

Keep your mouth shut until I feel good: testing the moderated mediation model of leader's threat to competence, self-defense tactics, and voice rejection

Anastasiia Popelnukha

School of Management, University of Science and Technology of China, Hefei, China

Shamika Almeida

School of Management, Operations, and Marketing, University of Wollongong, Wollongong, Australia

Asfia Obaid and Naukhez Sarwar

NUST Business School, National University of Sciences and Technology, Islamabad, Pakistan

Cynthia Atamba

School of Management, University of Science and Technology of China, Hefei, China

Hussain Tariq

NUST Business School, National University of Sciences and Technology, Islamabad, Pakistan, and

Qingxiong (Derek) Weng

School of Management, University of Science and Technology of China, Hefei, China

Abstract

Purpose – Although voice endorsement is essential for individuals, teams and organizational performance, leaders who consider followers' voice to be threatening are reluctant to implement followers' ideas. The authors, taking note of this phenomenon, investigate why leaders who feel a threat from followers' voice exhibit voice rejection at the workplace and when this detrimental tendency can be diminished. Thus, based on the self-defense tendency as per self-affirmation theory, the authors argue that those leaders who experience threat triggered by followers' voice, justify voice rejection through the self-defense tactics: message derogation and source derogation. In addition, the authors also propose that a leader's positive (negative) affect experienced before voice exposure may decrease (increase) self-defense and voice rejection.

Design/methodology/approach – To test the authors' moderated mediation model, they conducted two independent vignette studies ($N = 269$; $N = 208$). The purpose of the first vignette study was to test the simple mediation (i.e. the direct and indirect effects), whereas the second study aimed to test the moderated mediation model.

Findings – In Study 1, the authors found that the leader's perceived threat to competence provoked by followers' voice was positively related to voice rejection, and the relationship was partially mediated by message derogation and source derogation. In line with this, in Study 2, the authors tested the moderated mediation model and replicated the findings of Study 1. They found that the effects of leader's perceived threat to competence on voice rejection through self-defense tactics are weaker (stronger) at the high (low) values of a leader's positive affect. In contrast, the effects of a leader's perceived threat to competence on voice rejection through self-defense tactics are stronger (weaker) at the high (low) values of a leader's negative affect.

Originality/value – This study suggests that leaders who experience a threat to competence instigated by employee voice are more likely to think that ideas proposed by employees are non-constructive and employees who suggest those ideas are not credible, and these appraisals have a direct influence on voice rejection. However, if leaders are in a good mood vs. bad mood, they will be less likely to think negatively about employees and their ideas even when they experience psychological threats. The findings highlight several



avenues for future researchers to extend the literature on employee voice management and leadership coaching by providing theoretical and managerial implications.

Keywords Threat to competence, Source derogation, Message derogation, Voice rejection, Positive vs negative affect

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Introduction

Employee voice is identified as sharing of suggestions and concerns related to the current organizational procedures with authoritative figures in the organizations (See *et al.*, 2011). In the recent years, employee voice has been gaining more attention in the field of human resource management (HRM) (Holland *et al.*, 2017; Wæraas and Dahle, 2020) particularly on how organizations listen and respond to employees in how things can be improved at work (Mowbray *et al.*, 2015). Many organizations have developed formal and informal programs to ensure that employees can speak up freely and that managers understand their concerns (Hu and Jiang, 2018). Extensive studies demonstrate that employee voice when it is implemented can benefit organizations by improving managerial effectiveness, enhancing working conditions, reducing employee turnover, and boosting employee motivation (Fast *et al.*, 2014; McClean *et al.*, 2013; Morrison, 2011; Zapata-Phelan *et al.*, 2009). Thus, employee voice is viewed as an important HR strategy to promote high-performance work systems that enables high levels of employee-management commitment (Wilkinson and Fay 2011). However, sometimes voice can be seen as threatening. For example, Burris (2012) found that leaders perceive prohibitive voice as a threat to their status. Isaakyan *et al.* (2018) discovered that challenging public voice threatens leaders' image and also leads to less voice endorsement. In addition, Fast *et al.* (2014) revealed that leaders with low self-efficacy are more likely to disregard employees' suggestions as they experience ego-threat or competence threat coming from voice.

Although previous research has provided a fruitful discussion about voice-triggered perceived threats and voice rejection, we are unaware about cognitive processes linking these two constructs, and what can be done to diminish the detrimental impact of threat instigated from followers' voice on voice rejection. The current literature in voice endorsement emphasized that leader's perceived threat will directly lead to voice rejection, but self-affirmation theory (Sherman and Cohen, 2006) illustrates that perceived threat is not a definite predictor of message resistance, rather a defensive reaction to it (Martens *et al.*, 2006; Sherman and Cohen, 2002). Sometimes people who feel a threat, accept their imperfections and comply with other suggestions (Sherman and Hartson, 2011).

Therefore getting a better understanding of the mechanisms linking perceived threat to voice rejection can provide employee voice researchers with a map of cognitive actions that can guide future studies in voice endorsement. Moreover, the capture of processes can also allow employees to better navigate their voice expression. Finally, knowledge related to the underlying mechanism can facilitate research in exploring boundary conditions that can help to mitigate negative tendency that follows a perceived threat.

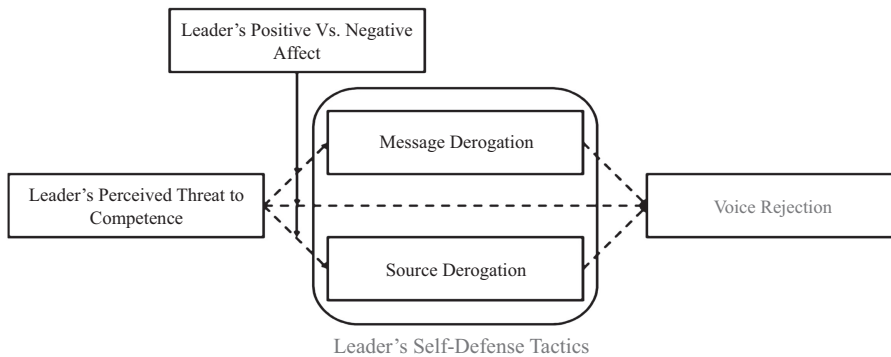
We draw on the self-defense aspect of self-affirmation theory (Sherman and Cohen, 2006) to explain the detrimental cognitive process revolving around perceived threat and voice rejection. Self-defense phenomenon describes the process when someone's competence is threatened; individuals might engage in different behavioral and cognitive strategies to eliminate the threat (Alicke and Sedikides, 2009). The two most widespread cognitive tactics of self-defense are message derogation and source derogation (Horton and Sedikides, 2009; van't Riet *et al.*, 2010). Message derogation here is identified as scrutinizing of the message content (Jenkins and Dragojevic, 2013; Thompson *et al.*, 2011) by discounting its constructiveness. Source derogation involves questioning the

employee's expertise and trustworthiness (Fast *et al.*, 2014; Fransen *et al.*, 2015; Zuwerink Jacks and Cameron, 2003). Thus, in our study, we assume that when leaders perceive followers' voice to be threatening their competence, they tend to dismiss followers' ideas (i.e. voice rejection) by engaging in self-defense activities such as message derogation and source derogation.

In addition, we also integrate the self-affirmation theory with affect-as-information model (Schwarz, 2012) to explore the boundary conditions under which the possible linkage between leaders' perceived competence threat triggered by followers' voice and voice rejection can be buffered. Many studies connect self-affirmation and positive affect to predict people's behavior (Charlson *et al.*, 2014; Mancuso *et al.*, 2012), however, in this work we are interested in the interplay between perceived threat and message receiver's affect on the self-defense reactions. The literature on affect-as-information model suggests that individuals who are experiencing positive affect are more likely to see threatening information constructively because positive mood serves as a buffer against the threat to self-esteem which allows message receivers to focus on benefits of the threatening information rather than ruminate on the consequence of threat (Aspinwall, 1998; Baumann and Kuhl, 2002). Following this line of reasoning, we state that positive affect may decrease self-defense and voice rejection, while negative affect may strengthen the relationship between voice-triggered threat, self-defense and voice rejection.

We intend to make several contributions to employee voice and self-defense literature. Voice endorsement research has typically focused on the direct links between threats and voice rejection and overlooked the underlying mechanism explaining these relations. Therefore, first, we address the limitations mentioned above by introducing self-defense cognitive tactics (i.e. message derogation and source derogation) that leaders utilize to protect their facade of competence. Second, we integrate the self-defense phenomenon and the affect-as-information model to suggest that a leader's positive (negative) affect can help to decrease (increase) self-defense tendency and consequently, voice rejection. In addition, researchers have explored the impact of leader's affect on employee voice (Liu *et al.*, 2015, 2017), it has not examined the influence of leader's mood on their voice endorsement. Our work can provide information about this issue. Finally, this study aims to provide critical practical implications as employees should know about when is the best time to approach leaders with suggestions, and leaders should understand their mood-based biasedness towards threatening voice.

In summary, our moderated mediation model proposes that message derogation and employee derogation partially mediate the relationship between leader's threat to competence and voice rejection, and positive (negative) affect moderates the direct and indirect relationships as shown in our conceptual model (see Figure 1). To test the proposed assumptions, we have conducted two independent vignette studies ($N = 268$, $N = 208$). In vignette studies, participants (majority with a supervisory experience) were asked to report their current negative and positive affect and later to take a role of a leader and to evaluate a fictitious employee idea by reporting the perceived threat to their competence and evaluating the message and the employee who brought the idea. The first study proposes that the underlying mechanisms to understand why the leaders' perceived threat to competence translates into voice rejection and, by doing so, we examine the direct and indirect relationships via self-defense tactics. The second study replicates the results of Study 1 and also explores the boundary conditions under which the relationship between leaders' perceived threat to competence and voice rejection through the self-defense tactics can be buffered. By doing so, we develop the moderated mediation relationships to test the direct and indirect effects via self-defense tactics at the values of leaders' positive vs. negative affect at the workplace.



