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## Managers' Perceptions of Employee Voice – A Qualitative Analysis\*\*

### Abstract

Organisations increasingly depend on their employees' insights to achieve organisational efficiency by optimising processes and solving problems. If employees share their knowledge, they do what the literature refers to as employee voice. The key prerequisite for organisations to benefit from employee voice is managers' perceptions of this behaviour. Being the main recipient of voice, managers' perceptions influence whether proposals are implemented or dismissed and whether employees are motivated to express voice in the future. Despite this important role, managers' perceptions of voice have received little attention in research so far. Hence, research has called for identifying additional influencing factors. To address this research gap, 22 interviews were conducted with managers from 20 organisations in Germany. The findings demonstrate that managers' valuations of voice are mainly influenced by the *content of voice*, the *manner of communication*, the *employee*, and the *recipient*. Regarding the endorsement of voice, especially a proposal's *feasibility* and *benefits* matter to managers. Furthermore, the interviewed managers did not differentiate between promotive and prohibitive voice or between the valuation and endorsement of voice. Finally, managers' perceptions of voice were either primarily influenced by facts or by the circumstances of the expression of voice. The study contributes to research on managers' perceptions of voice and employees' voice tactics.

Keywords: employee participation, employee voice, perception of voice, valuation of voice, endorsement of voice  
(JEL: M12, M50, M59, D83)

### Introduction

Organisations that make high-quality decisions often incorporate employee insights into their decision-making (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Because of employees' proximity to customers and operational processes, they often have information that managers do not. If employees share their knowledge through the discretionary communication of ideas, opinions, and suggestions for solving problems or chang-

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ing processes, they share what the literature refers to as employee voice (Detert & Burris, 2007; Morrison, 2011).

Research shows that voice can benefit employees, teams, and organisations (see e.g., the following reviews: Bashshur & Oc, 2015; Morrison, 2014, 2023). If employees express voice, they gain a sense of control and appreciation, which can have a positive impact on their job satisfaction, motivation, and company loyalty (Iverson & Curri van, 2003; Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Organisational learning and organisational performance may also increase, while units can benefit from stimulated creativity and improved decision-making (Bashshur & Oc, 2015). Given these benefits, research has dealt with the factors that influence this behaviour and found, for example, that employees are more motivated to speak up when they are extroverts (Zare & Flinchbaugh, 2019), have a proactive personality (Maynes & Podsakoff, 2014), and perceive their manager as ethical (Bedi et al., 2016; Zheng et al., 2022) and transformational (Svendsen et al., 2018). Job stressors (Ng & Feldman, 2012), narcissistic managers (Zhang et al., 2021), and a climate of fear and silence (Pinder & Harlos, 2001) tend to act as inhibitors for employees to express voice.

Managers seem to appreciate and reward employee voice when it is intended to improve organisational functioning and to help them achieve their own goals (Whiting et al., 2012), but there is also evidence for opposite effects. For instance, Seibert, Kraimer, and Crant (2001) found negative relationships between voice and employees' salary progression and between voice and employees' promotions. Further, Chamberlin's (2017) meta-analysis showed that the message's content has a strong influence on the voice-expressing employee's performance evaluation. For example, if the content is future-oriented and aims to improve organisational processes (promotive voice), voice has positive effects on managers' evaluation of employees' performance; however, pointing out existing problems that can harm the organisation (prohibitive voice) is associated with a poorer evaluation (Liang et al., 2012). In addition to content, research has shown, for example, that managers value voice more if it is communicated in private (Isaakyan et al., 2021), if they assume prosocial rather than egoistic motives behind voice (Whiting et al., 2012) and if the leader-member exchange quality (LMX) is high (Urbach & Fay, 2021).

Despite these examples, the factors that influence managers' perceptions of voice have received little attention (e.g., Bashshur & Oc, 2015; Howell et al., 2015; Chak Fu Lam et al., 2019), and several authors have called for research on additional influencing factors (e.g., Brykman & Raver, 2021; Burris et al., 2017; Isaakyan et al., 2021; Urbach & Fay, 2018). Investigating these factors has value since managers' perceptions link voice to outcomes for employees, other groups, and organisations, as managerial perceptions impact whether a proposal to which an employee gives a voice will be implemented (Morrison, 2014). Managers' perceptions also influence employees' future voice behaviour, as employees tend to continue speaking up if

managers have responded positively to previous input (Janssen & Gao, 2015), while employees who receive neutral or negative responses may choose to keep potentially useful information to themselves (Saunders et al., 1992). Further, managers' ignorance about the value of employee voice may lower employees' commitment to the organisation, and counterproductive work behaviour may occur (DeVries et al., 2012). Therefore, knowledge about what influences managers' perceptions of voice may help to determine the circumstances under which employees express or do not express voice.

Against this background, the following questions will be addressed: what factors influence managers' perceptions of voice, and what patterns exist in this regard? Therefore, a qualitative interview study was conducted with 22 managers from various companies.

This study makes four primary contributions to the literature. First, it contributes to research on managers' reactions to voice, which has been neglected in favour of research on the antecedents of voice, by identifying the factors that influence whether managers will value a proposal. The study's exploratory approach ensures that its findings are not limited to a single area. Second, the study expands what we know about the efficiency of employees' voice tactics (Wählin-Jacobsen, 2019; Xu et al., 2020) by identifying the factors employees should consider to ensure their voice leads to such positive outcomes as better performance evaluations and improved organisational efficiency. Third, the study is among only a few that relate persuasion research findings to the research on voice. By comparing the influencing factors identified in this study with those that are relevant to changes in attitude, the study facilitates a more informed assessment of whether the perception of voice is subject to similar mechanisms (e.g., Huang et al., 2018; X. Li et al., 2021; Whiting et al., 2012). As addressed in the persuasion literature, because of the large amounts of information managers must process daily, they might rely on heuristics and peripheral cues in responding to employee voice attempts, such as the source's credibility or the number of arguments (e.g., Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The study's use of an explanatory approach helps to identify such heuristics and peripheral cues (Howell et al., 2015). Fourth, the signalling theory is part of this study's theoretical foundation (Connelly et al., 2011; Spence, 1973). In this way, a more informed assessment of how managers interpret voice and what factors serve as signals to overcome incomplete information can be facilitated.

