = -.17, p = .060, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.21; 0.00]$). The interaction term also remained non-significant ($\beta = .03, p = .705, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.31; 0.46]$). Only a small amount of variance ($R^2 = .04$) was explained by the model.

Lastly, emotional support also showed no moderating role. The direct effect of confidentiality requirements on emotional exhaustion was not significant ($\beta = -.08, p = .400, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.65; 0.26]$). Similarly, the direct effect of emotional support on emotional exhaustion was not significant ($\beta = -.13, p = .158, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.15; 0.02]$). Finally, the interaction term was found to be non-significant ($\beta = -.06, p = .495, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.39; 0.19]$). The moderation model explains only a small amount of variance ($R^2 = .03$). Based on the non-significant interaction terms, no evidence in support of a moderation was found for any of the subscales.

Another idea was that perhaps the observed support might be the driving force behind higher quality relationships and thus should be investigated as a moderator instead because a

loss of social support is often seen as a lack of resources when people are in stressful situations (Taylor, 2012). Moreover, perceived organizational support has before proven to be a moderator helpful in relieving experiences of stress (Sarfraz et al., 2019). Thus, another moderation analysis was conducted in which observed organizational support was measured via four items from the perceived organizational support scale by Eisenberger et al. (1986). The direct effect of confidentiality requirements on emotional exhaustion remained non-significant ($\beta = -.11, p = .221, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.71; 0.16]$). Interestingly, a significant direct relationship was found between perceived organizational support and emotional exhaustion ($\beta = -.38, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.08; -0.03]$), indicating that higher perceived support leads to lower feelings of emotional exhaustion. Still, the interaction term was non-significant ($\beta = .06, p = .338, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.03; 0.10]$) and the whole moderation model remained a weak fit for the data ($R^2 = .13$) which indicates no evidence for a moderation through perceived organizational support.

Overall, the post-hoc explorations revealed no further insights besides a significant negative relationship between perceived organizational support and emotional exhaustion.

Discussion

To shed light on whether confidentiality requirements add to the burden faced by people in the workplace, this study aimed to investigate the impact of confidentiality requirements on emotional exhaustion and furthermore see whether relationship quality with colleagues would act as a moderator in this connection. Lastly, it examined whether extraversion could predict who would have better relationships at work.

Overall, no support for any of the three hypotheses was found. This could indicate that the theoretical model proposed in this study does not influence real-world outcomes in the way it was predicted. It may be that the model is more conditional or that the associations do not exist in the workplace at all.

Theoretical Implications

These results point to multiple implications regarding the transactional stress model. On the one hand, it is possible that confidentiality requirements are not sufficiently defined as a stressor according to the model, making the framework unfit to test the hypotheses. Lazarus (1993) made a clear distinction between stress and threat. Threat is one component that may influence the perception of stress that comes from a situation when one expects negative repercussions that have not yet arisen but may or may not appear in the future (Lazarus, 1993). This is the category confidentiality requirements may most closely fall under, since breaches of confidentiality only lead to negative consequences when they become known to relevant higher-ups which may or may not occur. Thus, an individual has ambivalence regarding the classification of the situation rather than it definitively being appraised as threatening or negative. This was not considered in the model. In turn, one may have to measure not only if there are confidentiality requirements, but rather if there is worry about consequences from breaking confidentiality. This would help to firmly establish confidentiality requirements as stressors leading to a negative primary appraisal.

On the other hand, as previous research has remarked, a problem with the transactional stress model is that primary and secondary appraisal are not independent, as the model implies (Peeters et al., 1995). Thus, considering that the hypotheses of this study are constructed on the difference between the two appraisals (a negative primary appraisal, but a positive secondary appraisal), the fact that they may more accurately be regarded as one (Peeters et al., 1995), may have presented a problem. Combining both appraisals into one whole appraisal process, as done in the moderation, may have caused the effects to cancel each other out entirely. Overall, the results of the current study do not fit within the framework of the transactional stress model and the implication of two separate appraisal processes. This may suggest that confidentiality requirements underly a different model than traditional workplace

stressors. If that is the case, literature so far lacks frameworks to properly investigate the topic and thus outcomes that stem from confidentiality may remain hidden until proper tools and models become available for their detection.