Note(s): Doted lines demonstrates the relationships tested in Study 1 (i.e., the simple mediation), whereas, the dotted as well as the solid lines demonstrate the relationship tested in Study 2 (i.e., the moderated mediation model)

Figure 1.
A proposed moderated
mediation model

Theoretical background and hypotheses development

Self-defense after experiencing threat to competence

Self-affirmation theory states that people's self-worth relies on different personal values, and when one's values are threatened, a person will suffer self-integrity damage (Sherman and Hartson, 2011). Competence has long been identified as a core personal value (Deci et al., 2008, 2017; Ros et al., 1999) that often determines how we see ourselves (Park et al., 2007). A threat to competence is the perception that one's abilities or image of a competent person are questioned. People often experience a threat to their competence, when someone tells them that they performed poorly on a task (Whelpley and McDaniel, 2016), when they receive low scores from other people (Curran, 2018), or when they feel they are losing face (Bourgoin and Harvey, 2018). In work settings, individuals are concerned how people around them evaluate their competence more than any other attribute (Barrick et al., 2009; Bourdage et al., 2018) because competence perception is a crucial predictor of career progress, hiring decisions and resource allocations (Cuddy et al., 2008). More specifically, in the context of the leader-follower relationship, the leader's competence is the symbol of power and dominance at the workplace (Chen et al., 2014). In line with this, leaders are highly motivated to project competence at work (Fast et al., 2014; Mintzberg, 2009).

Usually, leaders try to signal their current level of competence by making and controlling organizational decisions (Pfeffer, 1977). However, when employees challenge leaders' choices, leaders may feel that their competence is being damaged (Isaakyan et al., 2018; Maynes and Podsakoff, 2014). Typically, followers understand that voicing concerns in front of others can at times embarrass or humiliate their manager (Detert and Edmondson, 2011; Wei et al., 2015). Further, leaders might believe that if they endorse employee voice which challenges their opinion, they might legitimize the implicit challenge or criticism inherent in it (Burris, 2012; Wolfe et al., 2006).

Self-affirmation theory mentions that when individuals feel a threat to their perceived competence or ego, they have to do something about it (Collange et al., 2009; Legault et al., 2012). Decades of research has confirmed that people use different methods to defend or maintain their ego (Sedikides and Gregg, 2008). The process of struggling to maintain ones ego is called self-defense (Sedikides and Gregg, 2008). Self-defense literature states that people can cope with the threat to their ego through behavioral and cognitive strategies (Alicke and Sedikides, 2009, 2011). Behavioral strategies are directed at the change of the

current state, such as working harder and resolving conflicts. The cognitive tactics rely on changes of perceptions and interpretations of the reality by ignoring, minimizing or reconstructing the information (Thompson *et al.*, 2011; Mackinnon *et al.*, 2015). This strategy is often called as biased-processing (Fransen *et al.*, 2015). The most widespread cognitive tactics which people use when they encounter negative evaluative information are message derogation and source derogation (Alicke and Sedikides, 2011). These two processes can influence people's decision related to the received message (Holtgraves and Lasky, 1999; Jenkins and Dragojevic, 2013).

Message derogation

Message derogation is referred to as contesting of the message content (Jenkins and Dragojevic, 2013; Thompson *et al.*, 2011). It is often related to downplaying the seriousness of the message (van Koningsbruggen and Das, 2009), questioning the accuracy of the threatening information (Ditto and Lopez, 1992), its validity (Mackinnon *et al.*, 2015), its persuasiveness (Durik *et al.*, 2008) and constructiveness (Hosman and Siltanen, 2011). According to employee voice literature, derogation of voice is defined as criticizing and depreciating voice quality or perceptions that voice can help to improve the current situation (Whiting *et al.*, 2012). When leaders perceive voice to be helpful and constructive, they are more likely to appreciate it (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2009; Whiting *et al.*, 2012). For instance, Whiting *et al.* (2012) have discovered that voice constructiveness positively affects employee performance ratings. In addition, advice response literature state that perceived advice quality has a direct effect on the advice implementation: the more efficient advice seems to be, the more likely people to give it a second thought (Guntzviller *et al.*, 2017; MacGeorge *et al.*, 2016). In contrast, when the quality of the message is derogated, message recipients are less likely to follow recommended behavior (Craig *et al.*, 2015; Hosman and Siltanen, 2011). Because of this, derogation of the message is often conceptualized as a mediating variable between a message exposure and outcomes such as change of attitude and intentions to perform the recommended behavior (Dillard and Shen, 2005; Kim *et al.*, 2017; Rains, 2013; Silvia, 2006). Therefore, based on self-defense perspective of self-affirmation theory, we expect that leaders who experience a voice-triggered threat to their competence will derogate the content of the message, which consequently will lead to voice rejection. Thus we hypothesize:

- H1. Message derogation partially mediates the relationship between the perceived threat to a leader's competence and voice rejection

Because we assume that variables other than message and source derogation may explain the effect of the threat to competence on the voice rejection (e.g. revenge intentions, enhanced value of own ideas), we expect the mediation to be partial.

Source derogation

Source derogation involves dismissing the credibility of the source, questioning the source's expertise and trustworthiness (Fast *et al.*, 2014; Fransen *et al.*, 2015; Friestad and Wright, 1994; Zuwerink Jacks and Cameron, 2003). People engage in source derogation when they experience threats, such as a threat to their social identity (Branscombe and Wann, 1994) or a threat to their ego (Fein and Spencer, 1997). People usually do not like those who dislike their ideas, identities, and intelligence. That is why derogation of the source sometimes is even called "condemning the condemners" (Petriglieri, 2011). Source derogation is also one of resisting strategy for persuasion attempts (Fransen *et al.*, 2015). For instance, when people experience pressure to conform, they try to defend their freedom by derogating others.

Derogation of the source functions as part of the cognitive tactic of self-defense (Gilbert *et al.*, 1998). People often belittle others and their ideas to reconfirm their ego. Drawing on self-defense phenomenon (Alicke and Sedikides, 2009, 2011; Taylor, 1989), we argue that leaders who experience a threat to their competence-related image would utilize this tactic as well. In support of this notion, Fast *et al.* (2014), based on the self-discrepancy theory, found that when supervisors' abilities are questioned, they may denigrate their subordinates. Literature in persuasion also showed that derogation of the source of the message leads to a negative attitude and lower behavioral intentions towards the suggested actions (Blankenship and Holtgraves, 2005; De Dreu and van Knippenberg, 2005). For instance, Lam *et al.* (2019) discovered that employees with lower credibility are less likely to achieve voice endorsement. Based on the arguments mentioned above on self-defense reaction, we argue that source derogation mediates the relationship between leader's threat to competence and voice rejection. Thus, we hypothesize:

- H2. Source derogation partially mediates the relationship between the perceived threat to a leader's competence and voice rejection.

The moderating role of Leader's positive vs. negative affect

Leaders experience different emotions at work, such as happiness, excitement, anger, sadness, and distress (Eberly and Fong, 2013; Koning and Van Kleef, 2015; Madera and Smith, 2009). Leaders' emotions might be triggered by work-events or non-work-related occasions (Gino and Schweitzer, 2008). Employee voice research has found that employees are more likely to speak up to supervisors when the supervisors exhibit positive moods (Liu *et al.*, 2017), however, the impact of a leader's emotions on voice endorsement is unknown.

Research has found that emotions triggered by events and incidental emotions both influence judgments about others, themselves, and situations overall. According to the affect-as-information model (Clore *et al.*, 1994; Schwarz, 2012), the emotional states send people informational cues to make judgments about others, and people tend to misattribute their emotions to the target of judgment (Motoki and Sugiura, 2018; Schwarz and Clore, 1983). Moreover, people tend to make judgments that are consistent with their current emotions (Forgas, 1995; Johnson and Tversky, 1983; Schwarz and Clore, 1983; Smith *et al.*, 2006). This phenomenon is called emotion-congruency effect (Smith and Petty, 1995). For instance, positive emotions may mold optimistic attitude about the current state (Schwarz and Clore, 1988), future (Lerner and Keltner, 2000) and past events (Rusting, 1999), while negative emotions have the opposite effect. For example, Dunn and Schweitzer (2005) discovered that positive emotions make people see others as more trustworthy, and this can have an impact on the consequent advice receptivity (Gino and Schweitzer, 2008). Building on this model, we argue that leaders' positive affect experienced before voice exposure may have the capacity to decrease their engagement in message and source derogation, while negative affect may increase this tendency. In support of this argumentation, researchers found that people prefer to avoid threatening information by discounting its importance (Jemmott *et al.*, 1986; Liberman and Chaiken, 1992). However, positive mood can be a factor in increasing processing and persuasion regarding threatening messages (Isbell, 2004; Raghunathan and Trope, 2002). Baumann and Kuhl (2002) claimed that persuasion level increases because positive mood serves as a buffer against the threat to self-esteem which allows message receivers to concentrate on the usefulness of the threatening information rather than contemplate the consequence of threat (Aspinwall, 1998). In addition, several scholars pointed out that positive mood decreases defensive processing of threatening messages, and enhances the adoption of actions (Das *et al.*, 2012; Das and Fennis, 2008).

Similar to the self-affirmation theory that notes how one's psychological resources support coping with threats (Sherman and Cohen, 2006), positive affect may also boost one's

power and broaden one's perspective (van Koningsbruggen and Das, 2009). The self-affirmation theory states that when individuals feel positive about themselves in one area, they can tolerate a threat to self in another area. Positive mood can work as a signal of positive self-regard in unrelated areas. In contrast, a negative emotional state narrows down the focus of a person and create an illusion that one's global self-integrity is under threat and encourages one to defend himself or herself within the threat-domain (Sherman *et al.*, 2013).

Based on all the arguments mentioned above, we argue that feeling good may help leaders to put things into a bigger perspective and deal efficiently with voice triggered-psychological threats, but feeling bad will make leaders mind narrowed down on threat and will exacerbate its negative influence on voice reaction such as self-defense. Thus, we hypothesize:

H3a. Leader's positive affect moderates the relationship between a threat to competence and self-defense tactics such that the relationship will be weaker (stronger) when leader's positive affect is high (low).

H3b. Leader's negative affect moderates the relationship between a threat to competence and self-defense tactics such that the relationship will be stronger (weaker) when leader's negative affect is high (low).