In the remainder of the paper, the literature about managers' perceptions of employee voice is reviewed. Then, the study's method and sample are presented before the results are described and discussed. Finally, limitations and implications for future research are derived.

## Employee Voice and the Role of the Recipient

The literature has described employee voice as a form of proactive behaviour expressed at an employee's discretion without being part of his or her formal job requirements (Morrison, 2011; van Dyne & LePine, 1998). Voice is primarily constructive in nature, as it is usually intended to improve an organisation's functioning rather than to vent one's anger (Morrison, 2014). Voice is directed to colleagues (LePine & van Dyne, 1998), skip-level leaders (Detert & Treviño, 2010) but especially line managers, who are mainly responsible for a proposal's endorsement (Marchington & Suter, 2013) or its forwarding to higher authorities (Glauser, 1984).

When employees have information that could be useful to their organisation, they do not necessarily share it. Employees contrast the likelihood of change in the proposed way with the risks that may result from speaking up (Milliken et al., 2003; Morrison, 2014). Because voice challenges established processes and decisions, employees fear social exclusion and negative implications on their careers (Detert & Treviño, 2010). These concerns are well-founded, as Seibert, Kraimer, and Crant (2001), for example, showed by identifying a negative relationship between voice and career progression. However, other studies have identified positive effects of voice on employees' performance evaluations (e.g., Burris, 2012). In this way, managers show appreciation for the employees' commitment to improving organisational functioning, which is often necessary for the organisations' long-term existence in dynamic environments (Whiting et al., 2012). Besides that, managers reciprocate employees' contributions to managers' achievement of their own goals, such as the maintenance of efficient and error-free processes (Choi & Moon, 2017).

The reason for these contrasting results lies in the recipients' perceptions of voice. Because of the discretionary character of voice, employees are not necessarily expected to speak up, and managers are not necessarily obliged to process and evaluate employees' suggestions (van Dyne & LePine, 1998). Therefore, the perception of voice is an individual process without formal requirements determined by organisations (Howell et al., 2015). Depending on the process's outcome, either change or maintenance of the status quo and, regarding the sender, either rewards like a better evaluation or negative implications like social exclusion can result. Therefore, even promising proposals may receive no further attention (e.g., Fast et al., 2014).

From a theoretical perspective, the signalling theory (Connelly et al., 2011; Spence, 1973) may help to explain managers' perception of voice. According to the theory, peoples' behaviours transmit signals about their intentions and preferences to others with whom they interact. Those signals help to reduce information asymmetry between both parties (Spence, 2002). For example, in job interviews, applicants interpret the information they perceive, like the characteristics and behaviour of the recruiter, as a proxy for the employer's attractiveness (Ehrhart & Ziegert, 2005). Regarding the perception of voice, managers also have to deal with incomplete

information, as they, for instance, do not know the employee's underlying motive behind this behaviour (Whiting et al., 2012). Thus, perceived information, for example, about the employee, may influence how managers interpret voice.

Besides that, managers rely on heuristics and automatic cognition to process information to prevent an overload of the information they receive daily (Howell et al., 2015). For example, when employees propose changes regarding areas in which they are perceived as experts, managers are more likely to trust the proposal's accuracy and their ability to improve organisational functioning (Whiting et al., 2012). In doing so, they reduce their own cognitive efforts, pay less attention to the arguments, and rely instead on the employee's opinion (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). In such cases, managers tend to have more favourable attitudes toward the employees and their input (Whiting et al., 2012).

Existing research demonstrates that managers' perceptions of voice are influenced by factors that can be categorised as the content of voice, the manner of communication, the characteristics of the employee, and the characteristics of the recipient (Howell et al., 2015). Regarding the content of voice, it is, for example, important to managers whether employees present a solution for identified problems (Whiting et al., 2012) and whether it is related to the manager's direct work unit (Burris et al., 2017). In terms of the manner of communication, managers prefer voice that is communicated in private (Isaakyan et al., 2021) and with a moderate frequency (Huang et al., 2018). Besides that, voice is perceived more positively if it is communicated by an expert (Stumpf & Süß, 2022) and by employees with a proactive personality (Duan et al., 2021). With regard to the characteristics of the recipient, managers with high levels of self-efficacy (Fast et al., 2014) and low levels of depletion tend to value voice more (Chak F. Lam et al., 2022).

Voice is related to several similar constructs (Morrison, 2011), for example, issue selling (Dutton & Ashford, 1993) and organisational dissent (Kassing, 1997). Research demonstrates that managers' perceptions of these behaviours are influenced by some factors that are also important to them with respect to voice. Managers pay, for example, attention to opportune timing if they perceive both voice (Burris et al., 2017) and issue selling (Dutton et al., 2001).

The interviewed managers were asked about both their valuations (Burris et al., 2017) and their endorsements (Burris, 2012) of voice, although this study focuses on the former. Managers may attribute value to an idea without being willing to implement it because they often consider how the proposed change will affect them personally (Burris, 2012). For example, Urbach and Fay (2018) demonstrated that managers might not endorse ideas that could reduce their power in the organisation. However, when managers value an idea that does not result in the proposed change, it may lead to a better performance evaluation for the voice-expressing employee (Choi & Moon, 2017).