An important discovery, which was not initially expected, was that extraversion correlated significantly with emotional exhaustion, seen in Table 1. This finding aligns with previous research (Alarcon et al., 2009; Bakker et al., 2006). The explanation in past studies was that extraverts have more positive evaluations of their workplace (Alarcon et al., 2009; Bakker et al., 2006), which leads to lower perceptions of stress. In more general terms, this could point to the fact that personality traits and other internally reliant resources may have a higher impact on appraisal and followingly stress responses than external resources, like relationships, do. This idea is embedded in the *feelings-as-information theory* first proposed by Schwarz (2011). The theory states that internal states, such as feelings, are more important for guiding judgements about situations than stable states are (Schwarz, 2011). External sources, as the relationships used in this study, would count as stable states because there is a higher distance between the person and the social feedback coming from social relationships, so it tends to be consistent over time (Gütges et al., 2025). In contrast, internal information changes more frequently based on context (Gütges et al., 2025) which makes it highly informative to a person, bringing it to the forefront of their mind when making judgements (Schwarz, 2011). Thus, positive internal evaluations of the workplace, that were not accounted for, could have overshadowed the influence of relevant external resources, such as relationship quality.

Limitations

One limitation of the study was the snowball sampling. This is a non-probability sampling method that resulted in a sample that is unrepresentative of the general working population in terms of education and thus likely *emotional intelligence*, an umbrella of

competencies that enable a person to be better able to understand and regulate emotions (Emmerling & Cherniss, 2025). According to the OECD (2024) only around 1% of the Dutch population holds a doctoral degree. However, in the current sample, a much larger percentage of people (67.8%) have received a PhD, resulting in a much more highly educated sample compared to the population. This gap between the sample and population is critical because academic achievement and emotional intelligence are highly positively correlated (Garner et al., 2025; Shengyao et al., 2024), thus making it likely that the current sample has high emotional intelligence compared to the average of the population. Higher emotional intelligence in the sample would be significant because multiple facets of emotional intelligence are negatively correlated with emotional exhaustion (Moon & Hur, 2011). Due to successful regulation of their negative emotions in stressful circumstances (Fteiha & Awwad, 2020), people with high emotional intelligence may be less prone to being burdened by emotional exhaustion. They handle confidentiality requirements better, as they employ relevant positive coping strategies more frequently and effectively (Fteiha & Awwad, 2020), buffering the impact of the stressor. This line of reasoning indicates that a highly educated sample, like the one in this study, would plausibly display high emotional intelligence, if measured. Finding a correlation between confidentiality requirements and emotional exhaustion would consequently be difficult as there is likely already a factor, high emotional intelligence, in place that buffers the stressors' influence, weakening the connection between the variables. As emotional intelligence was not accounted for in the present study, we cannot be sure whether confidentiality and emotional exhaustion are truly unrelated or whether the emotional intelligence of the sample lead to the null findings.

The lack of a significant moderation may be attributable to a ceiling effect. As seen in Table 1, the average rating of people's relationship quality with colleagues was very high ($M = 4.73$; $SD = 1.14$) which prompted closer examination of the responses via a histogram of

responses to these items as seen in Appendix B. As expected, the histogram shows clear left skewness of the averaged responses. This indicates that participants' scores on this scale clustered significantly around the upper end of the scale, which was 5. A ceiling effect (Staus et al., 2021), such as this, may lead to an underestimation of the true effect of relationship quality might have because it hides the true nature of changes resulting from different levels of relationship quality as not enough information is available for low relationship quality at work. Finding a true moderation effect with the given data from the sample, would have been challenging. This indicates that the relationship quality scale does not discriminate between the levels of high-quality relationships precisely enough. Rather, everyone with good relationship quality at work clusters together, creating a blur, and thus making it is difficult when trying to differentiate between people and examine a true effect.

Future Directions

Future research may aim to retest the current hypothesis with a sample that is more representative of the working population, especially regarding education level, to confirm or reconsider the evidence against the theory from the current study. Additionally, it would be important to use a different scale for relationship quality that discriminates precisely across level. This way a potential ceiling effect could be avoided and relationship quality's true impact, or the lack thereof, could be investigated. Moreover, due to problems distinguishing between primary and secondary appraisal in previous, as also in this research, it may be useful to work with a different theoretical framework. Siegrist's (1996) effort-reward imbalance model would be suitable if confidentiality functions similarly to other work stressors. It would better capture benefits that may counteract exhaustion from keeping confidentiality without requiring a differentiation of appraisals.

Altogether, it must be determined whether organizational secrets, as hypothesized in this paper, elicit stress responses and if not, how they operate. While the current investigation

could not support any of its hypotheses, it is a first steppingstone in the discovery of what consequences may come from workplace secrets.