Thus far, we have explained why a leader's perceived threat to competence triggered by followers' voice instigated him/her to be engaged in voice rejection, and also proposed the underlying mechanism, i.e. leader's self-defense tactics to explain the relationship of a threat to competence and voice rejection (H1 and H2). Following this, we also proposed the moderating role of the leader's positive vs. negative affect on the perceived threat to competence and voice rejection relationship (H3). Taking this together, we further propose the moderated mediation of these relationships. By doing so, we argue that the leader's positive vs. negative affect can buffer the effect of leader's perceived threat to competence triggered by followers' voice on voice rejection via leader's self-defense tactics. We integrate the self-defense phenomenon and *the* affect-as-information model to argue that the leader's positive affect buffers the mediated relationships because positive affect allows the leader to deal effectively with followers' voice triggered-psychological threat. In contrast, we state that the leader's negative affect strengthens the mediated relationships because it constricts the leader's mind by exacerbating the impact of perceived threat. Accordingly, we put forward:

H4a. Leader's positive affect moderates the indirect relationship between a threat to competence and voice rejection via self-defense tactics such that the indirect relationship will be weaker (stronger) when leader's positive affect is high (low).

H4b. Leader's negative affect moderates the indirect relationship between a threat to competence and voice rejection via self-defense tactics such that the indirect relationship will be stronger (weaker) when leader's negative affect is high (low).

Overview of studies

We have conducted two independent studies to test our proposed relationships ($N = 269$, $N = 208$): the purpose of the first vignette study was to test the simple mediation (i.e. the direct and indirect effects), whereas, the second study aimed to test the moderated mediation model. In Study 2, we replicated findings of the first study with another population (all participants had a supervisory experience) using a different voice scenario to test the moderators.

The first study describes the improvement-oriented voice at a restaurant where a restaurant manager needs to decide whether to implement or decline proposed employee ideas and the second voice scenario depicts the employee challenging manager's decision at a mobile game company. We used a vignette-based design in our research as it provides greater control and precision (Aguinis and Bradley, 2014). Reactions to a message may often be based

on the characteristics of the message provider (Lam *et al.*, 2019) and the relationship between message provider and receiver (Urbach and Fay, 2020). The vignette methodology can help us to overcome this problem by providing a concrete scenario that eliminates the influence of relationships and controls employee characteristics. Moreover, as our study explores cognitive reactions to the perceived threat, which have a short-lived nature (Rhodes, 2017), vignette study provides an opportunity to measure immediate reactions, while a field study may fail to examine these perceptions.

Study 1: method

Sample and procedure

To test our hypothesized relationships, we collected data from the Master of Business Administration (MBA) students at a large public sector university located in the Anhui province of China. The participants were invited through seven WeChat groups, and the size of the groups ranged from 41 to 84 people. To ensure maximum participation of group members to our study, we offer 10 yuan (\$1.5) or small gifts (e.g. coffee or movie coupons) to those who completed the study's survey (e.g. see Shillamkwese *et al.*, 2020). Initially, 293 respondents took the survey (67% response rate) after list-wise deletion due to respondents not passing one or two filter items related to the vignette; our final sample consists of 269 responses.

The filter items or attention check questions were used to see if respondents read the scenario and were attentive while filling the survey. We asked respondents two scenario-based questions and provided them with multiple choice. The questions used were "What is your role in the described scenario?" and "What was your decision as a manager?" Filter items often used in survey-based studies to increase the validity of results (Kung *et al.*, 2018). Fifty-eight percent of respondents were female; the average age of participants was 32.10 years old (SD = 6.47). Sixty-two percent of respondents had an income higher than 7,000 yuan per month (US\$1,014). Seventy-six percent of respondents had a working experience of more than five years, 77% percent of respondents had an experience of managing other employees, and 59% of respondents reported that their current position is related to the supervision of other employees (for the detailed demographic information see Table 1).

The survey was distributed online over three days. All potential participants were informed that the study was voluntary and confidential. All those who agreed to participate in this study were asked to provide demographic information (sex, age, education, and income) and answer several work-related questions (tenure time, if they have previously managed other employees, and if their currently hold supervisory positions). After responding to the first part of the survey, the participants were asked to imagine themselves in the role of the restaurant manager, who was dealing with several customer complaints. To address the customer complaints, the manager rearranged the dining area and redesigned the customer ordering process (adapted from Fast *et al.*, 2014). See Appendix for further details. After announcing the managerial decision to the team, one of the employees proposed a different solution by suggesting to recruit more staff and improve online reservation.

We slightly changed the original voice scenario, as Chinese respondents were not familiar with jet services described in it. We left the same description of the encountered problems, but we modified the organization where the employee voice took place. The scenario-based design is appropriate for such type of study, as our focus is on the cognitive processes that cannot be examined directly. In addition, cognitive evaluations can be easily confounded by contextual factors, and vignette allowed us to avoid this issue. The vignette did not include the description of the employee, status, relationship with manager and gender as previous literature found that these factors get easily interwoven with message factors (Hans and

PR 51,1	<i>Gender %</i>	
	Female	57.62
	Male	43.38
402	<i>Education %</i>	
	Below high school	2.23
	College	11.52
	Bachelor	36.06
	Master	47.96
	PhD	2.23
	<i>Monthly income %</i>	
	Below 3,000 yuan	13.38
	3,001–5,000 yuan	23.79
	5,001–7,000 yuan	11.90
	7,001–9,000 yuan	15.61
	Above 9,000	35.32
	<i>Working experience %</i>	
	Less than 1 year	10.78
	1–3 years	13.01
	3–5 years	30.11
	5–7 years	23.79
	More than 7 years	22.30
	<i>Supervisory experience %</i>	
	Yes	67.66
	No	32.34
Table 1. Demographic information of respondents (Study 1)	<i>Current supervisory role %</i>	
	Yes	59.11
	No	40.89

Wijaya, 2019; Howell *et al.*, 2015). Moreover, many voice scholars confirmed that scenario-based studies are able to replicate field findings (Fast *et al.*, 2014; Lam *et al.*, 2019; Weiss and Morrison, 2018).

Measures

After the respondents finished reading the voice scenario, we asked them to fill the rest of the survey, which consisted of 4 scales measured on 7 points Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). All the scales were initially developed in English and underwent a procedure of back-translation (Brislin, 1986) and the final survey was presented in the local written language, Mandarin.

The threat to competence: the extent to which participants perceived the message as threatening their competence was measured with three items from the perceived competence scale adapted from Kim *et al.* (2004). We adapted this scale as it reflects image-concern rather than previously studied ego related self-perceptions. The original scale was “He is very capable of performing his job. He has much knowledge about the work that needs to be done on the job. I feel very confident about his skills” A sample of adapted items: “This employee’s voice would make others think that I am not capable of performing my job,” “This employee’s voice would make others think that I do not have enough knowledge about the work that needs to be done on the job” ($\alpha = 0.88$).

Voice rejection: voice rejection was measured using the voice endorsement scale, which consisted of 4 items; it was adopted from Fast *et al.* (2014). Example of the items: “I would

revise my decision and incorporate this employee’s comments” and “The comments from this employee would cause me to have second thoughts about my decision” ($\alpha = 0.89$). The scores of all items were reverse-scored to create a measure of voice rejection.

Source derogation: source derogation was measured with four items. This scale was adopted from the work of [Fast et al. \(2014\)](#). The sample of items: “This employee is knowledgeable about this issue” and “This employee is well informed on the subject of complaints” ($\alpha = 0.87$). All items were reverse-scored.

Message derogation: message derogation was measured with two items using the scale on perceived constructiveness from the work of [Whiting et al. \(2012\)](#). The items were reverse-scored. The two items are: “This employee’s comments are constructive” and “This employee’s comments are likely to enhance the performance of the restaurant” ($\alpha = 0.83$).

Scenario realism: To guarantee the validity of our study, we have asked all the respondents about the perceived realism of the described scenario. Our question about realism was adopted from the research of [Siponen and Vance \(2010\)](#). The scenario that we used in our study was perceived to be realistic by the majority of respondents ($M = 5.30$, $SD = 1.17$).

Control variables: Following previous studies (e.g. [Tariq and Ding, 2018](#); [Tariq and Weng, 2018](#); [2019](#); [Tariq et al., 2020](#); [Tariq et al., in press](#)), we used gender, working experience, supervisory experience, and current supervisory position as controls. Some advice response scholars found that females are more receptive to other suggestions ([Michaud and Warner, 1997](#)), while others indicated that the opposite is true ([MacGeorge et al., 2002](#)). We controlled for several work-related variables such as working experience, supervisory experience, and current supervisory position because our participants have different length of tenure, and some of them never worked as a supervisor.

Study 1: results

To ensure the contextual validity of our scales, we performed confirmatory factor analysis (see [Table 2](#)). The results did not indicate any validity concerns. As all variables in our study were collected from a single source, we needed to check the common method bias of our data. To address this potential concern, we followed several recommendations during the research design and analysis phases ([MacKenzie and Podsakoff, 2012](#); [Podsakoff et al., 2003](#)). In the

Variables	CR	AVE	MSV	MaxR(H)	Voice rejection	Source derogation	Message derogation	Leader’s perceived threat to competence
Voice rejection	0.888	0.666	0.578	0.899	0.816			
Message derogation	0.828	0.707	0.578	0.837	0.760 ^{***}	0.841		
Source derogation	0.877	0.643	0.269	0.892	0.501 ^{***}	0.518 ^{***}	0.802	
Leader’s perceived threat to competence	0.877	0.644	0.150	0.899	0.388 ^{***}	0.323 ^{***}	0.194 ^{**}	0.802

Note(s): *Model fit* CMIN = 121.291, DF = 71, CMIN/DF = 1.71, CFI = 0.98, SRMR = 0.04, RMSE = 0.05, PClose = 0.42

Significant at: ^{*} $p < 0.05$; ^{**} $p < 0.01$; ^{***} $p < 0.001$. CR = composite reliability, AVE = average variance extracted, MSV = maximum shared variance, MaXR (H) = maximum reliability

Table 2.
The Results of
confirmatory factor
analysis (Study 1)

research design phase, we provided assurances about the anonymity of the survey and the confidentiality of the data; we also simplified some statements in order to increase respondents' understanding of the questions. Finally, during the analysis phase, a series of confirmatory factor analyses were carried out. Harman's one-factor test was conducted with an unrotated factor solution. The test revealed an explained variance of 42.99 %, which is below the threshold of 50% suggested by Podsakoff *et al.* (2003). Harman's single factor was also run using CFA. Researchers suggested that method biases are substantial when a single factor model fits the data (Serrano Archimi *et al.*, 2018). We performed a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to ensure that all our scales were empirically distinct. The four-factor model showed the best fit indices, $\chi^2(59) = 107.8$, comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.98, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.05, and provided significantly better fit to the data than (1) a two factor model, where derogation of constructiveness, derogation of employee's credibility and voice rejection were combined into one factor ($\chi^2(64) = 562.9$; CFI = 0.76; RMSEA = 0.17), (2) than a three-factor model, where the derogation of constructiveness and employee's credibility were combined into one factor ($\chi^2(62) = 328.4$; CFI = 0.87; RMSEA = 0.13), (3) a three-factor model where derogation of employee and voice rejection were combined into one factor ($\chi^2(62) = 502$; CFI = 0.79; RMSEA = 0.16), (4) and a single factor ($\chi^2(65) = 932.3$; CFI = 0.58; RMSEA = 0.22). These results also indicated that CMV is not a major issue in our data (Gaski, 2017).

