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Please leave me alone: can daily interaction avoidance serve as a self-regulatory strategy?

Jette Völker 🔟 and Julia Iser-Potempa 🔟

School of Social Sciences, University of Mannheim, Mannheim, Germany

ABSTRACT

We adopt an agentic lens on interpersonal processes at the workplace and refine knowledge of daily withdrawal behaviours. Specifically, we investigate whether daily interaction avoidance can be an agentic and adaptive self-regulatory strategy by integrating assumptions from the model of selective optimization with compensation and social exchange theory. We assumed that intrapersonal fluctuations in anticipated workday characteristics (anticipated work goal importance, interaction costs, task independence, and compensatory effort) prompt employees to avoid interactions during the day, resulting in higher levels of serenity and task focus. We conducted a daily diary study, including three daily surveys for two workweeks (204 employees, 1,406 days). Results provided mixed support for our assumptions by showing that interaction avoidance might be an agentic strategy triggered by some of the anticipated workday characteristics but still results in rather maladaptive consequences. Additionally, a range of exploratory analyses shed further light on the phenomenon of interaction avoidance. Finally, we discuss the theoretical implications of our findings and make suggestions on how refining the conceptualization of interaction avoidance can help move research on interpersonal withdrawal processes forward.

Interaction avoidance (deliberately minimizing contact with co-workers at work) reflects an aspect of work withdrawal (Foulk et al., 2020). Considering larger human motives, interaction avoidance seems to clash with a general striving for human relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). As such, interaction avoidance has primarily been characterized as an unfavourable outcome in organizational behaviour research. Prior studies have identified adverse social experiences, such as mistreatment (Nifadkar et al., 2012; Woolum et al., 2017), as antecedents of daily interaction avoidance. This purely negative view of interaction avoidance seems to suggest that employees are at the mercy of their social environment and withdraw mostly in response to adverse social experiences. However, are employees only passive recipients of the circumstances they are confronted with?

According to social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), humans evaluate the costs and benefits of social interactions to achieve a balance between the effort needed to invest in the social interaction and the payoff received. Based on this theory, previous research has argued that this cost-benefit analysis regarding interaction avoidance is largely determined by adverse interpersonal experiences (e.g., negative experiences such as criticism; Nesher Shoshan et al., 2024). However, in our

view, this prevailing perspective on interaction avoidance clashes with the challenges and opportunities in modern working environments and oversimplifies interpersonal processes. For example, one central reason for employees to work remotely is to increase productivity and decrease social interruptions (R. J. Thompson et al., 2022). Accordingly, not only *inter*personal (i.e., regarding the relationship between individuals) preconditions seem to motivate decisions to engage in interactions during the day, but also *intra*personal (i.e., regarding thoughts within individuals) considerations come into play regarding cost-benefit analyses. Therefore, we argue that a purely negative view of interaction avoidance based on social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) is shortsighted because employees might deliberately and reasonably decide to avoid interactions on a given day (Doden et al., 2024). Importantly, we do agree that *continuously* avoiding interactions at work is not a suitable long-term strategy and counteracts humans' need for relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Instead, we suggest that *daily* fluctuations in interaction avoidance might be a self-regulatory strategy to deal flexibly with the upcoming demands of the workday (Doden et al., 2024). Accordingly, by integrating the self-regulatory underpinning of the model of selective

CONTACT Jette Völker ✉ jette.voelker@uni-mannheim.de

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optimization with compensation (SOC model; Baltes & Baltes, 1990) into the social exchange logic, we argue that daily interaction avoidance might be used as an agentic and self-regulatory strategy that is not only a passive response to adverse social experiences and might be adaptive on a short-term basis.

Our research project contributes to the literature by adopting an agentic lens on interpersonal processes at the workplace and refining knowledge of the antecedents and consequences of daily withdrawal processes (see Figure 1 for our full conceptual model). On the one hand, we broaden the social exchange perspective by suggesting that fluctuations in anticipated workday characteristics as intrapersonal anticipation processes determine the cost-benefit analysis regarding daily interaction avoidance apart from interpersonal experiences. Specifically, the SOC model (Baltes & Baltes, 1990) provides a valuable framework for categorizing workday characteristics that motivate daily interaction avoidance via selection (anticipated work goal importance and interaction costs), optimization (anticipated task independence), and compensation (anticipated compensatory effort) processes. Anticipating the workday in the morning thereby drives certain behaviours during the day (e.g., Fritz et al., 2021; Lanaj et al., 2019). Despite the importance of anticipatory processes, previous studies often overlooked the role of pre-work experiences in daily life (Sonnentag et al., 2025). Hence, we suggest that interaction avoidance not only results from adverse interpersonal experiences but instead might be an agentic strategy to encounter upcoming challenges and opportunities anticipated in the morning. Integrating the self-regulatory underpinnings of the model of selective optimization with compensation (Baltes & Baltes, 1990) into social exchange theory thus expands the social-exchange perspective by an intrapersonal and agentic perspective.