## Method

### Procedure and Sample

A qualitative interview study was conducted to identify and systematise the factors that influence managers' perceptions of voice. Managers' perceptions of employee voice have received comparatively little attention in research so far (Howell et al., 2015; Urbach & Fay, 2018). Only Burris et al. (2017) and MacMillan et al. (2020) have exploratively investigated managers' perceptions of voice, although the studies were limited to a single category of influencing factors. Many other factors that have not been investigated may influence managers' perceptions of voice. A look at persuasion research shows that several authors have assumed that the perception of voice is subject to mechanisms similar to those related to attitude change (e.g., Huang et al., 2018; Whiting et al., 2012). Since research has been dealing with persuasion for decades (e.g., Falk & Scholz, 2018; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), many more factors have already been identified that could also influence the perception of voice (for an overview see O'Keefe, 2015). Another reason for choosing a qualitative interview study is that managers tend to rely on automatic cognition or heuristic processing when voice is expressed to them (Howell et al., 2015), so interviews will require them to remember past voice attempts and to identify the heuristic cues that influenced their perceptions of voice. Because trust and a relationship can be built during interviews (Maxwell, 2012), managers may also talk about factors that influenced their perceptions, but that could be biased by social desirability (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986) in quantitative research designs. For instance, first evidence has shown that members of an ethnic minority group get less credit for voice (Howell et al., 2015). Even if factors like an employee's ethnicity have influenced a manager's perception of voice, admitting it may be more likely in an interview in which trust and anonymity have been established.

Twenty-two interviews with German managers were conducted from June to September 2021. Direct managers at the middle management level are the primary recipients of voice because of their power to act on suggestions by endorsing an idea and passing it on to higher authorities or by implementing it themselves (Morrison, 2011; Saunders et al., 1992). To ensure a heterogeneous sample, managers were selected without restrictions regarding firm-related factors like industry and company size. They were contacted via social media like Xing and LinkedIn and by using snowballing/recommendations. The interview's topic was revealed only as "communication between manager and employee". Because predominantly male managers responded initially, female managers were explicitly sought later on to get a more heterogeneous sample and to be able to check for patterns depending on managers' gender.

Before the interviews started, participants were assured anonymity. The interviews were held in German, the interviewees' native language, via Zoom and Microsoft Teams. Researchers and participants often prefer those tools for conducting inter-

views over face-to-face or telephone interviews because of their time-effectiveness, cost-effectiveness, and simplicity (Archibald et al., 2019). Furthermore, by offering the possibility to respond to and interpret nonverbal communication, the natural settings facilitate the building of trust. To build further trust during the interviews, no other persons except the participant and the interviewer were present (Bergen & Labonté, 2020).

The questionnaire, which was checked for practicability and comprehensibility based on the experience of two test interviews, started with a short introduction of the interviewer and the interview's purpose, followed by reassurance of anonymity. Then, the managers were asked to introduce themselves and to describe how communication typically occurs between their subordinates and themselves. Next, they were asked to think of a situation in which a subordinate employee suggested an improvement to them (promotive voice) or pointed out problems (prohibitive voice; Liang et al., 2012) and to describe the factors that influenced whether they did or did not value the proposal. When a proposal that was not valued has been described, the next step is to think of a situation in which the proposal was valued and vice versa. Following the semi-structured approach, additional questions were related to factors related to the content, manner of communication, source, and recipient, as influencing factors have been categorised in this way in the literature (Howell et al., 2015; Morrison, 2014). If a manager was unable to think of any factors, a few examples were given. When managers described situations in which employees expressed promotive voice, the managers were asked to describe next what is relevant for them if prohibitive voice was expressed, and vice versa. Then, the interviewees were asked to explain what a high-value proposal would look like and what a "no-go" would look like for them. These questions were followed by a question about what was decisive for the managers in determining whether they would or would not endorse a valued proposal. After managers were asked to reveal anything else that they would like to say in this regard, they were asked about some demographics (age, education, industry, span of control and duration of managerial responsibilities) if that information hadn't been given during the self-introduction beforehand. Three interviews evoked the impression that managers' responses were influenced by social desirability because, for example, the manager did not want to make critical comments about employees. In this case, attempts were made to create a more confidential atmosphere by referring again to anonymity.

Table 1. Managers' Characteristics

Number	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7	M8	M9	M10	M11	M12	M13	M14	M15	M16	M17	M18	M19	M20	M21	M22
Job description	CTO	CEO	Team Leader	Authorised Signatory	Department Leader	Team Leader	Team Leader	Store Leader	Senior Manager	Department Leader	CEO	Department Leader	Team Leader	Department Leader	CEO	Department Leader	Team Leader	Team Leader	Department Leader	Senior Manager	Department Leader	Department Leader
Managerial Resp. (years)	3	7	2	20	5	8	7	25	19	14	12	7	12	2	20	3	10	3	12	3	0.3	4.5
Span of Control	18	5	6	50	12	18	15	75	50	20	7	18	10	4	3	13	11	7	13	4	9	20
Industry	Information Technology	Retail & Consumer	Engineering	Facility Management	Health Care	Banking	Insurance	Retail & Consumer	Consulting	Service-Providing	Consulting	Insurance	Insurance	Education	Manufacturing	Automotive	Insurance	Insurance	Education	Consulting	Energy & Utilities	Telecommunications
Age	34	27	30	64	55	40	40	65	52	49	56	41	57	33	37	38	46	39	56	38	42	42
Gender	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male	Female	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male	Female	Male	Male	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female
Education	University	University	Apprenticeship	Apprenticeship	University	University	University	Apprenticeship	University	University	University	Apprenticeship	Apprenticeship	University	University	University	Apprenticeship	University	University	University	University	University

This study's sample consists of 22 German managers from 20 organisations. Among those interviewed, 36.40 per cent were female. The average age was 44.73 years. University graduates made up 72.73 per cent of the sample, and 27.27 per cent had completed an apprenticeship. They had an average of 9.04 years of managerial responsibility, an average span of control of 17.64 employees, and 27.27 per cent led a team, while 36.36 per cent led a department and 36.36 per cent led a store or an organisation. Their organisations belonged to various industries, such as insurance, education, automotive, and banking. The detailed characteristics of the interviewed managers are shown in Table 1.