Table 3 reports the descriptive statistics and correlations among the variables. Cronbach's alpha values are listed in the diagonal and range from 0.83 to 0.89. Our preliminary analysis found that those who experience higher perceived competence threat are more likely to derogate message's constructiveness ($r = 0.28$; $p < 0.001$), source's credibility ($r = 0.19$; $p = 0.004$) and engage in voice rejection ($r = 0.37$; $p < 0.001$). We found that none of the controls was correlated with our independent, dependent or mediating variables, but we still decided to include them in our analysis to show the effects of the tested model without the influence of those individual differences.

Following the recent studies, we used the PROCESS macro 2.61 in IBM SPSS Statistics 22 (Hayes and Preacher, 2014) to test the direct and indirect effects of leader's perceived threat to competence on voice rejection via source derogation and message derogation, and also used bootstrap estimates to construct bias-corrected confidence intervals. Table 4 demonstrates the findings of the formal mediation analysis. We found that leader's perceived threat to competence is positive and significant with voice rejection ($B = 0.16$, $SE = 0.05$, $t = 3.76$, $p < 0.001$, LLCI = 0.06, ULCI = 0.26). Table 4 demonstrates that leader's perceived threat to competence is positively and significantly related to source derogation ($B = 0.13$, $SE = 0.04$, $t = 2.98$, $p < 0.01$, LLCI = 0.02, ULCI = 0.24), and message derogation ($B = 0.24$, $SE = 0.05$, $t = 4.89$, $p < 0.001$, LLCI = 0.14, ULCI = 0.35). Bootstrapping analysis ($z = 5,000$ samples) confirmed that the indirect effects of leader's perceived threat to competence on voice rejection through source derogation ($B = 0.03$, LLCI = 0.02, ULCI = 0.07) and message derogation ($B = 0.14$, LLCI = 0.08, ULCI = 0.21) were positive and significant. In addition, the normal theory test for the indirect effects, i.e. leader's perceived competence threat on voice rejection via source derogation ($B = 0.03$, $SE = 0.01$, $Z = 2.35$, $p < 0.05$), and leader's perceived competence threat on voice rejection via message derogation ($B = 0.13$, $SE = 0.03$, $Z = 4.41$, $p < 0.001$) were positive and significant. Thus, we found support for H1 and H2.

Study 1: discussion

From these findings, we found that when leaders feel that others may question their competence, they try to protect their image by derogating the employee and the proposed ideas. These results can give support to the idea that threat to image (competence-related) can work the same as a threat to the ego. Moreover, we have found that self-defense (message and

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Perceived competence threat	3.58	1.14	(0.87)								
2. Voice rejection	3.55	1.03	0.37**	(0.89)							
3. Source derogation	3.36	0.83	0.19**	0.45**	(0.87)						
4. Message derogation	3.55	0.94	0.28**	0.65**	0.45**	(0.83)					
5. Gender	1.58	0.49	-0.04	-0.06	-0.01	0.05	(-)				
6. Age	32.10	6.46	-0.03	-0.27	-0.10	-0.17	0.01	(-)			
7. Working experience	3.33	1.26	-0.03	0.04	-0.02	0.03	-0.06	0.77**	(-)		
8. Supervisory experience	1.32	0.47	-0.09	-0.12*	-0.07	-0.08	0.19**	-0.21**	-0.37**	(-)	
9. Current supervisory experience	1.41	0.49	0.02	-0.04	0.04	-0.08	0.19**	-0.18**	-0.32**	0.54**	(-)

Note(s): *N* = 269. Significant at: * *p* < 0.05; ** *p* < 0.01; *** *p* < 0.001; figures in parentheses are alpha internal consistency reliabilities
 Gender: 1 - male, 2 - female
 Age: the highest age is 65, the lowest is 18
 Supervisory experience: 1 - yes, 2 - no
 Current supervisory position: 1 - yes, 2 - no
 Working experience (1 = less than 1 year, 2 = 1-3 years, 3 = 3-5 years, 4 = 5-7 years, 5 = more than 7 years)

Table 3.
Descriptive Statistics
and Correlations
(Study 1)

source derogation) work as mediators in the relationship between a threat to competence and voice rejection.

In Study 2, we wanted to replicate the findings of Study 1 with another voice scenario, and we also want to test our moderators. The replication of findings with different samples and different scenarios helped us to increase the confidence in our results as well as their generalizability (Coppock, 2019; Freese and Peterson, 2017). Moreover, this practice is prevalent for employee voice research (Hussain *et al.*, 2018; Lam *et al.*, 2019).

Study 2: method

We used the same procedure as in Study 1. However, we have changed the voice scenario and added negative and positive affect measurements, which were evaluated before reading the voice scenario. This time challenging voice was occurring in a mobile game company (see Appendix). The voice scenario was adapted from the work of Hussain *et al.* (2018).

Respondents: For this study, the link to the digital survey was distributed among several WeChat groups of our lab pool; we have also used the snowball method to collect more data (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981). The necessary condition for participation in the study was a supervisory experience. After the completion of the survey, respondents were provided with 10 yuan (\$1.5). We received 223 responses, but 15 responses were removed as respondents did not pass the filter items, or they did not have supervisory experience. Finally, we were left with 208 valid responses. Fifty-one percent of the respondents were female; the average age of respondents was 33.46 (SD = 6.09). The majority of respondents had a bachelor's degree (43%) or master's (50%) and an income of more than 9,000 yuan (\$1,014) per month (54%). Seventy-seven percent of respondents had working experience of more than five years; the rest had a shorter experience. Sixty-one percent of respondents were currently holding a supervisory position (for the detailed demographic information, see Table 5).

<i>Gender %</i>	
Female	50.96
Male	49.04
<i>Education %</i>	
Below high school	–
College	4.81
Bachelors	50
Masters	42.31
PhD	2.88
<i>Monthly Income %</i>	
Below 3,000 yuan	–
3,001–5,000 yuan	–
5,001–7,000 yuan	28.37
7,001–9,000 yuan	17.79
Above 9,000	53.84
<i>Working experience %</i>	
Less than 1 year	–
1–3 years	23.08
3–5 years	21.63
5–7 years	28.85
More than 7 years	26.44
<i>Current supervisory role %</i>	
Yes	60.58
No	39.42

Table 5.
Demographic
information of
respondents (study 2)

Measures: We used the same scales as in Study 1, and additionally, we measured a leader's positive and negative affect. The positive affect was measured with three items: happy, pleased, relaxed ($\alpha = 0.90$) adopted from [Markel and Frone \(1998\)](#). The measurement of negative affect was adopted from [Graham \(2008\)](#), it included three items: sad, angry, irritated ($\alpha = 0.92$). The affect was measured on a 7-points scale (1 = *not at all*, seven = *extremely*). Other scales were measures on a 7-points Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Reliabilities for all scales can be found in [Table 6](#).

Study 2: results

To ensure the contextual validity of our scales, we performed a confirmatory factor analysis. The results, demonstrated in [Table 7](#), indicated that there is no validity concern. To address the potential concern of common method bias, we followed the same procedure as in Study 1. Harman's one-factor test was conducted with an unrotated factor solution. The test revealed an explained variance of 46.27 %; variance was below the threshold of 50% suggested by [Podsakoff et al. \(2003\)](#). We performed a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to ensure that all our scales were empirically distinct. The six-factor model showed the best fit indices, $\chi^2(137) = 237.57$; $\chi^2/\text{df} = 1.73$; comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.97, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.06, and provided significantly better fit to the data than a single factor ($\chi^2(152) = 1,415.51$; $\chi^2/\text{df} = 9.31$; CFI = 0.59; RMSEA = 0.20). These results indicated that CMV is not a concern for our data set ([Gaski, 2017](#)).

[Table 6](#) reports the descriptive statistics and correlations among the four main variables used in this study. From the results depicted in [Table 6](#), we found that those leaders who experienced higher competence threat were more likely to derogate message ($r = 0.17$; $p = 0.013$), source ($r = 0.30$; $p < 0.001$) and engage in voice rejection ($r = 0.21$; $p = 0.002$).

First, to replicate the findings of Study 1 we used the PROCESS macro 2.61 in IBM SPSS Statistics 22 ([Hayes and Preacher, 2014](#)), and bootstrap estimates with bias-corrected confidence intervals to test the indirect effects of leader's threat to competence and voice rejection through source derogation and message derogation. [Table 8](#) demonstrates the findings of the formal mediation analysis (i.e. PROCESS macro; Model 4). We found that leader's perceived threat to competence is positively and significantly associated with voice rejection ($B = 0.23$, $SE = 0.06$, $t = 3.03$, $p = 0.003$, $LLCI = 0.08$, $ULCI = 0.38$). [Table 8](#) demonstrates that leader's perceived threat to competence is positively and significantly related to source derogation ($B = 0.28$, $SE = 0.60$, $t = 4.44$, $p < 0.001$, $LLCI = 0.16$, $ULCI = 0.41$), and message derogation ($B = 0.19$, $SE = 0.08$, $t = 4.43$, $p = 0.016$, $LLCI = 0.04$, $ULCI = 0.34$). Bootstrapping analysis ($z = 10,000$ samples) confirmed that the indirect effects of leader's perceived threat to competence on voice rejection through source derogation ($B = 0.12$, $LLCI = 0.06$, $ULCI = 0.21$) and message derogation ($B = 0.08$, $LLCI = 0.01$, $ULCI = 0.16$) were positive and significant. Moreover, after controlling for mediators the direct effect became insignificant ($B = 0.03$, $SE = 0.06$, $p = 0.59$). In addition, the normal theory test for the indirect effects, i.e. leader's perceived competence threat on voice rejection via source derogation ($B = 0.12$, $SE = 0.03$, $Z = 3.51$, $p < 0.001$), and leader's perceived competence threat on voice rejection via message derogation ($B = 0.08$, $SE = 0.03$, $Z = 2.27$, $p = 0.023$) were positive and significant as well. Thus, we again found support for [H1](#) and [H2](#) and replicated the findings of Study 1.