On the other hand, we broaden the social exchange perspective by suggesting that daily interaction avoidance might be an adaptive strategy that results in favourable workday outcomes. Thus, we want to add to previous research that has focused on the relationship between interaction avoidance and higher levels of emotional exhaustion (e.g., Hershcovis et al., 2018; Nesher Shoshan et al., 2024). While these studies focused on emotional processes, we explore two workday outcomes that closely relate to the self-regulatory reasoning based on the SOC model (Baltes & Baltes, 1990), which accordingly complements the social-exchange perspective. Specifically, drawing upon research on prevention-focused states, we suggest that daily interaction avoidance as a prevention-focused strategy results in cognitive perseverance as well as feeling calm and relaxed (Bindl et al., 2019; De Dreu et al., 2008; Higgins, 2006). Hence, we examine whether daily interaction avoidance relates to higher levels of daily task focus as an important performance-related process that can benefit from cognitive perseverance (Beal et al., 2005). In addition, we suggest that daily interaction avoidance as a self-initiated prevention strategy might result in feelings of serenity at the end of work as a "quiescence-related emotion" (Higgins, 2006, p. 452) because serenity is characterized by low activation (Russell, 1980). Thereby, we focus on the often-overlooked aspect of deactivated positive well-being at work (Sonnentag et al., 2025). Taken together, by adopting this self-regulatory and agentic perspective on interaction avoidance based on the SOC model (Baltes & Baltes, 1990), we aim to demonstrate that interaction avoidance can indeed go along with individual benefits and accordingly refine the social-exchange perspective that focuses on negative outcomes of interaction avoidance (e.g., Nesher Shoshan et al., 2024).

Theoretical background

To shed light on the antecedents and outcomes of daily interaction avoidance, we integrate ideas from social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) with the model of selective optimization with compensation (SOC model; Baltes &
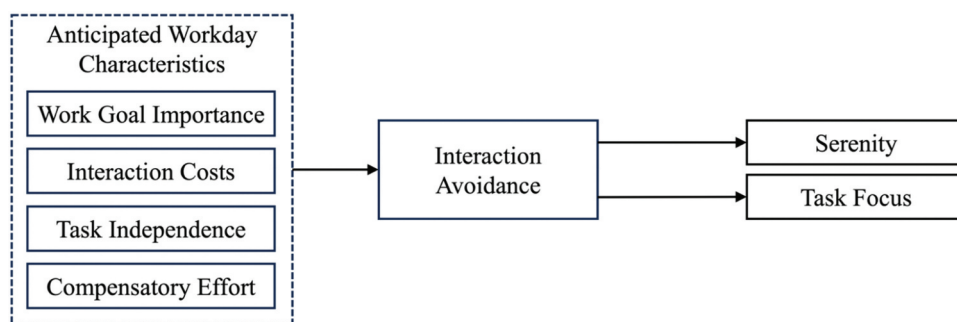

Figure 1. Conceptual model.

Baltes, 1990). Regarding antecedents, the SOC model describes self-regulatory strategies individuals pursue to sustain their functioning and well-being when confronted with high demands and low resources. In such situations, employees can prioritize goals (elective and loss-based selection strategies), optimize the use of given resources (optimization strategies), and substitute for the loss of resources (compensation strategies; Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Freund & Baltes, 2002). Originating from lifespan research, the SOC model has been successfully applied in work contexts (Moghimi et al., 2017), and previous studies have shown that the SOC strategies are used on a daily basis in employee samples (e.g., Schmitt et al., 2012; Zacher et al., 2015). Accordingly, the SOC framework is uniquely suited for deriving antecedents of daily interaction avoidance as a self-regulatory strategy to balance the costs and benefits of interactions at work. Regarding outcomes, the SOC model suggests that self-regulatory strategies result in a "reduced and transformed but effective life" (Baltes & Baltes, 1990, p. 22). Accordingly, selection, optimization, and compensation processes are related to beneficial performance- and well-being-related consequences (Moghimi et al., 2017). Similarly, the ultimate goal of daily interaction avoidance within the SOC framework should be to sustain one's functioning and well-being at work (Freund & Baltes, 2002). Building on the idea of reduced and transformed but effective days at work, we thus derive adaptive consequences of daily interaction avoidance. Specifically, such days might be reduced and transformed in terms of interpersonal interactions but still be effective regarding individual functioning. Taken together, combining the self-regulatory approach of the SOC model (Baltes & Baltes, 1990) with the idea of social cost-benefit analyses (Blau, 1964), we posit that four anticipated workday characteristics prompt employees to avoid interactions during the day, which, in turn, results in adaptive workday consequences because of self-regulatory processes.

Anticipated workday characteristics as antecedents of interaction avoidance

Selection processes
Starting with selection, we suggest that daily anticipated work goal importance and daily anticipated interaction costs result in higher levels of interaction avoidance.

Elective selection.
First, daily anticipated work goal importance means that employees personally value and attach importance to their work goals (Sheldon et al., 1999). In terms of the SOC model, daily anticipated work goal importance should trigger elective selection

processes because "the primary focus of [selection] is setting goals" (Freund & Baltes, 2002, p. 643) and, more specifically, elective selection "has a focus on aiming at desired states" (Freund & Baltes, 2002, p. 643). Specifically, humans naturally strive for different goals in life, for example, regarding work, health, and social relations (Bühler et al., 2019). Importantly, these strivings also vary from day to day such that the striving for accomplishment-related work goals might be more important on one day, while the striving for relatedness and communion goals might be more important on another day (Foulk et al., 2019). If goals are self-concordant and employees attach high personal importance to these goals, they are more likely to display goal-directed behaviour that results in progress towards that goal (Sheldon et al., 1999). Accordingly, employees align their daily behaviours at work with goals that are important to them during that day (Foulk et al., 2019; Koch et al., 2024). If employees anticipate that their work goals will be highly important on that day, they should be more likely to show individual accomplishment behaviours tied to their work goals and, in contrast, less likely to show communion-related behaviours tied to interpersonal goals. Therefore, we suggest that daily anticipated work goal importance should be positively related to daily interaction avoidance because employees prioritize work goals on these days.

Hypothesis 1: Anticipated work goal importance positively relates to daily interaction avoidance.