### Data Analysis

The interviews, which lasted an average of 35.12 minutes, were professionally transcribed and anonymised by the company transcripto. Thereby, the full verbatim transcription style was applied, meaning that every single spoken word was noted (Poland, 1995). Since research has already established some findings regarding managers' perceptions of voice, the interviews were analysed using an inductive-deductive approach with support from the MAXQDA 20 software (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019). Following the recommended steps, after the initial text work, a priori codes were derived from the literature, after which inductive main and sub-codes were created. Subsequently, the created codes were discussed with two researchers who are not co-authors of this study but are experienced in qualitative research. After the coding, the answers from several groups (e.g., differentiation with regard to demographic data) were compared to discover interrelationships. Table 2 shows some coding examples regarding promotive voice that demonstrate the applied approach to analyse the data.

**Table 2. Coding examples for promotive voice**

Statement	Sub-Code	Main-Code
"I'm always a fan of emotions, so when someone comes along and you notice that he's simply on fire for the idea, it's relatively easy to get me excited."	emotionality	manner of communication
"I have very introverted colleagues. If he or she makes a suggestion for improvement and is totally enthusiastic, then I know that someone has really put his or her back into it."	support of group opinion	employee
"Self-criticism is first and foremost for me. I am aware that I have many blind spots, which are also fixed within me as a person."	self-critical	recipient

## Results

In this chapter, the factors that managers named as influencing their perceptions of promotive voice are described, after which the results regarding their perceptions of prohibitive voice and their endorsement of voice are shown.

### Factors that Influence Managers' Valuations of Promotive Voice

Among the factors managers mentioned as having influenced their valuations of promotive voice, four main factors could be identified: the *content of voice*, the *manner of communication*, the *employee*, and the *recipient*. Following Kuckartz and Rädiger (2019), those four main factors are the result of the inductive aggregation of the identified sub-codes in combination with a deductive derivation from the literature (e.g., Howell et al., 2015). In the quotations from the translated interviews that follow, a reference to the manager from whom the statement originated is shown in parens. The factors that influence managers' valuations of promotive voice are visualised in Figure 1.

Regarding the first main factor, the *content of voice*, managers said that the *proposal's benefit* (e.g., M3, M5, M7), especially the *benefit for the organisation* (e.g., M1, M3, M4) and the *benefit for customers* (e.g., M8, M10, M13) were of importance for them.

Moreover, several managers stated that their perceptions of promotive voice were influenced by *extensive preparation* (e.g., M3, M4, M7), including that they pay attention to the idea's *advantages and disadvantages* (M20), *feasibility* (M18, M22), *alternatives* (M1), *pointed description* (e.g., M1, M13, M16), and *congruence with previous decisions* (M7, M14). Also related to *extensive preparation*, managers mentioned *rationality* (M1, M7, M8), employees' *preparation for questions* (M10), an idea's *breaking down into substeps* (e.g., M5, M8, M12), and employees' use of *visualisation* (e.g., M7, M12, M13), such as a short presentation as support for their argumentation:

"So, for example, if you have a helping or supporting document for this idea, roughly outlining what it's all about, perhaps also in the logic of problem-cause-solution, then it is definitely an essential component that is useful." (M12)

Another factor managers mentioned regarding the content of promotive voice is the idea's *congruence with corporate policy* (M5, M8):

"[...] so, it's always a question of checking whether what we're thinking about, what we're coming up with, what we want to implement is ultimately compatible with the overall concept of the organisation." (M5)

Figure 1. Factors that influence managers' valuations of promotive voice

content of voice	manner of communication	employee	recipient
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>proposal's benefit<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>benefit for the organisation</li><li>benefit for customers</li></ul></li><li>extensive preparation<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>advantages/disadvantages</li></ul></li><li>feasibility</li><li>alternatives</li><li>pointed description</li><li>congruence with previous decisions</li><li>rationality</li><li>preparation for questions</li><li>breaking down into substeps</li><li>visualisation</li><li>congruence with corporate policy</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>emotionality<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>anger</li><li>impulsivity</li><li>satisfaction</li><li>enthusiasm</li></ul></li><li>communication medium<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>face-to-face</li><li>text</li><li>communication enterprise social media</li><li>compliance with formal requirements</li><li>no influence</li></ul></li><li>timing<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>as soon as possible</li><li>off-peak hours</li><li>regular meeting</li><li>without influence</li></ul></li><li>respectful tone</li><li>offering responsibility for implementation</li><li>without influence</li><li>direct communication</li><li>support of group opinion</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>competence<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>knowledge</li><li>experience</li></ul></li><li>patience</li><li>assumed motive</li><li>perserverance</li><li>personality</li><li>past behaviour<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>voice frequency</li><li>quality of past decisions</li><li>quality of past voice</li></ul></li><li>without influence</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>personality<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>empathetic</li><li>open-minded</li><li>cooperative</li><li>autonomy oriented</li><li>self-critical</li></ul></li><li>opinion about the employee<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>trust in the employee</li><li>value congruency</li></ul></li><li>own motives</li></ul>

Next, factors that were important for managers' perceptions of voice and related to the *manner of communication* included *emotionality* (e.g., M1, M5, M6). Managers mentioned that *anger* (M7) and *impulsivity* (M13, M20) led them to dislike an

idea, while *satisfaction* (M4, M19) and *enthusiasm* (e.g., M12, M16, M21) made it more likely that they would value it:

"I'm always a fan of emotions, so when someone comes along and you notice that he's simply on fire for the idea, it's relatively easy to get me excited." (M16)

Next to *emotionality*, managers also talked about the role of the *communication medium*. While some managers preferred communication *face-to-face* (e.g., M16, M20, M22), others preferred *text communication* (M1, M10, M19), such as e-mails. One manager said that he likes it most if promotive voice is communicated via *enterprise social media* (M21). *Compliance with formal requirements* (M21) was also mentioned:

"Well, I would stand up for it, yes, I think, because management always lives by our firm's standards. When certain guidelines are adhered to, and the form is just right, I think that's important." (M21)

Some managers argued that the communication channel has no influence (M9, M10, M11). They said that they want to keep the hurdles for employees to express voice as low as possible:

"If I now tell them that they must at least have made a ten-page PowerPoint presentation before they come to me with any improvements, then I set the bar so high that the employees [...] better leave it [...]. If someone thinks they have a good suggestion or a good idea, they can come to me at any time through any channel." (M10)

In addition, the *timing* (M8, M15, M18) was named as influencing managers' perceptions of promotive voice with regard to the *manner of communication*. One manager stated that he preferred that employees speak up *as soon as possible* (M22). Others liked it if promotive voice was expressed at *off-peak hours* (e.g., M2, M4, M5) or at a *regular meeting* (M8, M16, M17). Two managers said that the timing has no influence (M6, M9). Regarding the *manner of communication*, managers also mentioned that a *respectful tone* (e.g., M7, M8, M14) should be used, and the employee's *offering responsibility for implementation* (M13) mattered to them. While for some managers, the *manner of communication* had no influence regarding their perceptions of promotive voice (M10, M11), others stated that they preferred *direct communication* (M9, M21, M22) without restraint or embellishment, as well as the *support of group opinion* (e.g., M18, M19, M22):

"If someone has a proposal, if the person shows that other people in the company also support the idea, that makes a difference. So, if it's just one person, of course, I would listen. But if the whole company thinks something is a good idea, and I'm the only one in the minority, then I'm not going to oppose it." (M1)

Factors that influenced managers' perceptions of promotive voice with respect to the *employee* included the employee's *competence* and especially his or her *knowledge* (M9, M21) and *experience* (e.g., M12, M15, M19). Further, an employee's *patience* (M14) and the *assumed motive* (M8, M15) are such that the employee did not express voice to distinguish himself or herself but to help the organisation and play

roles. An employee's *perseverance* (M17) and *personality* (M6, M19) were also stated as influencing the perception of promotive voice:

"I have very introverted colleagues. If he or she suggests a proposal and is totally enthusiastic, then I know that someone has really put his or her back into it." (M6)

Besides these factors, some managers said that an employee's *past behaviour* mattered to them, particularly the *voice frequency* (M6, M20), the *quality of past decisions* (M1), and the *quality of past voice* (M7, M9):

"There are, perhaps, employees who come again and again with proposals, where I or where we together have concluded that the suggestion was not so [good], the second is perhaps also not so good. Then, one has [...] a different expectation of the proposal than of someone who has had two proposals that I have passed along and that have been implemented." (M9)

Some managers said that the *employee* himself or herself has no influence (e.g., M4, M5, M8) regarding their perceptions of promotive voice.

The last main factor is related to the *recipient*. Managers said that they noticed some personal characteristics that led them, in their opinion, to perceive voice as they do. Managers argued that their *personality* of being *empathetic* (M6) and *open-minded* (e.g., M1, M2, M3) was of influence. Some managers mentioned that they see themselves as *cooperative* (M5), *autonomy-oriented* (M22), and *self-critical* (M11):

"Self-criticism is first and foremost for me. I am aware that I have many blind spots which are also fixed within me as a person." (M13)

Moreover, managers mentioned that their *opinion about the employee*, specifically their *trust in the employee* (M1) and *value congruency* (e.g., M1, M2, M15) between the employee and themselves, matters. Managers' *own motives* also play a role (M1, M9):

"If I have someone where I think, 'Oh, some things didn't go well. The employee is not satisfied,' then I may be more inclined to implement his or her suggestion [...]." (M9)

## Factors that Influence Managers' Valuations of Prohibitive Voice

Because prohibitive voice was expressed less frequently than promotive voice to most of the interviewed managers, fewer factors could be identified. The results regarding managers' valuations of prohibitive voice are related to the same categories as those regarding their valuations of promotive voice: the *content of voice*, the *manner of communication*, the *employee*, and the *recipient*. The factors that influence managers' valuations of prohibitive voice are visualised in Figure 2.

**Figure 2. Factors that influence managers' valuations of prohibitive voice**

content of voice	manner of communication	employee	recipient
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— solution-orientation</li> <li>— extensive preparation               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— description of causes</li> <li>— mentioning of other departments that will be necessary for problem-solving</li> <li>— mentioning alternatives</li> <li>— describing the problem's full scope</li> <li>— comprehensible presentation</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— emotionality               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— irritability</li> <li>— problem-reinforcing emotions</li> </ul> </li> <li>— communication medium               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— face-to-face</li> <li>— text</li> <li>— communication</li> <li>— modern communication media</li> </ul> </li> <li>— timing               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— as soon as possible</li> <li>— without influence</li> </ul> </li> <li>— direct communication</li> <li>— personal responsibility</li> <li>— finger pointing</li> <li>— respectful tone</li> <li>— formal communication</li> <li>— without influence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— assumed motive</li> <li>— voice frequency</li> <li>— mentality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— personality</li> <li>— complicity</li> </ul>

Regarding the *content of voice*, managers preferred *solution-orientation* (e.g., M18, M19, M21):