To test the moderated mediation model, we followed the recent studies (e.g. [Ahmad et al., 2019](#); [Butt et al., 2019](#); [Hongbo et al., 2019](#)) and used PROCESS macro 2.61 in IBM SPSS Statistics 22 ([Hayes and Preacher, 2014](#)). By doing so, we ran the Model 8 of PROCESS macro to test the effect of a leader's perceived threat to competence on voice rejection via self-defense tactics at the values of a leader's positive vs. negative affect. [Table 9](#) demonstrates that the interaction term of leader's perceived threat and leader's positive affect is marginally

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Perceived competence threat	4.05	1.20	(0.79)								
2. Voice rejection	4.02	1.33	0.21 ^{***}	(0.93)							
3. Source derogation	3.62	1.13	0.30 ^{***}	0.61 ^{***}	(0.91)						
4. Message derogation	3.80	1.35	0.17 [*]	0.63 ^{***}	0.56 ^{***}	(0.88)					
5. Leader's positive affect	4.79	1.44	-0.14 [*]	-0.65 ^{***}	-0.60 ^{***}	-0.61 ^{***}	(0.90)				
6. Leader's negative affect	2.76	1.48	0.22 ^{***}	0.36 ^{***}	0.41 ^{***}	0.45 ^{***}	-0.50 ^{***}	(0.92)			
7. Gender	1.51	0.50	-0.05	-0.04	-0.02	-0.01	0.02	0.02	(-)		
8. Age	33.47	6.09	-0.10	-0.07	-0.05	-0.04	0.01	-0.05	0.04	(-)	
9. Working experience	3.59	1.11	-0.07	-0.02	-0.02	-0.02	-0.10	0.02	-0.09	0.50 ^{***}	(-)
10. Current supervisory experience	1.39	0.49	0.02	0.01	-0.01	0.03	-0.01	-0.08	0.08	0.02	0.03

Note(s): $N = 208$. Significant at: ^{*} $p < 0.05$; ^{**} $p < 0.01$; ^{***} $p < 0.001$; figures in parentheses are alpha internal consistency reliabilities
Gender: 1 - male, 2 -female
Age: the lowest age of the respondent is 24, the highest is 55
Current supervisory position: 1- yes, 2 - no
Working experience (1 = less than 1 year, 2 = 1-3 years, 3 = 3-5 years, 4 = 5-7 years, 5 = more than 7 years)

Table 6.
Descriptive statistics
and correlations
(study 2)

Variables	CR	AVE	MSV	MaxR(H)	Voice rejection	Source derogation	Message derogation	Leader's perceived threat to competence
Voice rejection	0.938	0.791	0.476	0.943	0.889			
Message derogation	0.885	0.794	0.476	0.889	0.690***	0.891		
Source derogation	0.908	0.712	0.426	0.912	0.643***	0.623***	0.844	
Leader's perceived threat to competence	0.798	0.576	0.153	0.872	0.238**	0.237**	0.391***	0.759

Table 7. The results of confirmatory factor analysis (Study 2)

Note(s): *Model fit* CMIN = 237.569, DF = 137, CMIN/DF = 1.73, CFI = 0.97, SRMR = 0.05, RMSE = 0.06, PClose = 0.108
Significant at: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$. CR = composite reliability, AVE = average variance extracted, MSV = maximum shared variance, MaXR (H) = maximum reliability

significant with source derogation ($B = 0.08$, $SE = 0.04$, $t = -1.87$, $p = 0.06$, $LLCI = -0.16$, $ULCI = 0.01$) and significant with message derogation ($B = -0.14$, $SE = 0.05$, $t = -2.69$, $p = 0.008$, $LLCI = -0.23$, $ULCI = -0.04$). Thus, we found support for H3a that states that a leader's positive affect moderates the relationship between a threat to competence and self-defense tactics such that the direct relationship will be weaker (stronger) when leader's positive affect is high (low). In line with this, we also found that the interaction term of leader's perceived threat to competence and leader's negative affect is positive and significant with source derogation ($B = 0.16$, $SE = 0.04$, $t = 3.82$, $p < 0.001$, $LLCI = 0.08$, $ULCI = 0.24$) and message derogation ($B = 0.20$, $SE = 0.04$, $t = 4.18$, $p < 0.001$, $LLCI = 0.11$, $ULCI = 0.30$). Hence, we found support for H3b, that is, leader's negative affect moderates the relationship between a threat to competence and self-defense tactics such that the direct relationship will be stronger (weaker) when leader's negative affect is high (low).

In addition, we followed the approach of Edwards and Lambert (2007) to plot the interaction terms and also to explore the simple slopes test. By doing so, first, we plot the interaction term of leader's perceived threat to competence and leader's positive affect on source derogation and found that the relationship becomes non-significant when leader's positive affect is high ($B = 0.09$, $p = 0.22$) and stronger when leader's positive affect is low ($B = 0.32$, $p < 0.001$). In line with this, we also plot the interaction term of leader's perceived threat to competence and leader's positive affect on message derogation and found that the relationship is non-significant when leader's positive affect is high ($B = -0.09$, $p = 0.31$) and stronger when leader's positive affect is low ($B = 0.29$, $p = 0.003$). Thus, we found support for H3a, that is, leader's positive affect moderates the relationship between a threat to competence and self-defense tactics such that the direct relationship will be weaker (stronger) when leader's positive affect is high (low) (see Figure 2 and 3).

We plotted the interactions in terms of the leader's perceived threat to competence and leader's negative affect on source derogation and found that the relationship is stronger when leader's negative affect is high ($B = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$) and non-significant when leader's negative affect is low ($B = -0.04$, $p = 0.64$). In line with this, we also plotted the interactions in terms of the leader's perceived threat to competence and leader's negative affect on message derogation and found that the relationship is stronger when leader's negative affect is high ($B = 0.37$, $p < 0.001$) and weaker when leader's negative affect is low ($B = 0.24$, $p < 0.02$).

Antecedents	Source derogation				Mediators				Message Derogation				Dependent Variable			
	B(SE)	t	LLCI	ULCI	R ²	B(SE)	t	LLCI	ULCI	R ²	B(SE)	t	LLCI	ULCI	R ²	
<i>Constant</i>	2.62(0.60)	4.37***	1.43	3.81	0.09**	3.14(0.74)	4.25***	1.68	4.59	0.03	1.10(0.56)	1.98*	0.01	2.20	0.50***	
Perceived competence threat	0.28(0.06)	4.44***	0.16	0.41		0.19(0.08)	4.43*	0.04	0.34		0.03(0.06)	0.53	-0.08	0.15		
Source derogation	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.43(0.07)	5.91***	0.29	0.58		
Message derogation	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.41(0.06)	6.84***	0.29	0.53		
Gender	0.01(0.15)	0.02	-0.30	0.31	-0.02(0.19)	-0.08	-0.39	0.36	0.36	0.21	-0.06(0.13)	-0.45	-0.33	0.21		
Age	-0.01(0.01)	0.27	-0.03	0.03	-0.01(0.02)	-0.36	-0.04	0.03	0.03	0.01	-0.01(0.02)	-0.80	-0.03	0.01		
Working experience	0.01(0.08)	0.11	-0.15	0.17	0.01(0.10)	0.09	-0.18	0.20	0.20	0.16	0.03(0.07)	0.40	-0.11	0.16		
Current supervisory experience	-0.04(0.16)	-0.25	-0.35	0.27	0.07(0.19)	1.00	-0.30	0.45	0.45	0.27	-0.01(0.14)	-0.01	-0.27	0.27		
Predictor					Effect					ULCI					ULCI	
<i>Direct effect</i>																
Leader's perceived competence threat on voice rejection					0.03						-0.08				0.15	
<i>Indirect effect</i>																
Leader's perceived competence threat on voice rejection via source derogation					0.12***						0.06				0.21	
Leader's perceived competence threat on voice rejection via message derogation					0.08*						0.01				0.16	
<i>Total effect</i>																
Leader's perceived competence threat on voice rejection					0.20***						0.09				0.31	
<i>Normal theory test for indirect effect</i>											SE				Z	
Leader's perceived competence threat on voice rejection via source derogation					0.12						0.03				3.51***	
Leader's perceived competence threat on voice rejection via message derogation					0.08						0.03				2.27*	

Note(s): Results of direct, indirect, total, and normal theory effects of perceived competence threat on voice rejection
N = 208; LLCI = Lower level of the 95% confidence interval; ULCI = Upper level of 95% confidence interval; * *p* < 0.05; ** *p* < 0.01; and *** *p* < 0.001

Table 8.
Results of mediation analysis (study 2)

Table 9.
Results of the
moderated mediation
analysis (study 2)

Antecedents	Source derogation				Mediators				Message Derogation				Dependent Variable Voice rejection			
	B(SE)	t	LLCI	ULCI	R ²	B(SE)	t	LLCI	ULCI	R ²	B(SE)	t	LLCI	ULCI	R ²	
<i>The effects of perceived competence threat on voice rejection via self-defense tactics at the values of positive effect</i>																
Constant	3.78(0.42)	9.03***	2.95	4.60	0.41***	3.91(0.50)	7.79***	2.92	4.90	0.41***	2.34(0.54)	4.35***	1.28	3.40	0.55***	
Perceived competence threat	0.21(0.05)	4.03***	0.11	0.31	0.10(0.06)	1.61	-0.02	0.22			0.05(0.06)	0.85	-0.06	0.16		
Source derogation	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.28(0.07)	3.75***	0.13	0.43		
Message derogation	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.27(0.06)	4.30***	0.15	0.40		
Positive affect	-0.41(0.05)	-8.56***	-0.51	-0.32	-0.50(0.06)	-8.71***	-0.61	-0.39			-0.29(0.06)	-4.70***	-0.42	-0.17		
PCT X PA	0.08(0.04)	-1.87	-0.16	0.01	-0.14(0.05)	-2.69**	-0.23	-0.04			0.03(0.04)	-0.64	-0.12	0.06		
Gender	0.01(0.12)	0.01	-0.24	0.25	-0.02(0.15)	-0.12	-0.31	0.27			-0.06(0.13)	-0.48	-0.31	0.19		
Age	0.01(0.01)	0.22	-0.02	0.03	0.00(0.01)	0.09	-0.03	0.03			-0.01(0.01)	-0.55	-0.03	0.02		
Working experience	-0.06(0.06)	-0.88	-0.19	0.07	-0.07(0.08)	-0.86	-0.22	0.09			-0.02(0.07)	-0.31	-0.15	0.11		
Current supervisory experience	-0.05(0.12)	-0.37	-0.29	0.20	0.06(0.15)	0.41	-0.23	0.35			0.01(0.13)	0.01	-0.25	0.25		