Conclusion

Ultimately, even though no significant relationships stood out in this paper, literature about confidentiality requirements and their impacts remain scarce, yet confidentiality infiltrates many working environments. Continuing investigation of this variable and its outcomes remains crucial to be able to distinguish influences of confidentiality requirements from other factors in the workplace. Only in this way will it be possible to find suitable stress and burnout interventions that target as many aspects of stressors as possible, thus creating better opportunities for employees to flourish.

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Appendix A

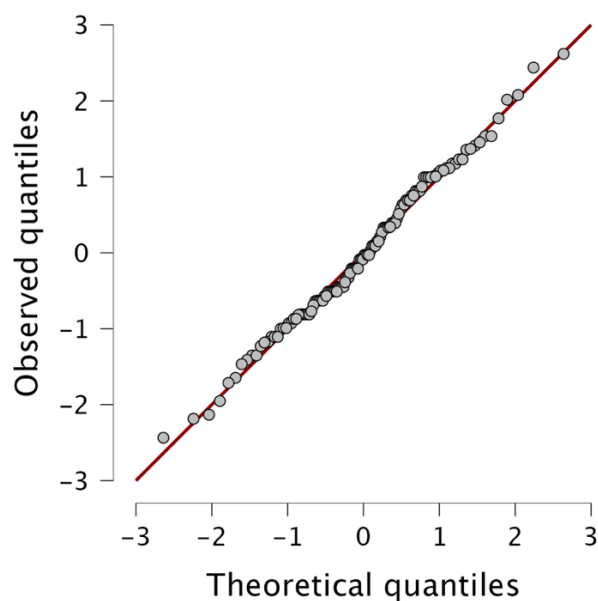
Hypothesis 1

To ensure the validity of conclusions drawn from this data set for investigating this hypothesis, a few assumptions must be tested. Notably, assumptions of normality of the residuals, normality, linearity and homoscedasticity should not be violated and there should be no evidence of influential observations or outliers.

The Q-Q plot in Figure A1 shows a comparison of the observed residuals in the data set to the expected residuals based on a perfect normal distribution. Points are expected to approximately follow a straight line when the assumption of normality of residuals is not violated. This is the case for the relationship between confidentiality requirements and emotional exhaustion. Thus, the assumption has not been violated, and valid conclusions can be drawn. During this, the Durbin-Watson statistic was also examined. No evidence for autocorrelations would be found if the statistic is between 1.5 and 2.5. $DW = 1.77$ in this case, indicating no evidence for autocorrelation.

Figure A1

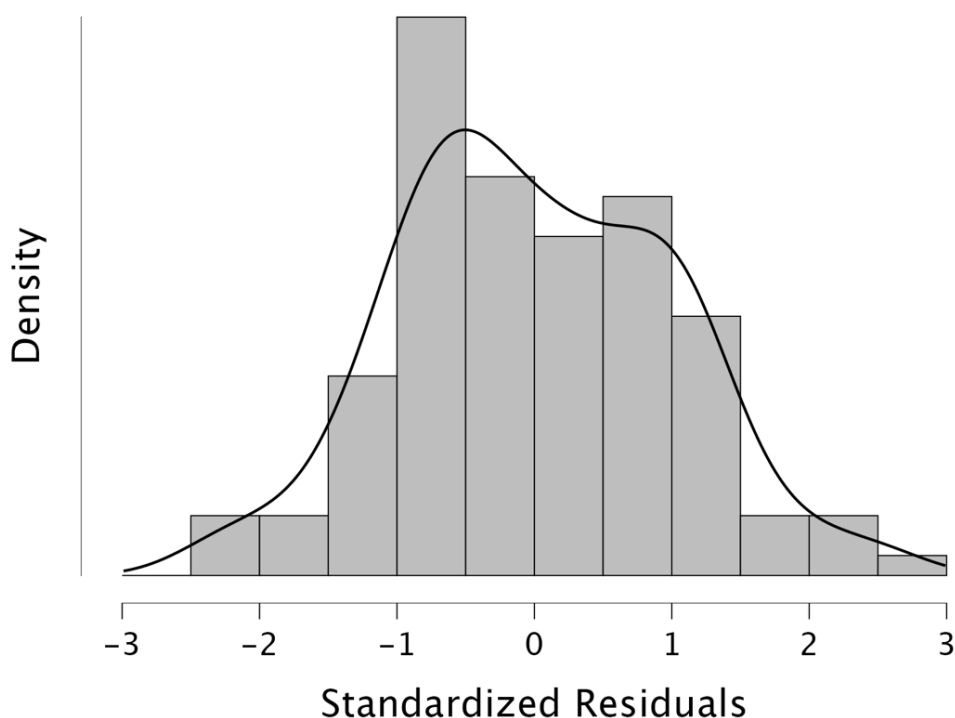
Q-Q Plot Standardized Residuals of Confidentiality Requirements and Emotional Exhaustion



To see whether the assumption of normality has been violated, a residual histogram can be of use. This shows the distribution of the residuals that result from the regression of confidentiality requirements on emotional exhaustion. This can be seen in Figure A2. The figure should approximate a bell-shaped normal curve, be symmetrical around zero and show no gaps, spikes or elongated tails for there to be no violation of the assumption. That is the case for this association as it roughly forms a bell-shaped curve and shows no predominant spikes or gaps, being just about symmetrical around zero. Thus, no violation has been found and data analysis can continue and conclusions from this would be meaningful.