Loss-based selection.
Second, daily anticipated interaction costs refer to the ratio between expected benefits and expected costs that interactions entail. For example, benefits from interactions at work might be feeling related to others, while costs might be the time and energy that one needs to invest in the exchanges (Puranik et al., 2020). Regarding the SOC model, daily anticipated interaction costs should trigger loss-based selection, referring to "experiencing a loss in goal-relevant means that are threatening the maintenance of a given level of functioning in a specific goal domain" (Freund & Baltes, 2002, p. 643). Integrating the social exchange logic, employees continuously estimate the costs and benefits of interactions and are more committed to interactions when the benefits outweigh the costs (Blau, 1964). If employees expect interaction costs to threaten their work goals during that day, this should trigger loss-based selection processes and thus decrease investment into interactions at work. For example, employees who previously experienced costs such as depletion after helping others are more likely to show self-serving behaviours and less likely to show further

helping behaviours (Gabriel et al., 2018). Accordingly, anticipating that interactions will entail costs at work might prompt employees to avoid interactions during that day and instead focus on their individual work goals. Hence, we suggest that daily anticipated interaction costs positively relate to daily interaction avoidance.

Hypothesis 2: Anticipated interaction costs positively relate to daily interaction avoidance.

Optimization processes

Continuing with optimization, we suggest that daily anticipated task independence should be positively related to daily interaction avoidance. On days with high levels of task independence, employees do not rely on others to complete their tasks but instead pursue their work goals independently (Pearce & Gregersen, 1991). In terms of the SOC model, optimization "involves the acquisition and investment of goal-relevant means" (Freund & Baltes, 2002, p. 643). Daily anticipated task independence facilitates investing goal-relevant means (e.g., time and effort) in pursuing work goals because employees' goal striving does not rely on interactions with others during the day but instead is entirely under their own control (Pearce & Gregersen, 1991). Accordingly, on days characterized by high anticipated task independence, employees should be more likely to optimize their workday according to their reduced social requirements. For example, employees seek and provide less help to others when they depend less on other individuals at work (Cleavenger et al., 2007; Pearce & Gregersen, 1991). Additionally, task independence can be seen as an autonomous work characteristic that provides employees with the necessary control to design their workday (Parker et al., 2025). Hence, we suggest that task independence a) enables employees to avoid interactions during the day and b) simultaneously decreases the need for interactions during the day, resulting in higher levels of interaction avoidance.

Hypothesis 3: Anticipated task independence positively relates to daily interaction avoidance.

Compensation processes

Concluding with compensation, we suggest that daily anticipated compensatory effort should be positively related to daily interaction avoidance. Days with high levels of compensatory effort are characterized by a need to invest increased levels of resources (e.g., energetic or cognitive resources) to fulfil tasks and prevent losses, meaning that performing well is more effortful (Hockey, 1997). In terms of the SOC model, compensation describes the "use of alternative means to maintain a given level of functioning when specific goal-relevant means are no longer available" (Freund & Baltes, 2002, p. 644). These alternative means also encompass "psychological compensatory efforts" (Baltes & Baltes, 1990, p. 22), such as expending higher levels of cognitive and energetic resources into work goal striving. For example, when employees start their workday with lower levels of energetic and cognitive resources, which would be relevant means regarding work goals, they are more likely to invest compensatory effort into reaching their work goals (Binnewies et al., 2009). Importantly, humans naturally strive to prevent further resource losses (Hobfoll, 1989) and want to minimize costs due to interpersonal interactions (Blau, 1964). However, interpersonal interactions can accompany further resource losses and costs, for example, when feeling depleted after helping others (Gabriel et al., 2018). Hence, we suggest that employees try to protect their limited resources by avoiding interactions during the day when they already anticipate high levels of compensatory effort needed for work goal striving.

Hypothesis 4: Anticipated compensatory effort positively relates to daily interaction avoidance.

Outcomes of interaction avoidance

Serenity

First, daily interaction avoidance should result in higher levels of serenity. Serenity is a deactivated positive affective state in which employees feel calm and relaxed (Abele-Brehm & Brehm, 1986; Russell, 1980). We focus specifically on deactivated positive affect because we deem it unplausible that days with few interactions are characterized by highly activated states such as excitement, which often go along with deliberate actions to increase positive interpersonal interactions (Sonnentag et al., 2025). Instead, interaction avoidance does not reflect a promotion-oriented but rather a prevention-oriented strategy (i.e., targeted at preventing obstacles and negative consequences; Bindl et al., 2019). Prevention-focused states are typically related to lower levels of activation (Baas et al., 2011; Higgins, 2006) and higher levels of "quiescence-related emotions" (Higgins, 2006, p. 452). Thus, serenity as a deactivated and quiescence-related state is an ideal outcome for capturing the positive consequences of interaction avoidance.

Because we portray daily interaction avoidance as a self-regulatory strategy triggered by selection, optimization, and compensation processes, employees should feel in charge of their own behaviours. Deciding on one's own to avoid interactions during the day should convey

a feeling of control and satisfaction that benefits employees' well-being (Gabriel et al., 2020; Teuchmann et al., 1999; C. A. Thompson & Prottas, 2006). Additionally, because daily interaction avoidance helps reduce the costs of interactions, it can prevent cognitive and physiological costs that would contradict feeling relaxed and serene (e.g., worrying about interactions, Brosschot et al., 2005; cortisol levels; Sommovigo et al., 2023). Hence, we assume that daily interaction avoidance relates to higher levels of serenity as a state of deactivated positive affect.

Hypothesis 5: Daily interaction avoidance positively relates to end-of-work serenity.

Task focus

Second, we argue that daily interaction avoidance relates to higher levels of task focus, which we define as concentration on work-related tasks (Jackson & Marsh, 1996). Interaction avoidance as a prevention-focused strategy should go along with cognitive perseverance and an increased focus on existing tasks, as opposed to promotion-focused strategies that result more in cognitive flexibility and a broader processing mode (De Dreu et al., 2008; Nijstad et al., 2010). Accordingly, task focus is uniquely suited to gauge the performance-related benefits of interaction avoidance.