“[...] that the colleague doesn't just come up and say, 'that's bad, that's bad, that's bad', but always to have a solution ready.” (M3)

Managers also said they pay attention to *extensive preparation*. They value a *description of causes* (M12) for the problem, *mentioning other departments that will*

*be necessary for problem-solving* (M10, M17), *mentioning alternatives* (M2) for problem-solving, *describing the problem's full scope* (M17, M20), and a *comprehensible presentation* (M7, M16):

"Yes, it was important for me first of all whether it was comprehensible to me or whether it was actually an operating error, for example." (M7)

Regarding the next main factor, the *manner of communication*, *emotionality* played a role, as managers disliked *irritability* (M7, M19) and ascribed higher value to problems when employees showed *problem-reinforcing emotions* (M6):

"Frustration, anger, sadness, these are emotions that I associate with problems. They trigger stress in employees. If [...] I recognise stress factors, then the problem is naturally also greater for me [...]" (M6)

In addition, managers said that the *communication medium* is important to them, as some preferred *face-to-face* (M6, M19, M21), but one manager preferred *text communication* (M3), and another one *modern communication media* (M15):

"WhatsApp or Viber is just faster and easier to use [...]. Then a picture can be sent that a tool has broken off or that a saw blade has deformed somewhere [...]" (M15)

Regarding the *timing* (M19), some managers said that it is *without influence* (M6), while others preferred communication *as soon as possible* (M4, M10). Managers also mentioned that they preferred *direct communication* (e.g., M15, M21, M22) and taking *personal responsibility* (M2, M12) instead of *finger-pointing* (M11, M13, M18):

"What you always have to pay attention to, especially as a manager, is that you don't somehow engage in a bit of finger-pointing." (M13)

Furthermore, some argued that a *respectful tone* (M9, M12, M16) and *formal communication* (M4) matter to them:

"I still have the old thinking. I can have a very good relationship with people, but there is still a fine distance." (M4)

One manager said that the *manner of communication* has no influence (M3) regarding his perception of prohibitive voice.

Looking at the role of the *employee*, managers said that employees' *assumed motive* (M4) and *voice frequency* (M14) mattered:

"If it's an employee who constantly comes with problems, he or she is certainly perceived differently than if you come with an issue for the first time. So you can differentiate between the two." (M14)

Furthermore, an employees' *mentality* (M15, M18) was of influence:

"It's the way of knowing everything but not actually doing it. So this perceived competence, it's just a stereotypical old man who knows everything, can do everything, but actually isn't always necessarily right." (M18)

Regarding the *recipient*, managers said that their *personality* (M1, M6, M17) influenced the perception of prohibitive voice:

“I think that stays with the right mix of empathy and severity. The employees know that they can come to me with any problem. I don’t judge anyone for any problem. Problems are there [...]” (M6)

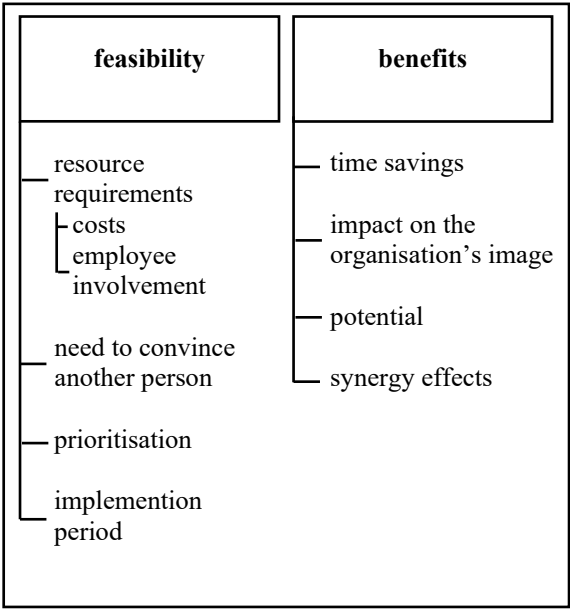
Furthermore, their *complicity* (M9) in the problem had an influence:

“I think that it is also relevant to what extent I personally share responsibility for the grievances and in which cases I do not.” (M9)

Factors that Influence Managers’ Endorsements of Voice

Apart from the valuation of promotive and prohibitive voice, managers were also asked about the factors that influence their endorsements of voice. The factors that influence managers’ endorsement of voice are visualised in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Factors that influence managers’ endorsements of voice



Some managers said that they pay attention to the same factors they do regarding the valuation of voice. Others named especially the *feasibility* as decisive. Among factors related to *feasibility*, *resource requirements* (e.g., M1, M5, M12), including *costs* (e.g., M15, M21, M22) and *employee involvement* were mentioned (e.g., M17, M18, M21):

“So if it is a very high effort for us, and we know that we need high IT capacities for it, and personnel is not always priority one, then the promised effect that we expect must be quite large so that I am willing to make an effort for it.” (M18)

Regarding *feasibility*, the *need to convince another person* (M1, M16), the *prioritisation* (M1, M5), and the *implementation period* (M1, M14, M20) were also named.

Next to *feasibility*, the *benefits* (e.g., M1, M12, M13) of voice were important for managers' endorsement of voice. Specifically, they talked about the *impact on the organisation's image* (M1), the *potential* (M10, M18), *time savings* (M3, M15, M18), and *synergy effects* (M4):

"So, we have now, as an example, an employee who came to us with a new software [...]. Of course, we could buy new software for sixty or eighty thousand euros. That can be done within a fortnight. But, there is a financial aspect behind it. The question is: what are the synergy effects, and how does it pay off?" (M4)

## Discussion

This section describes the patterns in the factors managers mentioned as influencing their valuations and endorsements of voice.