Figure A2

Standardized Residuals Histogram of Confidentiality Requirements and Emotional Exhaustion

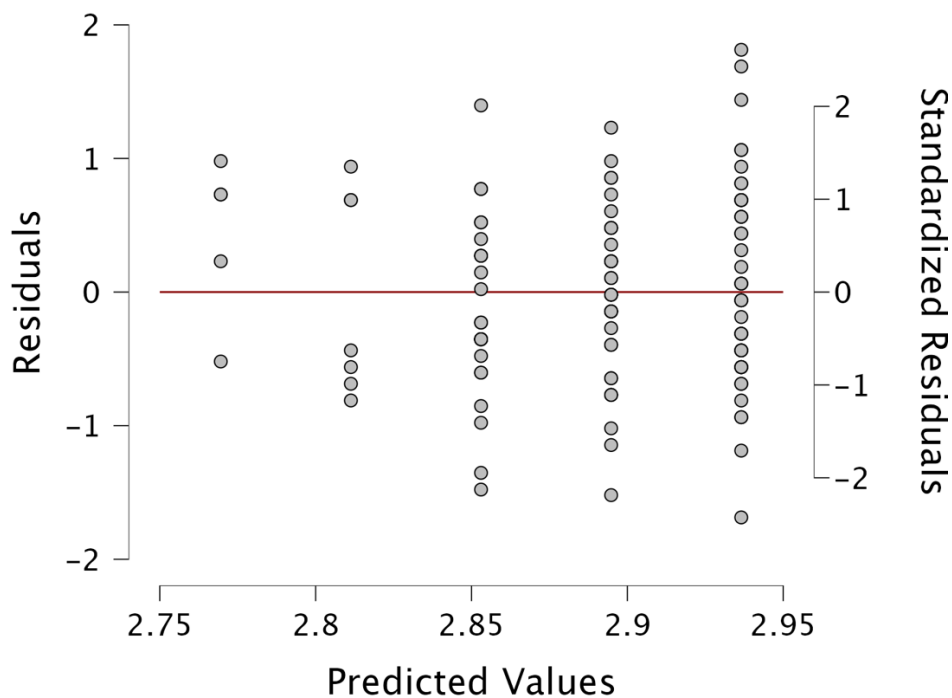


Linearity and homoscedasticity were assessed via a plot showing residuals against predicted values. Such an investigation for this data can be seen in Figure A3. For linearity to

not be violated it is expected that the plot shows no systematic pattern, and the points are randomly scattered around zero. The spread of the residual is expected to stay the same along the predicted values, for the assumption of homoscedasticity to not be violated. Both of these expectations are fulfilled when examining Figure A3, thus the assumptions are not violated and conclusions drawn based on the data are likely to be valid.

Figure A3

Residuals vs. Predicted of Confidentiality Requirements and Emotional Exhaustion



Lastly, examination of the observations shows no influential points or outliers after assessment with Cook's distance and standardized residuals respectively. Cook's distance is expected to be below 1 and the standardized residuals are expected to remain below 3. This is the case when investigating this relationship. Thus, conclusions based on this subset of data should be valid.

Hypothesis 2

When wanting to draw valid conclusions based on the data for hypothesis two, it is crucial that certain assumptions are met. Assumptions of normality of the residuals, normality, linearity and homoscedasticity should not be violated. Moreover, there should be no influential observations or outliers in the data set and there should be no multicollinearity.

Firstly, multicollinearity can be checked by looking at the variance inflation factor (VIF). The VIF shows the inflation of the regression coefficient that happens when the predictors of a model are correlated. In order for there to be no problematic multicollinearity, this factor should remain smaller than 10. Table A1 shows the VIF of the confidentiality requirements, the relationship quality and the interaction term of confidentiality and the relationship quality. The VIF is not significantly above 10 for all of these. This suggests there is no significant multicollinearity in the moderation, and the regression coefficients are likely reliable.