Employees ensure their functioning regarding work goals by employing daily interaction avoidance as a self-regulatory strategy in response to selection, optimization, and compensation processes (Baltes & Baltes, 1990). Specifically, avoiding interactions can reduce distractions from others, facilitating concentration on one's tasks (Puranik et al., 2020). Similarly, establishing a -quiet hour (i.e., an hour without interpersonal distractions and interruptions; König et al., 2013) was shown to benefit task performance. Additionally, daily interaction avoidance helps prevent costs from interactions, which might distract attention away from tasks (e.g., due to negative affective reactions, Beal et al., 2005). Hence, we suggest that daily interaction avoidance positively relates to task focus during the day.

Hypothesis 6: Daily interaction avoidance positively relates to daily task focus.

Methods

Procedure and sample

We conducted a daily diary study in Germany as part of a larger research project focusing on interpersonal processes at work.[1] This is the first publication based on the larger data set. Participants first registered for the study and responded to a short baseline survey assessing demographics. Afterwards, they were invited to participate in the daily diary phase covering three daily surveys (morning, lunch-break, and end-of-work surveys) on ten consecutive workdays. German-speaking employees who worked for at least 20 hours on four days per week, who did not work in shifts, and who had regular interactions with supervisors and co-workers at work (e.g., excluding solo self-employment) could participate. We recruited participants with the help of undergraduate psychology students and via social media. Depending on their compliance, participants could participate in a voucher lottery (6 vouchers worth 150€ in total) and receive an overview of the study's results.

In total, 237 participants registered for the study. The baseline survey was completed by $n = 219$ participants, who provided $n = 1,439$ morning, $n = 1,250$ lunch-break, and $n = 1,325$ end-of-work surveys. We excluded daily surveys that were completed exceptionally fast (Leiner, 2019) or not at the correct time (excluding $n = 28$ morning, $n = 44$ lunch-break, and $n = 38$ end-of-work surveys). After matching the three surveys per day ($n = 1,557$ days, $n = 213$ employees), we included all days on which at least the end-of-work survey was completed (excluding $n = 122$ days) as well as all participants who provided at least one daily survey (excluding $n = 3$ employees). Finally, we excluded six participants who indicated to have no co-workers because this contradicts our conceptual focus on co-worker interactions. The final sample consisted of $n = 1,406$ days provided by $n = 204$ employees. Regarding rules of thumb for power in two-level models, our final sample size is thus sufficiently large to detect small within-person effect sizes at a power level of $\geq .80$ (Arend & Schäfer, 2019). The final sample's mean age was $M = 41.46$ ($SD = 13.85$) years and 67.16% were female. Employees included in the final sample worked for $M = 34.36$ ($SD = 9.12$) hours per week in diverse occupations (e.g., administrative staff, teachers, consultants) and regularly interacted with $M = 4.98$ ($SD = 5.14$) co-workers. During study participation, employees worked on-site at the office (as opposed to working remotely from home and other locations) on 68.81% of the days.

Measures

All items were presented in German and translated using the back-translation method if necessary (Brislin, 1970). Unless indicated otherwise, participants responded to all items on 5-point rating scale ranging from 1 = *not at all*

true to 5 = *absolutely true*. We calculated within- and between-person Cronbach's alpha as multilevel reliability values based on the procedure suggested by Lai (2021).

Anticipated workday characteristics

We assessed all anticipated workday characteristics in the morning survey and instructed employees to indicate whether the following statements apply to their upcoming workday. To assess anticipated work goal importance, we used three items that have previously been used to measure health goal importance at work (Koch et al., 2024). We adapted the items to focus on work goals (e.g., "It feels important for me to achieve my work goals today"). Two-level reliabilities were α_{within} = .82 and $\alpha_{between}$ = .83. To assess anticipated interaction costs, we used a self-developed item focusing on a cost-benefit analysis of social interactions (Blau, 1964). We used the following instruction: "Please estimate whether contact with your coworkers today will entail costs or benefits. Costs could, for example, refer to resources that you need to invest (e.g., time, attention). Benefits could, for example, refer to resources that you receive (e.g., information, exchanges)". Employees responded to the item on a 5-point rating scale ranging from 1 = *the benefits will completely outweigh the costs* to 5 = *the costs will completely outweigh the benefits*. To assess anticipated task independence, we used three items from Pearce and Gregersen (1991), such as "Today, I will be able to plan my own work with little need to coordinate with others". Two-level reliabilities were α_{within} = .67 and $\alpha_{between}$ = .76. To assess anticipated compensatory effort, we used three items from Binnewies et al. (2009), such as "Today, it will need much energy to work on my tasks". Two-level reliabilities were α_{within} = .74 and $\alpha_{between}$ = .80.

Interaction avoidance

We assessed interaction avoidance in the lunch-break and the end-of-work surveys to temporally separate the assessment from the outcomes (Podsakoff et al., 2024) while still being able to capture withdrawal behaviours during the entire day. In both surveys, we used five items from Nifadkar et al. (2012), such as "I avoided speaking with my coworkers unless absolutely necessary" and instructed employees to indicate whether the following statements apply to their morning (afternoon) at work. Two-level reliabilities were α_{within} = .90 and $\alpha_{between}$ = .79 in the lunch-break survey and α_{within} = .92 and $\alpha_{between}$ = .82 in the end-of-work survey. Because our conceptual model referred to interaction avoidance during the entire day, we used the mean of morning and afternoon interaction avoidance values in all analyses (see, e.g.,

Gabriel et al., 2024; Sonnentag et al., 2021, for similar approaches).