(continued)

Antecedents	Source derogation				Mediators				Message Derogation				Dependent Variable			
	B(SE)	t	LLCI	ULCI	R ²	B(SE)	LLCI	ULCI	R ²	t	B(SE)	LLCI	ULCI	R ²		
<i>The effects of perceived competence threat on voice rejection via self-defense tactics at the values of negative effect</i>																
Constant	3.62(0.47)	7.73***	2.70	4.54	0.27***	3.71(0.55)	2.61	4.80	0.28***	2.54*	1.36(0.53)	0.30	2.41	0.50***		
Perceived competence threat	0.19(0.06)	3.28**	0.08	0.31	0.06(0.07)	0.92	-0.07	0.20		0.49	0.03(0.06)	-0.09	0.14			
Source derogation	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-		5.48***	0.41(0.07)	0.26	0.56			
Message derogation	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-		6.06***	0.39(0.06)	0.26	0.51			
Negative affect	0.22(0.05)	4.28***	0.12	0.32	0.32(0.06)	5.32***	0.20	0.44		0.17	0.01(0.05)	-0.09	0.11			
PCT X NA	0.16(0.04)	3.82***	0.08	0.24	0.20(0.04)	4.18***	0.11	0.30		1.16	0.05(0.04)	-0.03	-0.13			
Gender	-0.02(0.14)	-0.16	-0.30	0.25	-0.05(0.16)	-0.33	-0.38	0.27		-0.44	0.06(0.14)	-0.33	0.21			
Age	-0.00(0.01)	-0.04	-0.03	0.02	0.01(0.01)	-0.09	-0.03	0.03		-0.80	-0.01(0.01)	-0.03	0.01			
Working experience	-0.02(0.07)	-0.27	-0.16	0.12	-0.03(0.08)	-0.38	-0.20	0.13		0.36	0.02(0.07)	-0.11	0.16			
Current supervisory experience	0.04(0.14)	0.28	-0.24	0.31	0.19(0.17)	1.12	-0.14	0.52		0.06	0.01(0.14)	-0.26	0.28			

Note(s): N = 208; PCT; Perceived competence threat; PA; Positive affect; NA; Negative affect; LLCI = Lower level of the 95% confidence interval; ULCI = Upper level of 95% confidence interval; * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001

Table 9.

Hence, we found support for H3b, that is, a leader's negative affect moderates the relationship between a threat to competence and self-defense tactics such that the direct relationship will be stronger (weaker) when leader's negative affect is high (low) (see Figure 4 and 5).

Tables 10 and 11 revealed the indexes of the moderated mediation model, and the conditional direct and indirect effects of the leader's perceived threat to competence on voice rejection via self-defense tactics at the values of leader's positive vs. negative affect. Table 10 demonstrate that the indexes of the moderated mediation model with the mediation of source derogation ($effect = -0.02, SE = 0.01, LLCI = -0.06, ULCI = -0.01$) and message derogation ($effect = -0.04, SE = 0.02, LLCI = -0.09, ULCI = -0.01$) at the values (i.e. High, Mean, and Low) of leader' positive affect are significant. Moreover, the conditional indirect effects of perceived leader's threat to competence on voice rejection via source derogation and message derogation are significantly weaker at the high value of leader's positive affect (i.e. $effect = 0.09, SE = 0.04, LLCI = 0.03, ULCI = 0.19$ for source derogation, and $effect = 0.08, SE = 0.04, LLCI = 0.03, ULCI = 0.17$ for message derogation), and non-significant at the low value of leader's positive affect (i.e. $effect = 1.44, SE = 0.03, LLCI = -0.01, ULCI = 0.09$ for source derogation, and $effect = -0.03, SE = 0.03, LLCI = 0.09, ULCI = 0.03$ for message

Figure 2.
The interaction term of leader's perceived threat to competence and leader's positive affect on source derogation (study 2)

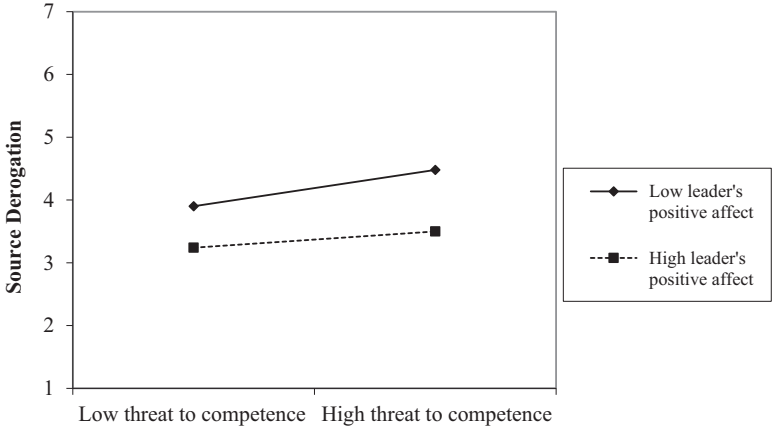
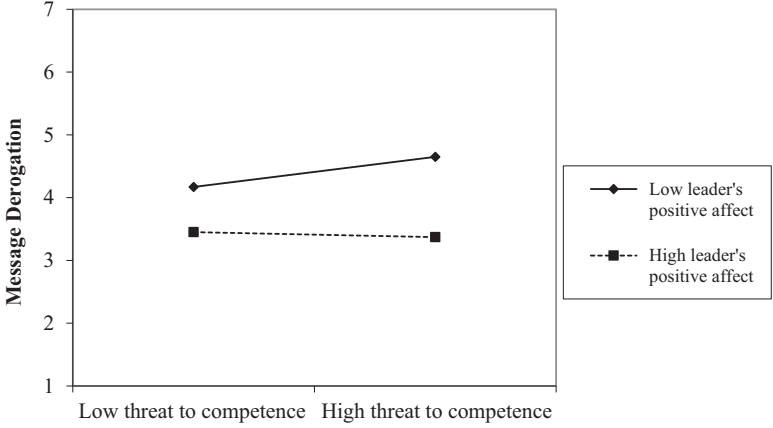


Figure 3.
The interaction term of leader's perceived threat to competence and leader's positive affect on message derogation (study 2)



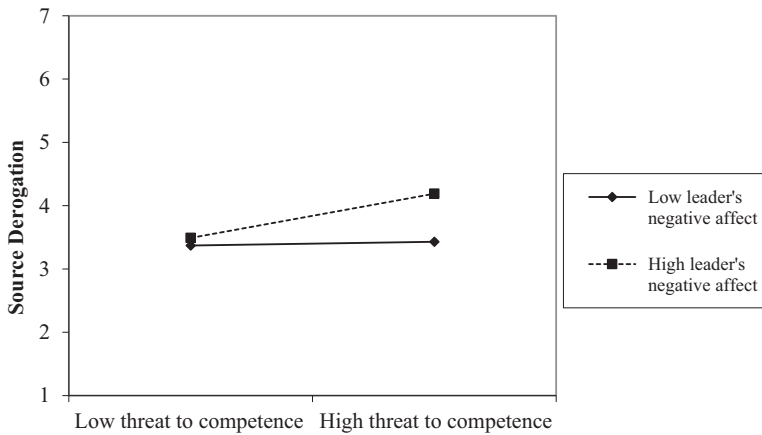


Figure 4. The interaction term of leader's perceived threat to competence and leader's negative affect on source derogation (study 2)

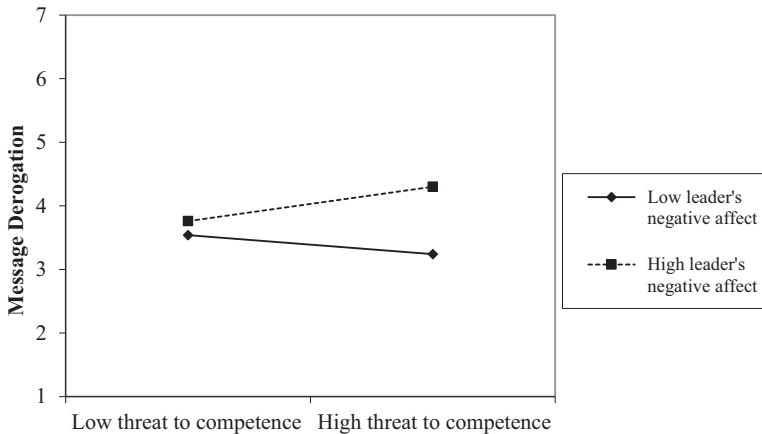


Figure 5. The interaction term of leader's perceived threat to competence and leader's negative affect on message derogation (study 2)

derogation). Therefore, we found support for H4a, that is, leader's positive affect moderates the indirect relationship between a threat to competence and voice rejection via self-defense tactics such that the indirect relationship will be weaker (stronger) when leader's positive affect is high (low).