### Factors that Influence Managers' Perceptions of Voice

This study's results show that managers' valuations of both promotive and prohibitive voice are influenced by the *content of voice*, the *manner of communication*, the *employee*, and the *recipient*. This categorisation on the level of the main factors is in line with the literature (e.g., Howell et al., 2015; Schreurs et al., 2020). Several sub-factors in these categories (see Figures 1, 2, and 3) could be identified. The influence of some of those factors has already been quantitatively demonstrated. For example, Whiting, Maynes, and Podsakoff (2012) showed that managers appreciate *solution orientation*, employee's *experience*, and early *timing*. As described before, some of the identified factors may transmit signals to managers about the value of voice (Connelly et al., 2011). For example, extensive preparation and the support of a group opinion could transmit the signal that employees have put a lot of effort into the development of voice. Several interviewed managers explicitly stated that they interpret the information they perceive to be able to evaluate voice:

"Someone who has more experience has seen more, can probably make better decisions in those subjective situations at the end of the day." (M1)

An extensive literature review regarding managers' perceptions of voice reveals no empirical evidence of the influence of several of the identified factors. For example, regarding the *content of voice*, the role of an idea's *congruence with previous decisions* and *congruence with corporate policy*, an employee's *preparation for questions*, and the use of *visualisation* have been neglected in research so far (MacMillan et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2022). Concerning the *manner of communication*, for example, the influence of *offering responsibility for implementation*, *finger-pointing*, and *formal communication* has not yet been investigated (S. Kim et al., 2021). For instance, the *employee's patience and perseverance* (Liao et al., 2021), and regarding the *recipient*,

the role of *value congruency* and *complicity* in managers' valuations of voice have been neglected (Guarana et al., 2017; Liu & Dong, 2020).

For a few of the identified factors, other studies' findings point in a different direction of effect. Some of the interviewed managers stated that *emotionality* is important to them because it reinforces the value of the proposed change:

"And if I find that even if I don't like the content or perhaps wouldn't share it, but I notice that the employee is extremely emotionally involved or engaged by it, then I would give it more weight and more attention." (M9)

In contrast, Grant (2013) showed that managers see voice more favourably if employees regulate their emotions, so the communication is more constructive and less emotional. Furthermore, all managers stated that they appreciated the *support of group opinions*. These statements contradict Isaakyan et al. (2021), who demonstrated that managers prefer privately expressed voices over publicly expressed voices. The authors argued that managers experience a higher threat to their image of being a leader who can ensure smooth organisational functioning if an employee criticises the status quo in the presence of others. The differing results could be due to the difficulty of recalling threats to one's image, even if they were experienced. Isaakyan et al. (2021) addressed this phenomenon, which they described as limited psychological realism, in their study by capitalising on existing relationships between managers and employees. The differing results could also be due to the influence of social desirability, as discussed in the limitations section of this study.

Regarding the endorsement of voice, two main factors, *feasibility* and the proposal's *benefit*, were identified. As for the perception of promotive and prohibitive voice, the influence of some of the related sub-factors has already been shown in quantitative research. For instance, Burris, Rockmann, and Kimmons (2017) showed that managerial endorsement is more likely if voice demonstrates a high level of importance, less resource allocation, and a low level of interdependency. The influence of other factors on managers' endorsement of voice has not yet been investigated. Research is lacking on, among other factors, the influence of the communication of *synergy effects* and the *impact on the organisation's image*.

The four identified categories—the *content of voice*, the *manner of communication*, the *employee*, and the *recipient*—which the persuasion literature identified as the most effective regarding individual persuasion—remain the same (O'Keefe, 2015). Therefore, this study contributes to the literature on the similarity between the perception of voice and persuasion (e.g., Huang et al., 2018; Whiting et al., 2012). If an employee expresses voice, it is usually necessary that the receiving manager's attitude is changed in the proposed way for the idea to be endorsed rather than discarded (Whiting et al., 2012). According to the literature, an individual's attitude change depends on the motivation and ability to process a message (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). For example, people are more motivated to process a message if it is personally relevant to them. The ability to process a message is, among other

influences, influenced by prior knowledge about the message's topic, as the more prior knowledge someone has, the more likely the person is to rely on his or her own opinion during a persuasion attempt (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). However, if a person has little prior knowledge about a topic, for example, because of a lack of experience, he or she tends to use heuristics to form an attitude. One heuristic that the literature has regarded as one of the most persuasive is source credibility (Pornpitakpan, 2004). If a message is communicated by a source who is perceived as credible, trustworthy, and/or an expert, people tend to reduce their own cognitive resources and rely on the opinion of the source (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). This line of reasoning may explain why some of the identified factors in this study, such as the employee's *knowledge* and *experience*, influence managers' perceptions of voice.

The leader-member exchange (LMX) theory (Graen & Cashman, 1975) may be useful in explaining further the influence of factors related to the employee on managers' perceptions of voice. According to the theory, employees either have a low-quality or a high-quality exchange with their managers, resulting in them being either in-group or out-group members (Dienesch & Liden, 1986). Employees who newly join a team or organisation first have to prove themselves to managers through their work and behaviour in order to improve the quality of exchange respectively to get in his/her in-group. From that point on, employees receive a higher level of trust, support, and rewards (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Furthermore, those employees have higher levels of job satisfaction, fewer turnover intentions and are more motivated to show extra-role behaviour, for example, voice (Gerstner & Day, 1997; Liden & Maslyn, 1998). The literature demonstrates that LMX is influenced by various factors, some of which were also mentioned by this study's interviewees. For example, Liden et al. (1993) showed that managers' expectations of employees' future competence are positively related to high-quality exchanges. Employees benefit in several ways from high-quality exchanges (for a review see, for example, Gerstner & Day, 1997). Among other factors, their voice is perceived more positively by a manager with whom they have a history of high-quality exchanges (Huang et al., 2018), as those employees' voice is more likely to be attributed to the intention to improve how the organisation functions. Huang et al. (2018) showed that the positive effect of LMX is strong enough to offset the potential negative effect of prohibitive voice (Chamberlin et al., 2017).