Outcomes

We assessed the outcomes in the end-of-work survey. To assess serenity, we used four items from Abele-Brehm and Brehm (1986). Participants were asked to indicate whether the following adjectives describe how they feel right now (e.g., "calm") on a 5-point rating scale ranging from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *extremely*. Two-level reliabilities were α_{within} = .79 and $\alpha_{between}$ = .75. To assess task focus, we used three items from Jackson and Marsh (1996) that we adapted to work tasks. Participants were instructed to indicate whether the following statements apply to their workday (e.g., "My attention was focused entirely on my work tasks"). Two-level reliabilities were α_{within} = .91 and $\alpha_{between}$ = .75.

Control variables

We relied on three control variables. First, we controlled for the day of study participation (within-person level only) to eliminate concerns about systematic trends in response patterns during study participation (Gabriel et al., 2019). Second, we controlled for the daily work location (within-person level only) to rule out that the possibility of avoiding interactions with co-workers systematically differed between days working on-site at the office versus working remotely. To do so, we used a dummy variable that indicated days employees worked on-site at their regular office (coded 1) compared to working remotely from home and other locations (coded 0). Finally, we controlled for state negative affect in the morning to rule out that transient mood states bias our results (Gabriel et al., 2019). We assessed negative affect (e.g., "distressed"; Watson et al., 1988) with four adjectives in the morning survey. Two-level reliabilities were α_{within} = .62 and $\alpha_{between}$ = .80.

Preliminary analyses and data-analytic procedure

Descriptive statistics, intra-class correlations, and inter-correlations of all variables are displayed in Table 1. Prior to analysing the full conceptual model, we conducted a two-level confirmatory factor analysis with all constructs of the conceptual model loading on separate factors. This model fit the data very well, χ^2 (560) = 1,030.00, $p < .001$, scaling correction factor (SCF) = 1.02, RMSEA = .02, CFI = .97, TLI = .97, $SRMR_{within}$ = .03, $SRMR_{between}$ = .06, and thus provided evidence for construct validity. Importantly, this model fit the data better than a model collapsing the antecedents on one factor, χ^2 (582) = 3,110.51, $p < .001$, SCF = 1.02, RMSEA = .06,

Table 1. Descriptive statistics, intra-class correlations, and inter-correlations.

	M	SD$_{L1}$	SD$_{L2}$	ICC	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 Anticipated work goal importance	3.48	0.65	0.73	0.56	–	−.07	−.02	−.14**	−.04	−.01	.21***	−.04
2 Anticipated interaction costs	2.68	0.62	0.74	0.59	−.09	–	.04	.07	.08	.03	−.02	.05
3 Anticipated task independence	3.18	0.71	0.66	0.46	.00	−.07	–	−.10*	.09*	.03	−.12**	.00
4 Anticipated compensatory effort	2.77	0.60	0.69	0.57	.36***	.13	−.21*	–	.07*	−.06*	.02	.24***
5 Interaction avoidance	1.78	0.58	0.66	0.57	−.18*	.38***	−.03	.23*	–	−.10*	−.12*	.13**
6 Serenity	2.99	0.64	0.63	0.49	.08	−.25*	.18	−.32***	−.37***	–	.11**	−.06
7 Task focus	3.44	0.72	0.60	0.41	.41***	−.07	.07	−.07	−.22**	.33***	–	−.08
8 Morning negative affect	1.54	0.40	0.49	0.60	.09	.11	−.18*	.54***	.35**	−.46***	.35***	–

L1 = day level (Level 1), L2 = person level (Level 2). Intraclass correlations (ICC) demonstrate the proportion of variance that is attributable to the person level. Correlations below the diagonal are person-level correlations (*n* = 204). Correlations above the diagonal are day-level correlations (*n* = 1,406).
p < .05. **p* < .01. ***p* < .001.

CFI = .85, TLI = .84, SRMR$_{within}$ = .07, SRMR$_{between}$ = .15, Satorra-Bentler $\Delta\chi^2$ (22) = 2,085.61, *p* < .001, as well as a model collapsing the outcomes on one factor, χ^2 (572) = 2,604.13, *p* < .001, SCF = 1.02, RMSEA = .05, CFI = .88, TLI = .87, SRMR$_{within}$ = .09, SRMR$_{between}$ = .15, Satorra-Bentler $\Delta\chi^2$ (12) = 1,890.78, *p* < .001.

To analyse the data, we calculated a two-level path model in Mplus 8.11 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017). We included all direct paths at both the within- and between-person levels to implicitly centre variables within the model and decompose variances into within- and between-person parts (Preacher et al., 2010). However, because our hypotheses only referred to the within-person level, we focus our results description on the within-person level. To handle missing data, we used robust full information maximum likelihood estimation (Newman, 2014). The data and analysis codes are available on OSF: https://osf.io/w9zk2/

Results

Hypothesis testing

The results of the two-level path model are displayed in Table 2. Hypotheses 1 and 2 stated that anticipated work goal importance (H1) and anticipated interaction costs (H2) positively relate to daily interaction avoidance. We found no support for Hypotheses 1 and 2 because neither anticipated work goal importance (unstandardized path estimate [est.] = 0.03, *SE* = 0.03, *p* = .315) nor anticipated interaction costs (est. = 0.05, *SE* = 0.04, *p* = .214) predicted daily interaction avoidance. Hypotheses 3 and 4 stated that anticipated task independence (H3) and anticipated compensatory effort (H4) positively relate to daily interaction avoidance. We found support for both Hypotheses 3 and 4 because higher levels of anticipated task independence (est. = 0.06, *SE* = 0.03, *p* = .047) and higher levels of anticipated compensatory effort (est. = 0.06, *SE* = 0.03, *p* = .033) were indeed

Table 2. Results of two-level path analysis.