Table A1

Collinearity Statistics of Centered Predictors

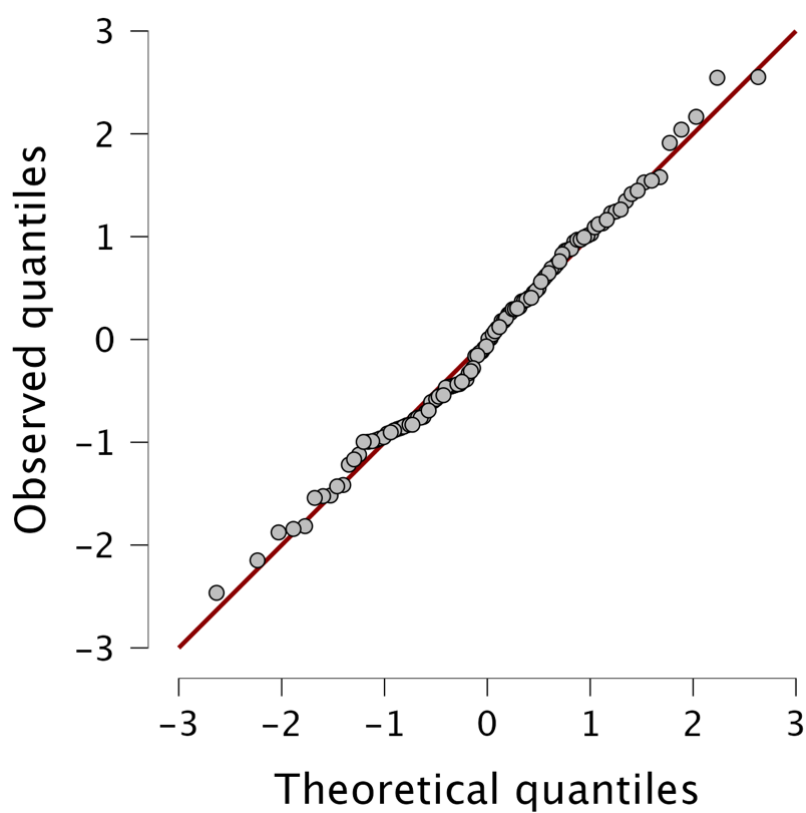
Predictor	VIF
Confidentiality Requirements	1.002
Relationship Quality	1.001
Confidentiality × Relationship Quality	1.003

Further investigating the assumption normality of residuals, a Q-Q plot compares the observed with the expected residuals for this model. The expectation is an approximately straight line of residuals when this assumption is not violated. As seen in Figure A4, this assumption is not violated in this model, as the residuals do roughly follow a straight line. Thus, conclusions based on this part of the data may be reliable. During creation of this

figure, the Durbin-Watson statistic was also inspected. The expectation was that the statistic would be between 1.5 to 2.5 to show there are no autocorrelations. The statistic was $DW = 1.77$, so no evidence for autocorrelation.

Figure A4

Q-Q Plot Standardized Residuals of the Moderation Model Predicting Emotional Exhaustion from Confidentiality Requirements, Relationship Quality and Their Interaction