Table 11 demonstrate that the indexes of the moderated mediation model with the mediation of source derogation ($effect = 0.06$, $SE = 0.03$, $LLCI = 0.03$, $ULCI = 0.11$) and message derogation ($effect = 0.08$, $SE = 0.03$, $LLCI = 0.04$, $ULCI = 0.14$) at the values (i.e. High, Mean, and Low) of leader's negative affect are significant. Moreover, the conditional indirect effects of perceived leader's threat to competence on voice rejection via source derogation and message derogation are significantly stronger at the high value of leader's negative affect (i.e. $effect = 0.18$, $SE = 0.04$, $LLCI = 0.10$, $ULCI = 0.28$ for source derogation, and $effect = 0.14$, $SE = 0.04$, $LLCI = 0.07$, $ULCI = 0.25$ for message derogation), and weaker at the low value of leader's negative affect (i.e. $effect = -0.02$, $SE = 0.04$, $LLCI = -0.10$, $ULCI = 0.06$ for source derogation, and $effect = -0.09$, $SE = 0.04$, $LLCI = -0.19$, $ULCI = -0.02$ for message derogation). Therefore, we found

Predictor	Mediator	Moderator	Effect	SE	LLCI	ULCI
<i>Index of the moderated mediation model</i>	Source derogation	Positive affect	-0.02	0.01	-0.06	-0.01
<i>Index of the moderated mediation model</i>	Message derogation	Positive affect	-0.04	0.02	-0.09	-0.01
<i>Direct effect</i>						
Leader's perceived competence threat on voice rejection	-	Positive affect at -1SD	0.09	0.09	-0.09	0.26
Leader's perceived competence threat on voice rejection	-	Positive affect at Mean	0.05	0.05	-0.06	0.16
Leader's perceived competence threat on voice rejection	-	Positive affect at +1SD	0.00	0.08	-0.15	0.16
<i>Indirect effect</i>						
Leader's perceived competence threat on voice rejection via source derogation	Source derogation	Positive affect at -1SD	0.09	0.04	0.03	0.19
Leader's perceived competence threat on voice rejection via source derogation	Source derogation	Positive affect at Mean	0.06	0.03	0.02	0.12
Leader's perceived competence threat on voice rejection via source derogation	Source derogation	Positive affect at +1SD	1.44	0.03	-0.01	0.09
Leader's perceived competence threat on voice rejection via message derogation	Message derogation	Positive affect at -1SD	0.08	0.04	0.03	0.17
Leader's perceived competence threat on voice rejection via message derogation	Message derogation	Positive affect at Mean	0.03	0.02	-0.01	0.08
Leader's perceived competence threat on voice rejection via message derogation	Message derogation	Positive affect at +1SD	-0.3	0.03	-0.09	0.03
Note(s): <i>N</i> = 208; LLCI = Lower level of the 95% confidence interval; ULCI = Upper level of 95% confidence interval						

Table 10. Results of the conditional direct, and indirect effects of perceived competence threat on voice rejection via self-defense tactics at the values of positive affect

support for H4b, that is, leader's negative affect moderates the indirect relationship between a threat to competence and voice rejection via self-defense tactics such that the indirect relationship will be stronger (weaker) when leader's negative affect is high (low).

Study 2: discussion

Study 2 provided us with more robust support for our mediating hypotheses. Moreover, in this study, we have found the full mediation. Besides, the results of this study demonstrated that positive affect could have a buffering role in the main and indirect relationships. In contrast, the manager's negative affect can increase message and employee derogation as well as the level of voice rejection when managers experience a threat to their competence triggered by employee voice.

General discussion

Employee voice plays a vital role in the discipline of HRM in terms of assuring justice and giving opportunities for employees to improve their workplace issues and to contribute to

Predictor	Mediator	Moderator	Effect	SE	LLCI	ULCI
<i>Index of the moderated mediation model</i>	Source derogation	Negative affect	0.06	0.03	0.03	0.11
<i>Index of the moderated mediation model</i>	Message derogation	Negative affect	0.08	0.03	0.04	0.14
<i>Direct effect</i>						
Leader's perceived competence threat on voice rejection	–	Negative affect at -1SD	-0.04	0.09	-0.21	0.12
Leader's perceived competence threat on voice rejection	–	Negative affect at Mean	0.03	0.06	-0.09	0.14
Leader's perceived competence threat on voice rejection	–	Negative affect at +1SD	0.10	0.09	-0.07	0.27
<i>Indirect effect</i>						
Leader's perceived competence threat on voice rejection via source derogation	Source derogation	Negative affect at -1SD	-0.02	0.04	-0.10	0.06
Leader's perceived competence threat on voice rejection via source derogation	Source derogation	Negative affect at Mean	0.08	0.03	0.03	0.15
Leader's perceived competence threat on voice rejection via source derogation	Source derogation	Negative affect at +1SD	0.18	0.04	0.10	0.28
Leader's perceived competence threat on voice rejection via message derogation	Message derogation	Negative affect at -1SD	-0.09	0.04	-0.19	-0.02
Leader's perceived competence threat on voice rejection via message derogation	Message derogation	Negative affect at Mean	0.02	0.03	-0.02	0.09
Leader's perceived competence threat on voice rejection via message derogation	Message derogation	Negative affect at +1SD	0.14	0.04	0.07	0.25

Note(s): *N* = 208; LLCI = Lower level of the 95% confidence interval; ULCI = Upper level of 95% confidence interval

Table 11. Results of the conditional direct, and indirect effects of perceived competence threat on voice rejection via self-defense tactics at the values of negative affect

organizational development (Wilkinson and Fay, 2011). However, employee voice may elicit feelings of threat in the heads of the managers to whom voice is addressed. Thus the critical question is left: does voice triggered threat always lead to less managerial endorsement? Moreover, what are the mechanisms that align perceived threat to voice rejection? Is there any boundary condition that can buffer the negative effect of experiencing threat on voice endorsement? To answer these questions, we have drawn on the self-affirmation theory as the backdrop of our study. According to the self-affirmation theory, there are three ways that individuals tend to respond to self-directed threats: accommodation, defensive responding, and self-affirmations (Sherman and Cohen, 2006).

In this paper, we focused on the defensive response as people often tend to distort, deny, and misrepresent reality in a manner that protects their self-integrity. Although this practice is prevalent, in a particular context, it may be harmful, for instance, in organizations where continuous creativity and improvement is required. We also incorporated the notions of affect as an information model to understand how voice recipient's emotions might modify the association between perceived threat and voice rejection.

Our study contributes to the growing research on employee voice recognition by challenging an existing assumption in the voice literature, suggesting that voice triggered

threat will directly lead to voice rejection (Burris, 2012; Fast *et al.*, 2014). We have found that threat to competence made leaders discount subordinates' credibility (source derogation) and voice constructiveness (message derogation). The rationale behind such leader behavior is the psychological immune system called self-defense that makes people respond to threat by utilizing biased thinking: scrutinizing the message factors and discounting the credibility of those who shared ideas. Moreover, based on the affect-as-information theory (Schwarz, 2012), we found that a leader's positive affect can decrease self-defense and consequent voice rejection after experiencing a threat, while negative affect has the opposite impact on these relationships.

Theoretical implications

Our study contributes to the extant literature in five main ways. First, research on voice endorsement has generally overlooked the underlying mechanism between voice triggered-threat and voice rejection (Burris, 2012; Fast *et al.*, 2014). We addressed this limitation by introducing leader's self-defense cognitive tactics (i.e. message derogation and employee derogation) as mediators. Secondly, our work contributes to the literature on self-defense consequences (Mitchell *et al.*, 2018; Wakeman *et al.*, 2019) by adding a new outcome – voice rejection. Third, based on the affect-as-information model (Schwarz, 2012), we added to employee voice and self-affirmation literature by demonstrating that leader's positive (negative) affect moderates the relationship between perceived threat and consequent individual reactions such as message and source derogation.

Previous research has paid attention to the question of how leader's effect influence employees' desire to speak up (Liu *et al.*, 2017); we demonstrate that leader's own emotions influence managerial voice endorsement. Specifically, we have found that leaders who experience negative affect are more likely to engage in self-defense tactics by rejecting the content of the voice and the credibility of an employee. In contrast, leaders who experience positive affect are less likely to react to employee voice defensively. It is probable that in a positive mood, leaders are more likely to reflect on an alternative source of identity that can secure their overall sense of self-integrity, and thus they may be more apt to consider information without resorting to defensive biases.

Fourth, we have extended the findings of self-defense phenomenon (Alicke and Sedikides, 2011) by introducing competence-threat from the public image perspective. We discovered that threat to competence could also lead to self-defense tactics, such as derogation of a source along with derogation of the message. It means that people tend to dislike others and their messages not only because of their hurt ego but also because they feel that their projected competence is damaged. Fifth, although self-affirmation studies generally find that manipulations of mood fail to produce the same effects as self-affirmations for reducing the perceived threat consequences (Raghunathan and Trope, 2002), our work demonstrates that negative and positive affect may function as a positive and negative affirmation in the context of employee voice.

Practical implications

Our study provides practical value for organizations, employees and managers. Employees, who want to voice their ideas to their leaders, need to be aware that their voice may convey a threat to the leader's competence that will lead to lowering their ability to persuade the leader and having a negative evaluation of themselves. However, the leader's positive affect will decrease these negative relationships. Thus, employees should try to approach their leaders when the leaders are in a good mood, or they should try to induce the leader's positive mood. Previous literature has shown that affirmation leads to less biased processing (Jaremka *et al.*, 2011; Sherman *et al.*, 2000) and gift-giving can increase positive affect (Estrada *et al.*, 1994).

Thus, employees can try to first praise their leaders, voice the positives of the situation or the leader's suggestions to induce the leader's positive emotions before voicing their ideas as these actions should.

HRM is responsible for ensuring the effective functioning of employee voice processes and developing formal reporting or communication training (Tarrant *et al.*, 2017) for leaders and decision-makers in the organization. Such training and voice-related policies should also take into consideration the fact that threat to competence would lead their managers to brush aside valuable suggestions. Another detrimental effect of competence threat is when leaders contest employee's competence or credibility. We know that employee credibility evaluation is positively related to performance ratings and promotion (Fuegen *et al.*, 2004; Inesi and Cable, 2015), but if a supervisor, based on voice instance, start to consider someone as less competent and credible, then that subordinate would most probably miss an opportunity for organizational growth. This can be detrimental for both the employee and the organization as a whole. Thus, our study suggests that voice-related threats can be very harmful to organizations.

Leaders should undergo formal training to manage their self-defensive behavior. Training can focus on how avoiding or denigrating negative self-relevant information, may restore global self-integrity in the short-term, but may have negative long-term consequences, such as missing opportunities to improve the organizational process. Leaders at all levels of the organization should undergo ongoing training to become aware of these effects. Another way to mitigate competence threat is by making managers feel safe and supported even when employees question their expertise. Organizations should encourage members to question each other's decisions by embracing a diversity of voices. To this end, HR policies and practices need to facilitate an organizational environment where decision-making mechanisms generate a trusting partnership between management and employees to achieve set organizational goals (Almeida *et al.*, 2020).

Our findings also suggest that leaders listening to employee's suggestions should be mindful of their emotions because their negative emotions can increase their biased thinking towards employees voicing ideas. When leaders encounter employee's voice, they should ask themselves: do I dislike it because I feel bad right now or because this idea poses little value?