	Interaction avoidance			Serenity			Task focus		
	Est.	SE	p	Est.	SE	p	Est.	SE	p
Intercept	0.65	0.45	.150	3.95***	0.52	< .001	2.72***	0.45	< .001
Within person (Level 1)									
Day of data collection	0.00	0.01	.518	0.00	0.01	.968	0.01	0.01	.301
Work location[a]	−0.14*	0.06	.017	−0.07	0.05	.164	0.09	0.08	.250
Morning negative affect	0.16**	0.06	.006	−0.06	0.06	.302	−0.10	0.08	.223
Anticipated work goal importance	−0.03	0.03	.315	0.00	0.03	.949	0.22***	0.04	< .001
Anticipated interaction costs	0.05	0.04	.214	0.04	0.05	.368	0.01	0.04	.884
Anticipated task independence	0.06*	0.03	.047	0.02	0.03	.536	−0.10*	0.04	.010
Anticipated compensatory effort	0.06*	0.03	.033	−0.05	0.04	.160	0.00	0.04	.945
Interaction avoidance				−0.11*	0.04	.012	−0.11	0.06	.072
Residual variance	0.32***	0.03	< .001	0.41***	0.03	< .001	0.48***	0.04	< .001
Between person (Level 2)									
Morning negative affect	0.39*	0.16	.013	−0.41**	0.13	.002	−0.46**	0.13	.001
Anticipated work goal importance	−0.20*	0.09	.021	0.10	0.08	.221	0.37***	0.07	< .001
Anticipated interaction costs	0.29***	0.06	< .001	−0.11	0.08	.154	0.02	0.07	.794
Anticipated task independence	0.08	0.07	.285	0.08	0.10	.400	0.02	0.08	.819
Anticipated compensatory effort	0.12	0.12	.311	−0.12	0.10	.251	−0.03	0.09	.758
Interaction avoidance				−0.14	0.10	.128	0.00	0.08	.983
Residual variance	0.32***	0.05	< .001	0.28***	0.04	< .001	0.24***	0.03	< .001

[a]coded 1 = working at the office and 0 = working remotely from home or other locations. Day of data collection, work location, and morning negative affect were included as control variables. *n* = 1,406 days from 204 employees.
p < .05. **p* < .01. ***p* < .001.

related to higher levels of daily interaction avoidance. Turning to the outcomes, Hypotheses 5 and 6 stated that daily interaction avoidance positively relates to end-of-work serenity (H5) and daily task focus (H6). The results contradicted Hypothesis 5 because daily interaction avoidance was *negatively* related to serenity (est. = −0.11, *SE* = 0.04, *p* = .012). Additionally, we found no support for Hypothesis 6 because daily interaction avoidance was not significantly related to task focus (est. = −0.11, *SE* = 0.06, *p* = .072).

Regarding our control variables, we observed two interesting findings. First, employees reported lower levels of interaction avoidance when working on-site at the office (est. = −0.14, *SE* = 0.06, *p* = .017), possibly because it is harder to avoid interactions when being at the office versus when working remotely. Second, higher morning negative affect (est. = 0.16, *SE* = 0.06, *p* = .006) resulted in higher levels of interaction avoidance. In light of the SOC model, this finding can inform selection processes. Specifically, state negative affect could trigger loss-based selection because initial losses have been experienced in the morning and thus represents an alternative antecedent of interaction avoidance. Accordingly, we speculate that morning states might be more decisive than anticipated workday characteristics regarding selection processes motivating daily interaction avoidance.[2]

Additional analyses

We ran two sets of additional analyses to understand better the unexpected findings regarding the outcomes of daily interaction avoidance. To do so, we considered both relevant mediators and moderators of the relationship between interaction avoidance and serenity as well as task focus (see Tables S1 to S3 in the Online Supplements). First, we sought to understand why daily interaction avoidance resulted in adverse consequences and tested an explaining mechanism. Because interaction avoidance necessarily goes along with reduced interpersonal contact, it might be that interaction avoidance triggers loneliness. Daily loneliness might result in rumination (Gabriel et al., 2021), which contradicts feelings of serenity and focusing on one's tasks (Brosschot et al., 2005). Accordingly, we tested whether daily loneliness explains the negative association between daily interaction avoidance and serenity as well as task focus. We assessed loneliness in the end-of-work survey using a single-item measure ("Today, I felt lonely at work"; Matthews et al., 2022). Results showed that daily interaction avoidance was indeed indirectly related to serenity (est. = −0.03, *SE* = 0.01, *p* = .020) and task focus

(est. = −0.03, *SE* = 0.01, *p* = .013) via loneliness. Accordingly, we found initial evidence that increased loneliness might be an explanatory mechanism regarding the adverse consequences of daily interaction avoidance.