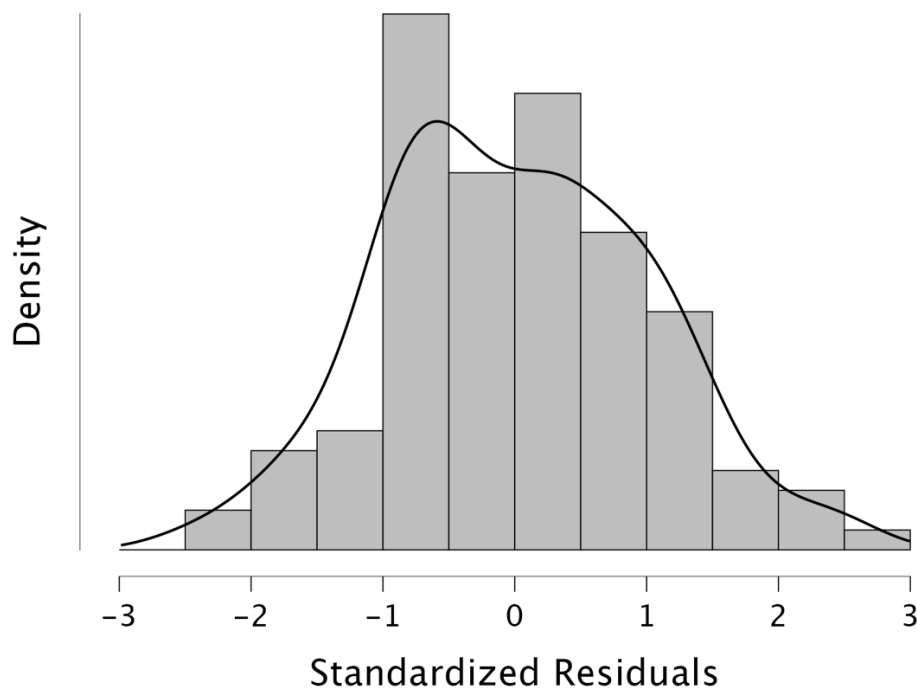


To examine the normality assumption, a histogram of residuals was used. It shows the distribution of residuals from the regression of the model along the standardized residuals. The curve is expected to be roughly bell-shaped and symmetrical around zero. Moreover, no spikes, elongated tails or gaps should be evident in order for the assumption to not be violated. Figure A5 shows this for this regression. There seems to be no evidence for violation of the normality assumption as the histogram shows a roughly bell-shaped curve that lacks

gaps, spikes or long tails and is approximately symmetrical around zero. Conclusions based on this should thus be valid.

Figure A5

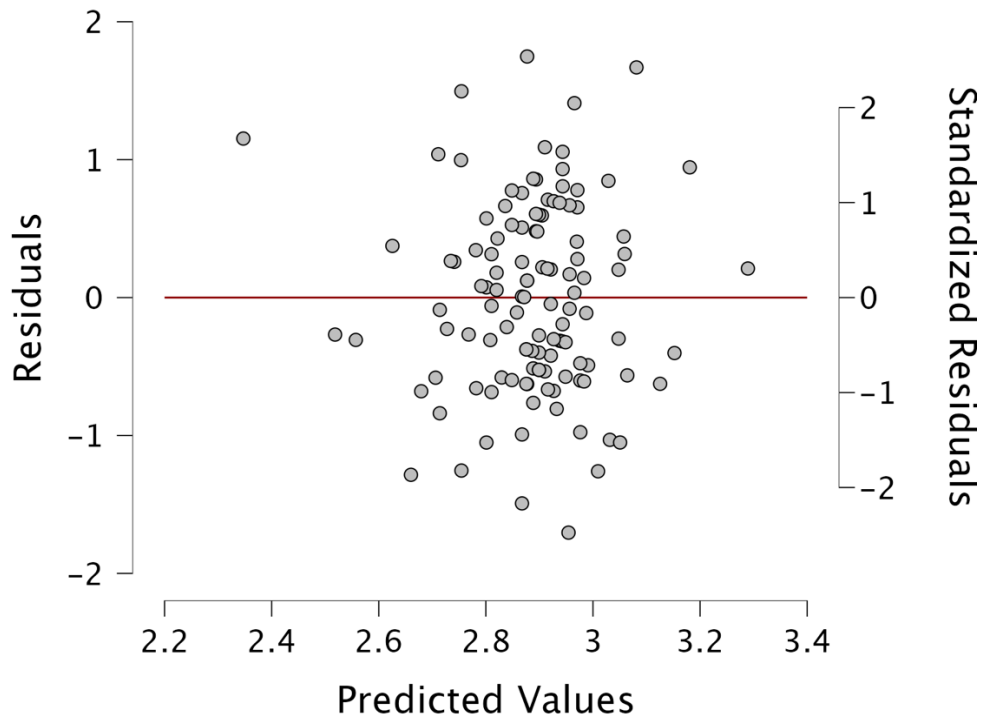
Standardized Residuals Histogram of the Moderation Model Predicting Emotional Exhaustion from Confidentiality Requirements, Relationship Quality and Their Interaction



Both linearity and homoscedasticity can be evaluated when plotting residuals against predicted values. The linearity assumption is not violated when the plot shows no systematic pattern around zero but is randomly scattered. The homoscedasticity assumption shows no violation when the scatter of points remains approximately equal for all predicted values. As Figure A6 shows, both of these hold in this model. Thus, no violation of the linearity or homoscedasticity assumption was found and thus any conclusions based on these are likely to be valid.

Figure A6

Residuals vs. Predicted of the Moderation Model Predicting Emotional Exhaustion from Confidentiality Requirements, Relationship Quality and Their Interaction



Lastly, the data should be examined for influential observations via Cook's distance and outliers via standardized residuals. It is expected that no observations would have a Cook's distance of above 1 or standardized residuals above 3. This is the case for this model, thus there are no influential observations or outliers that would introduce error into the model's estimates. Conclusions based on this may be valid.