The findings of our study also have a practical value for general social interaction research. As our Study 2 indicated that the listener's affect might function as a buffer against adverse reaction after experiencing a threat, people are recommended to approach others with challenging ideas when those are in a positive mood.

Future research and limitations

Our study has certain limitations that are important to mention and address in future studies. We applied a scenario-based approach to investigate the relationships between leader's threat to competence and employee voice outcomes. This approach allows us to eliminate the effects of other contextual factors that could influence voice outcomes, such as the feasibility of the proposed ideas, organizational culture, and relationship between an employee and the leader. Moreover, this method is widely used by voice researchers (Isaakyan *et al.*, 2018; Lam *et al.*, 2019) not only because of its convenience but also because it provides an opportunity to explore psychological reactions triggered by voice, that cannot be directly examined in the field study because of their automatic and short-lived nature (Sherman and Cohen, 2006).

We believe that survey-based studies have their strengths, but this approach has certain limitations related to the external validity of the findings. Another limitation refers to the measures used in our study. Although Ajzen (1991) found that behavioral intentions are good predictors of actual behavior, Bosco *et al.* (2015) stated that intentions and actual behavior have medium or small size correlations. Future research should try to measure actual voice

endorsement by testing the model within the field of study. However, one should carefully examine all the control variables that can affect relationships such as leader-member exchange, tenure, voice content, organizational type and organizational culture. Another limitation of our study is that we measured participants affect rather than manipulating it. Therefore, we recommend researchers to manipulate mood experimentally after the voice exposure.

Finally, our two studies were conducted in China, which may influence the generalizability of our results to other cultural contexts. Chinese culture is characterized by high power distance (Hofstede, 2011) and harmony-seeking (Hoare *et al.*, 2011; Lee and Sparks, 2007), which may exacerbate voice-triggered threats. In cultures that are more individualistic and less concerned about public image, the relationship between perceived threat and voice rejection should be weaker, and there may be other prevailing mechanisms connecting perceived competence threat and voice rejection, such as self-confidence. We leave this proposition for further researchers.

Our first study has shown that self-defense tactics, i.e. source derogation and message derogation, work as partial mediators in Study 1 and as full mediators in Study 2. It means that the link between the leader's threat to competence and voice rejection might include other mechanisms unexplored in our research. Thus, we suggest that scholars explore other underlying mediating mechanisms of the link. Another promising area of research is the investigation of other moderating conditions that can mitigate the effect of competence threat on voice outcomes, for example, leader-member exchange relationships. In line with this, another possible direction for extending current research is to investigate other employee voice outcomes that could be influenced by the competence threat, for instance, leader's intentions, attitude to self-improvement, and even the narcissistic approach to supervision.

In this paper, we explored perceived threat to projected competence, but leaders can experience different image threats triggered by voice, for instance, threat to warmth and threat to power. Thus, other image threats could also be explored. We believe that different threats will affect voice outcomes differently. Future research may also try to investigate the underlying mechanisms of the links between various threats and voice outcomes. We assume that various threats would have different mechanisms related to voice rejection. For example, we know that threat to status is related to voice rejection, but it is possible that it does not have any impact on cognitive self-defense. For instance, if an employee threatens the leader's status, it means that a leader feels that the employee is a potential competitor who could not be underestimated.

Moreover, if a leader evaluates the employee as status-threatening, he or she will feel that ideas which employee brought up can be appreciated by colleagues and higher-level leaders. We also recommend researchers to consider positive aspects of threats. It is possible that certain threats may lead to constructive outcomes. For instance, studies about a threat to autonomy could be associated not just with negative affect, such as anger, but also with positive emotions, such as feeling strong and determined (Steindl *et al.*, 2015). We believe that studying the positive side of threats would be enriching for employee voice research.

Another likely domain of future research is studying the different motivations behind the links of threats and voice rejection. We believe that different threats would lead to opposition because of different motives, and, if those motives are satisfied, then opposition to the threat could be eliminated. Thus, scholars can try to investigate the domain of voice rejection from a motives perspective. Fast *et al.* (2014) have investigated what kind of managers are more likely to experience threats, such as those managers who possess low self-efficacy. We also suggest that researchers explore other leader-related variables, such as reactance trait, narcissism, and see if they could predict the experience of different types of threats. Future research could also consider contextual conditions that may influence a leader's perceived threat, such as being an expatriate in a foreign country. Leaders from collectivistic societies

may experience higher threat from suggestions of people from individualistic societies. Another promising area is to explore in which type of organizations, leaders are less likely to react defensively towards employee voice. For instance, organizations which emphasize team input should decrease a leader's need to be more competent than subordinates. We leave these propositions for further research.

Conclusion

To sum up, leaders who experience a threat to competence are more likely to think that employees' proposed ideas are non-constructive and employees who suggest those ideas are not credible, and these appraisals have a direct influence on voice rejection. However, if leaders are in a good mood, they will be less likely to think negatively about employees and their ideas even when they experience psychological threats. Thus, employees should try to choose the right moment to approach their leaders or create the right moment by increasing the leader's positive affect. Our findings also suggest that leaders should be mindful about their emotions when they listen to ideas from their subordinates. Sometimes people reject ideas not because the idea is not good, rather because the proposed ideas may point at their mistakes which can make them uncomfortable. Thus, before dismissing ideas, a leader should be sure to ask himself or herself: why I do not like the suggestion? If the answer is because it threatens my image as a competent leader, and I am in a bad mood, then try to reassess the suggestion at a different time and reconsider the merits of the suggestion.

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Appendix

Scenario used in Study 1

Please imagine that you a manager of 65 subordinates at a big restaurant. Recently your restaurant has been receiving a lot of complaints. The complaints were primarily in two areas: customers who ordered tables online have to wait in line for a long time after the arrival; and waiters were rude to customers, but when confronted, they claimed that it is hard to pay too much attention to each customer needs as restaurant is often overcrowded.

After one month of analyzing data and interviewing customers, you as manager had concluded that the dining area and ordering rules needed to be redesigned, and in response had created a strategic plan to do so.

Then, during a weekly staff meeting, one of your employees spoke up and raised a concern about your plan. He proposed a completely new plan that called for more personnel and improved ordering system that should be sensitive to rush hours. He claimed that incorporating his proposed changes into the plan would lead to resounding success for the restaurant.

Scenario used in Study 2

Imagine you are a manager of a team with 30 employees at a mobile game development company Paradise Inc. Your team designed a new promising mobile game. Members of the organization hope that

this game will help Paradise Inc. to regain its leading market position. Recently you have found out that the rival company is working on a similar project. Taking into consideration market situation and competition issue, you have decided to release the game as soon as possible. During one of the regular meeting you announced to your subordinates, that next week you are going to release the game to the market. Suddenly one of your employees raised the hand and said:

We have to postpone the release for at least three weeks. The game has several important issues: it is still unstable and prone to crashing on many devices. I am certain that many users will be angry and they will spread negative words about our company that can significantly influence our reputation.

About the authors

Anastasiia Popelnukha is currently doing her PhD at the University of Science and Technology of China. He is pursuing her PhD in Organizational Behavior and Human Resource Management from the School of Management, Department of Business Administration. His current research focuses on destructive leader behaviors and followers' voice behaviors.

Shamika Almeida, PhD, is an assistant professor in school of management and marketing at the University of Wollongong, Wollongong, Australia. She worked in the corporate sector in fast moving consumer goods, banking, apparel, travel and recruitment consulting industries for over ten years before her entry into academia. Her own exposure to discrimination in the corporate sector motivated her to analyze why employers may be hesitant to recruit skilled migrants in the workplace. In 2007, she undertook a PhD at the University of Sydney to address these real-life experiences. Since this time, Shamika has been passionate about giving voice to the "underdogs" of society, using research, training and education to create awareness of exclusionary behavior in the workplace and to identify mechanisms of creating an inclusive society. Consequently, her teaching and research are focused on diversity and inclusion. In particular, her work explores skilled migrant employment and careers, gender-inclusive practices supporting career progression, life journeys of transgender women entrepreneurs, the wellbeing of healthcare professionals and holistic organizational and leadership practices that are founded on a care based perspective.

Asfia Obaid, PhD, is an assistant professor in management and Head of Department at NUST Business School, National University of Sciences and Technology, Islamabad, Pakistan. She received her PhD in Business Administration from Manchester Business School, University of Manchester, UK. She has made contribution to knowledge through various avenues that include delivering training sessions, consulting with organizations on industry specific problems, publishing of research articles, conducting research grant projects. Her core areas of interest include Strategic HR, Compensation and Performance Management.

Naukhez Sarwar is an assistant professor in management and Principal at NUST Business School, National University of Sciences and Technology, Pakistan. He received his PhD in Business Administration from Manchester Business School, University of Manchester, UK. His core areas of interest include Strategic HR, Compensation and Performance Management.

Cynthia Atamba is currently doing her PhD at the University of Science and Technology of China. He is pursuing her PhD in Organizational Behavior and Human Resource Management from the School of Management, Department of Business Administration. His current research focuses on destructive leader behaviors and followers' voice behaviors.

Hussain Tariq, PhD, is an assistant professor at NUST Business School, National University of Sciences and Technology, Islamabad, Pakistan. He received his PhD in organizational behavior and human resource management from Department of Business Administration, University of Science and Technology of China. He has published his work in *Applied Psychology*, *Personnel Review*, *Employee Relations*, *Journal of Service Theory and Practice* and *Business Ethics: A European Review*, amongst others. His research focuses on the root of destructive leader behaviors, structures and practices that enhance teamwork and collective motivations in organizations. His current research focuses on the root of destructive leader behaviors, structures and practices that enhance teamwork and collective motivations in organizations.

Qingxiong (Derek) Weng is a professor in management at University of Science and Technology of China. He received his PhD in Business Management in Huazhong university of Science and Technology. He is an associate editor of *Journal of Vocational Behavior*. He also services as the editorial

board member of *Journal of Managerial Psychology* and *Journal of Career Development*, and as an ad-hoc reviewer of leading journals, such as *Academy of Management Review*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, *Human Relations* and so on. His research interest mainly focuses on vocational behavior and psychology, leadership, personnel assessment and selection. Qingxiong (Derek) Weng is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: wqx886@ustc.edu.cn

Keep your
mouth shut
until I feel good