Second, we were interested in whether other workday characteristics might buffer the adverse consequences of daily interaction avoidance and tested (a) autonomy and (b) interpersonal conflicts as moderators. On the one hand, we speculate that the adverse consequences might be more pronounced on days with low (vs. high) levels of autonomy because interactions with others are more crucial for work progress on such days. We assessed daily autonomy in the end-of-work survey using a single-item measure ("Today I could decide on my own how to go about doing my work"; Spreitzer, 1995) and included it as a moderator in the previous path model. Results showed a significant interaction term in predicting serenity (est. = 0.22, *SE* = 0.05, *p* < .001; see Figure S1A in the Online Supplements) but not in predicting task focus (est. = 0.00, *SE* = 0.06, *p* = .953). Specifically, daily interaction avoidance negatively related to serenity on days with lower levels of autonomy (−1*SD*; est. = −0.27, *SE* = 0.06, *p* < .001), but not on days with higher levels of autonomy (+1*SD*; est. = 0.06, *SE* = 0.05, *p* = .242). Interestingly, when testing simple slopes at ±2*SD*, daily interaction avoidance was even positively related to serenity on days with higher levels of autonomy (+2*SD*; est. = 0.23, *SE* = 0.08, *p* = .006). On the other hand, on days that are characterized by high levels of interpersonal conflicts with co-workers, daily interaction avoidance might be less of a deliberate strategy but instead a way to avoid further conflicts (Nesher Shoshan et al., 2024), accordingly going along with more severe negative consequences. We assessed daily interpersonal conflicts in the end-of-work survey using a single-item measure ("Today, there were interpersonal conflicts with my coworkers"; Matthews et al., 2022) and again included it as a moderator in the path model. We observed a significant interaction term when predicting serenity (est. = −0.10, *SE* = 0.04, *p* = .016; see Figure S1B in the Online Supplements) but not when predicting task focus (est. = −0.05, *SE* = 0.06, *p* = .425). Specifically, daily interaction avoidance was unrelated to serenity on days with lower levels of interpersonal conflicts (1*SD*; est. = −0.01, *SE* = 0.05, *p* = .773), but negatively related to serenity on days with higher levels of interpersonal conflicts (+1*SD*; est. = −0.20, *SE* = 0.07, *p* = .002). Accordingly, (a) high levels of autonomy and (b) low levels of interpersonal conflicts can potentially offset and/or reverse the adverse consequences of daily interaction avoidance regarding serenity.

Discussion

We aimed to examine whether daily interaction avoidance can be an agentic and adaptive self-regulatory strategy by integrating assumptions from the SOC model (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Freund & Baltes, 2002) and social exchange theory (Blau, 1964). Results provided mixed support for our assumptions by showing that interaction avoidance might be an agentic strategy triggered by some of the anticipated workday characteristics but still results in rather maladaptive consequences.

Theoretical implications

Despite (or perhaps due to) some unexpected findings, our study provides important implications for theory. Starting with the antecedents of daily interaction avoidance, our results highlight that employees withdraw not only in response to adverse interpersonal experiences but also due to intrapersonal fluctuations in workday characteristics. Accordingly, we underline that interaction avoidance behaviours are not merely passive responses to mistreatment (e.g., Nesher Shoshan et al., 2024; Woolum et al., 2017). Instead, interaction avoidance might be used as a self-regulatory strategy in terms of optimization and compensation processes (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Freund & Baltes, 2002). Therewith, we provide further evidence that morning anticipatory processes and states can be decisive regarding behaviours and experiences during the workday (Sonnentag et al., 2025). At the same time, we show that workday characteristics relate to employees' workday design efforts during the day (Parker et al., 2025). In terms of social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), these results suggest that the cost-benefit analysis determining interaction avoidance is not only driven by previous interpersonal interactions and norm violations. Instead, complementing the social-exchange perspective, cost-benefit analyses regarding daily withdrawal processes can also be motivated by characteristics of the upcoming workday that make interactions more costly. Hence, we show that the maintenance of social exchange relationships can also be a matter of the larger daily context and is not only determined by previous interpersonal experiences. Combining the social-exchange perspective with self-regulatory theories thus is a fruitful approach for taking account of intra- and interpersonal determinants of workplace interactions.

Continuing with outcomes of daily interaction avoidance, our results suggest that even short-term withdrawal processes seem to harm the social exchange process and accordingly go along with adverse consequences. Specifically, our additional analyses demonstrated that even single days characterized by interaction avoidance could potentially result in loneliness and, accordingly, can have harmful downstream consequences on serenity and task focus. These findings contradict our assumptions based on the SOC model (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Freund & Baltes, 2002) but are in line with studies finding empirical relationships between interaction avoidance and higher levels of emotional exhaustion (Hershcovis et al., 2018; Nesher Shoshan et al., 2024). Accordingly, in the case of interaction avoidance, the harm caused to social exchange processes with co-workers (Blau, 1964) might outweigh the benefits obtained from regulating oneself (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Freund & Baltes, 2002). This finding is noteworthy because employees seem to deliberately choose to avoid interactions based on optimization and compensation processes but still experience adverse consequences. Hence, the self-regulatory perspective from the SOC model (Baltes & Baltes, 1990) might explain additional pathways that shift the cost-benefit analysis of social interactions and motivate employees to avoid interactions during the day, but interaction avoidance does not seem to be an effective self-regulatory strategy within this framework. Thus, the social-exchange perspective seems more suitable for explaining the consequences of interaction avoidance than our self-regulatory reasoning because interaction avoidance can come at a cost for employees. Still, our additional moderation analyses suggest that high levels of autonomy and low levels of interpersonal conflicts might offset and/or reverse the negative well-being-related consequences of daily interaction avoidance. Also other research on prevention-oriented behaviours showed that beneficial consequences can depend on co-occurring workday characteristics (Doden et al., 2024). Hence, again, considering the larger work-related context and intraindividual processes can be fruitful for better understanding the nature of daily interactions within the social-exchange logic.

Limitations and directions for future research

It is important to interpret our findings considering two key methodological limitations. First, we relied on self-report measures such that common-method bias might result in overestimating the effects (Podsakoff et al., 2024). We tried reducing these concerns by temporally separating the assessment of all constructs within the three daily surveys. However, future research could employ other methods, such as relying on physiological markers to capture serenity (Sommovigo et al., 2023). Second, we cannot draw conclusions about causality because we have collected purely correlational data. Again, our three daily surveys helped display the assumed temporal order of constructs. Still, we cannot rule out reverse-causal effects such that, for

example, daily interaction avoidance might also predict higher levels of compensatory effort. Future experimental research could, for example, employ vignette designs (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014) that manipulate the levels of workday characteristics in fictive scenarios and assess employees' expected avoidance behaviours.