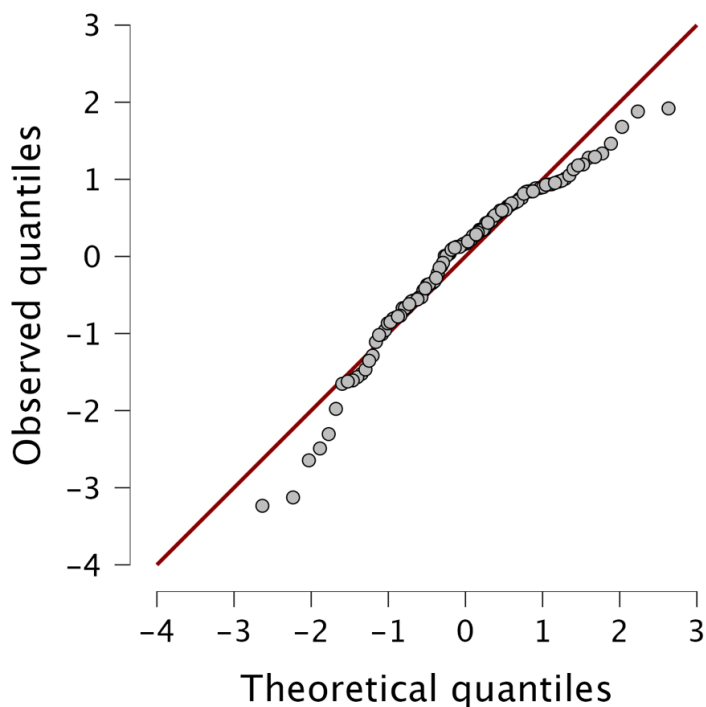
Hypothesis 3

Validity of conclusions based on the data for investigating the hypothesis can only be ensured after the examination of certain assumptions. The assumptions of normality of the residuals, normality, linearity and homoscedasticity should not be violated. Moreover, there should be no influential observations or outliers in the data set.

A Q-Q plot was used to test the assumption of normality of residuals. It depicts a comparison of observed and expected residuals. The expectation is that the points of this plot approximate a straight line. This is shown in Figure A7 for the residuals of the association between relationship quality and extraversion. The residuals of this relationship do approximate a straight line, thus there is no evidence for violation of the assumption of normality of residuals and valid conclusions may be able to be drawn from the data set. With creation of this figure, the Durbin-Watson statistic was also examined. It is expected to be between 1.5 to 2.5 if there are no autocorrelations. Here, $DW = 1.96$, thus no there is no evidence for autocorrelation.

Figure A7

Q-Q Plot Standardized Residuals of Relationship Quality and Extraversion

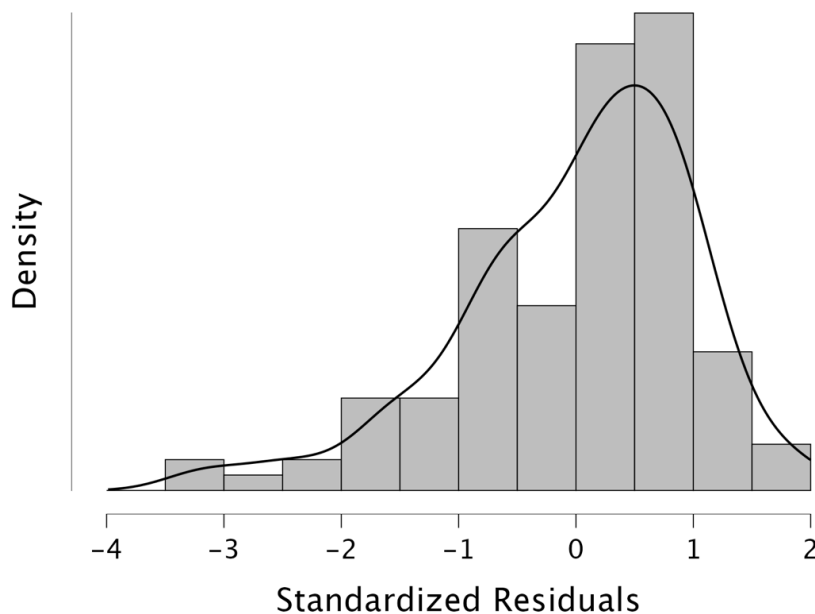


The assumption of normality was examined via a histogram of residuals. It depicts the errors that come about when relating relationship quality and extraversion. For this

assumption to not be violated, the histogram should show an approximately bell-shaped curve, no elongated tails, gaps or spikes. Moreover, the distribution should be symmetrical around zero. In Figure A8 it can be seen that this assumption is violated. The curve is not bell-shaped and symmetrical around zero but rather left-skewed. Thus, there is a possibility that p -values and confidence intervals may be inaccurate. The chance of Type I and Type II errors is increased and thus, conclusions based on this may be incorrect. However, since examination of the Q-Q plot showed only slight deviation but still approximating a line, and the decision was made to keep the outliers (see Table 2A), no further action was taken in this case. Moreover, due to moderate sample size, it is expected that inference is robust enough and that interpretations would not vary in a large degree, but this should still be kept in mind while interpreting the data as a limitation.

Figure A8

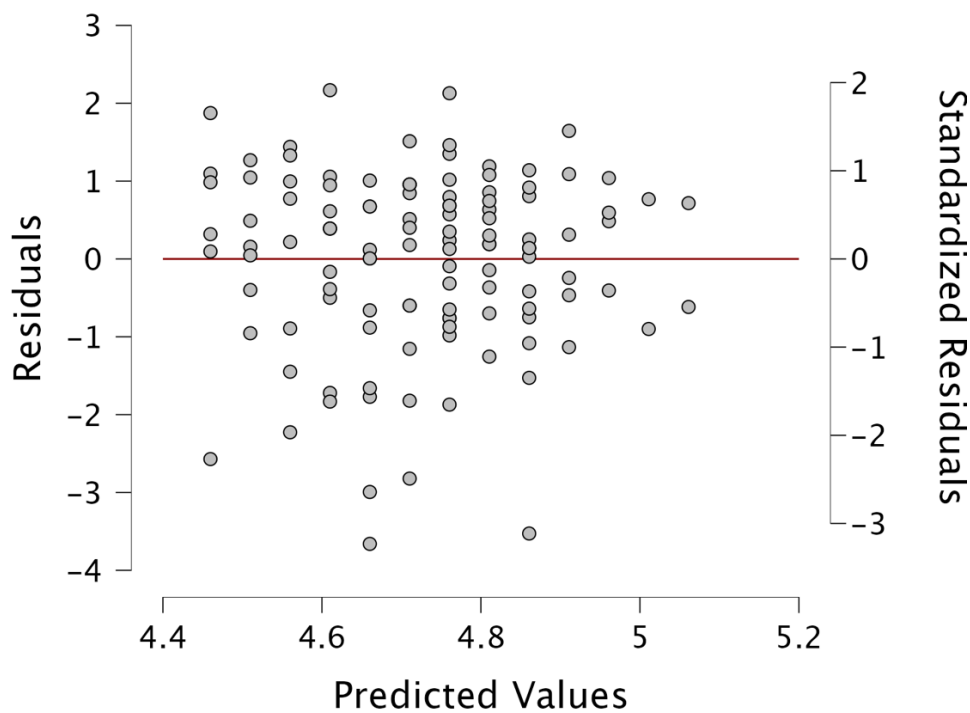
Standardized Residuals Histogram of Relationship Quality and Extraversion



Assumptions of linearity and homoscedasticity were examined by plotting residuals against predicted values. The expectations for non-violations are that the points are scattered at random around zero without a pattern (linearity) and an equal spread of residuals across the range of predicted values (homoscedasticity). As seen in Figure A9, both of these assumptions are not violated within the relation between relationship quality and extraversion. The scatter is random and spread evenly across the predicted values. Thus, conclusions based on this may be valid.

Figure A9

Residuals vs. Predicted of Relationship Quality and Extraversion



Visual examination of the observations shows no influential points or outliers. This can be investigated using Cook's distance and standardized residuals respectively. The expectations are that residuals have a Cook's distance of less than 1 and the standardized residuals remain smaller than 3. All observations had a Cook's distance of less than 1, thus no

influential points were found. However, as seen in Table A2, two data points showed a standardized residual greater than 3, thus these are outliers. This may distort the regression model's estimations and lead to errors. Conclusions should be viewed with caution. However, the outliers were selected to not be excluded from the analysis as manual examination of the data indicated no specific reason to do so, other than the size of their standardized residual. Thus, for a holistic view of the results, the cases remained in the data set.

Table A2

Outliers

Case Number	Standardized Residual
59	-3.126
77	-3.234

Appendix B

Below the histogram of the mean responses to the relationship quality questions. It would be expected that the histogram shows an approximate bell-curve if all the answers were evenly spread out and no answers should be particularly clustered around certain scores. However, this is not the case in the histogram in Figure B1. Thus, answers cluster at high values of relationship quality.

Figure B1

Density of Average Responses Across All Items Measuring Relationship Quality