In addition to these methodological aspects, some conceptual limitations may pave the way for future research. Starting with the specific constructs investigated in this study, we suggest future research to dive deeper into the work-related antecedents of interaction avoidance. Because we focused on a specific set of work-related characteristics to align with the SOC model (Baltes & Baltes, 1990), we cannot transfer our results to other relevant workday characteristics. To broaden this perspective, scholars could draw upon the SMART work design model that describes five categories of work characteristics that might motivate interaction avoidance (e.g., high information processing demands; Parker & Knight, 2024). Regarding the outcomes, we provided first evidence that certain boundary conditions might buffer the adverse effects of interaction avoidance, but these analyses were only exploratory in nature. Accordingly, we encourage future research to replicate the findings from our additional analyses and systematically investigate the boundary conditions that shape the consequences of daily interaction avoidance. For example, scholars could dive deeper into the role of personality dynamics such that highly introverted individuals who experience a misfit between their personality and their current interpersonal work demands might benefit from daily interaction avoidance (Wanberg et al., 2024).

Finally, we would like to mention that we still do not want to rule out that interaction avoidance can entail beneficial consequences. It is surprising to us that the studies focusing on interaction avoidance all revealed adverse consequences of interaction avoidance (e.g., Hershcovis et al., 2018; Nesher Shoshan et al., 2024; and ours), although research in other fields shows that taking breaks from interpersonal interactions can actually be beneficial (e.g., the quiet hour; König et al., 2013; turning off communication notifications; Ohly & Bastin, 2023; reducing social distractions during remote work; R. J. Thompson et al., 2022). We speculate that two core limitations might underlie the conceptualization of interaction avoidance that we also adapted in this study. On the one hand, we decided to use the same measure used in other studies (e.g., "I avoided speaking with my coworkers unless absolutely necessary"; Nifadkar et al., 2012) to align our study with previous research. However, we acknowledge that the wording of these items is rather extreme and negatively toned. Similar conceptual problems also occurred in other fields of research. For example, research on workplace interruptions often used negatively connotated items,

while newer approaches developed neutral assessments to provide a more balanced picture of the outcomes of interruptions (Toebben et al., 2025). Accordingly, we conclude developing more neutral items for assessing interaction avoidance might be necessary. On the other hand, we want to emphasize that the conceptualization of interaction avoidance and the accompanying items are rather broad and neglect temporal dynamics, while employees can use a plethora of different strategies to avoid interactions during multiple episodes of the day. For example, employees could communicate their availability to co-workers in advance (cf. expectation setting; Shockley et al., 2021), which might be a more proactive and favourable strategy. Contrarily, "hiding" from co-workers and ignoring their requests without explanation might undermine the social exchange process more strongly because it reduces trust (Blau, 1964). Additionally, some behaviours might only be used within clearly defined time periods, such as implementing a "quiet hour" during the day (König et al., 2013). Hence, we encourage future research to investigate *how* employees avoid daily interactions and thus identify discrete behavioural patterns (Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2024) while also including a temporal perspective regarding single interaction avoidance episodes. Taken together, we believe that refining the conceptualization of interaction avoidance is a necessary next step to move research on interpersonal withdrawal processes forward.

Practical implications

From a practical point of view, our study allows two main conclusions. First, co-workers and supervisors need to acknowledge that employees may avoid interactions for valid reasons based on their anticipation of the workday and their morning states. Hence, being mindful of the potentially demanding situations of others is important to avoid misinterpreting employees' avoidance behaviours. Likewise, employees could openly communicate in advance that their decision to avoid interactions on this specific day is not due to interpersonal issues, but rather due to the (anticipated) characteristics of their day. Thus, employees could communicate that their day will be particularly effortful, that their tasks will require rather individual (as opposed to highly independent) work, or that they simply woke up on the wrong side of the bed. Making such decisions more explicit can help to increase trust and help sustain the exchange process with co-workers (Blau, 1964).

Second, we currently cannot recommend that employees should avoid interactions during the day due to the predominance of adverse consequences. Notably, while employees used interaction avoidance potentially for

good reasons, it still backfired. Accordingly, we agree with previous recommendations to educate about the potential downsides of avoiding interactions (Nesher Shoshan et al., 2024). If it is still necessary to avoid interactions on a day, employees could mix phases of interaction avoidance with phases of interaction initiation to balance out the adverse and beneficial consequences, respectively. In addition, we observed that the effects of interaction avoidance were less detrimental on days characterized by high levels of autonomy and low levels of interpersonal conflicts. Accordingly, organizations could provide employees with high levels of autonomy, for example, regarding the scheduling of tasks (Breaugh, 1985), as well ensure a positive tone within teams to avoid interpersonal conflicts with co-workers (Hentschel et al., 2013).

Conclusion

To sum up, our study suggests that interaction avoidance might be used as a self-regulatory strategy in terms of optimization and compensation processes (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Freund & Baltes, 2002). However, avoiding interactions during the day still seems to be costly, potentially harming social exchange processes with co-workers (Blau, 1964). We encourage future research to continue situating interaction avoidance within the larger work context rather than considering it a purely interpersonal phenomenon as well as to refine the conceptualization of interaction avoidance to help uncover its potential benefits alongside its risks.

Notes

1. The local ethics committee declared this study exempt because no ethics approval is needed for purely correlational studies conducted in Germany.
2. The direction and significance of the results largely remained the same when ommitting the control variables with one small exception. The relationship of daily interaction avoidance and daily task focus was significant (est. = −0.13, $SE = 0.06$, $p = .045$) in a model without control variables.

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ORCID

Jette Völker http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5369-7484
Julia Iser-Potempa http://orcid.org/0009-0006-4209-2291

Data availability statement

Data and analysis codes are available on OSF: https://osf.io/w9zk2/

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