In addition to the factors that the persuasion literature and LMX indicate that influence managers' perceptions of voice, a possible explanation for the role of a *respectful tone* may be derived from Social Judgment Theory (Hovland et al., 1953). If an employee appears polite and respectful during the expression of voice, managers tend to attribute positive intentions to them, while the opposite behaviour is likely to be perceived as challenging and harmful, to which managers are likely to react defensively and to perceive as negative.

## Identified Patterns Regarding Managers' Perceptions of Voice

The interviewees' statements were also reviewed for patterns (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019). Among this study's findings was that the differentiation between promotive and prohibitive voice, unlike the findings in the literature (Liang et al., 2012), was not clear; instead, a close overlap between both forms of voice appeared, providing reason to conclude that the difference has little effect on managers' perceptions of voice. Directly after changing the interviews' focus from promotive voice to prohibitive voice, several managers (e.g., M3, M12, M13) said that the same factors are important in their perceptions of both:

"So, if someone comes up with things that are bad, then, yes, it's just like with the suggestions for improvement, that I'm also a friend of not just coming up and saying 'that's bad, that's bad, that's bad', but always to have a solution ready." (M3)

Often, the managers mentioned an expressed idea (promotive voice), as well as a problem (prohibitive voice), in the same sentence:

"So, the perfect suggestion would actually be that the employee has already thought about it in advance, perhaps not just the initial spark and somehow throws it down, but actually also dealt with the problem or with the proposal [...]." (M17)

Furthermore, comparing the factors that influenced the perception of promotive and prohibitive voice (Figures 1 and 2) demonstrated that many factors (e.g., *face-to-face communication*, *voice frequency*, and the recipient's *personality*) were mentioned for both forms of voice. The reasoning regarding this overlap is in line with Huang et al. (2018), who demonstrated that prohibitive voice might be perceived as positive as promotive voice when the level of LMX is high and the frequency of voice is low. In this case, proposals and even criticism tend to be considered beneficial. In contrast, Chamberlin et al.'s (2017) meta-analysis showed that promotive voice positively influences the voice-expressing employee's evaluation, while prohibitive voice has a negative influence. This contradictory finding indicates that managers' perceptions of voice may be influenced by factors they did not mention in the interviews, perhaps because their answers were influenced by social desirability, or they may not have been aware that their perceptions of voice were influenced by certain factors. Li et al. (2019) may shed some light on this connection, as they demonstrated that managers might not endorse voice even if it is beneficial to them when, for example, a manager's ego is depleted because of heavy workloads and pressure. In such cases, they may try to maintain the current situation because of uncertainties related to the proposed change, including its probability of success. Depleted managers also pay more attention to information that is in line with their own opinions than they do to information that supports contrary opinions (J. Li et al., 2019). Consequently, although depleted managers are often unable to make efficient decisions on their own and could make beneficial use of employees' input, they tend to maintain the status quo (Morrison & Milliken, 2000).

Another pattern regarding managers' perceptions of voice indicates that managers may not differentiate between the valuation and endorsement of voice. After changing the focus of the interview to the endorsement of voice, some managers referred to what they said regarding the valuation of voice:

"[...] As I said, if the proposal is well thought out, helps as many people as possible, and can be implemented pragmatically—these three things—then I'm immediately on board and set the levers in motion." (M6)

This conclusion is also supported by the main codes and sub-codes in this study. The factors that managers mentioned as influencing their endorsement of voice (*feasibility* and *benefit*; Figure 3.) were also mentioned as influencing the valuation of voice. Besides that, some managers talked about the endorsement of voice, although they were asked about its valuation. For example, M6 answered the question about what influences his/her valuation of promotive voice with a proposal's costs that may result in it not being endorsed:

"Nevertheless, there are always proposals that [...] in terms of their costs can not be endorsed. Unfortunately, we have that very often." (M6)

Regarding prohibitive voice, M10 changed the interviews subject to its endorsement directly after being asked about its valuation:

"When employees come to you with a problem, for example, concerning a poorly running process, what do you pay particular attention to?

To how well a proposal can be endorsed." (M10)

Moreover, Urbach and Fay (2018) measured both the support of voice (with similar items as for the valuation of voice; e.g., "I will encourage the employee to take his idea further") and the endorsement of voice and found a high correlation between them ( $r = .85$ ). Therefore, although some studies propose to separate between the valuation of voice from the endorsement of voice (e.g., Burris, 2012), it could be wise to intertwine them.

The analysis of the interviews also revealed certain patterns regarding the factors that influence managers' perceptions of employee voice. The categories to which the factors are related, the amount of time managers spent talking about them, and the examples by means of which managers clarified their argumentations suggested that it is primarily facts that influence some managers' perceptions of voice. For instance, M10 mentioned several factors related to the *content of voice* as influencing the perception of voice. Regarding promotive voice, M10 stated that employees' *preparation for questions* and the outlined *benefit for customers* influenced the perception of voice:

"So, it has to be financially feasible, it has to be feasible in terms of time, and it has to bring clear added value for the end-user. I always think for the end-users, too." (M10)

Concerning prohibitive voice, M10 named *mentioning other departments necessary for problem-solving* and, concerning the endorsement of voice, the idea's *potential*,

*costs*, and *employee involvement* as important. M10 also said that the voice-expressing *employee*, the *communication medium*, and the *manner of communication* did not have influence:

"I honestly don't care about the manner. [The employee] doesn't have to make a PowerPoint presentation. I don't mind if [the employee] calls me halfway or shares a screen or comes into my office and says, 'I saw something for this and that.'" (M10)

At the end of the interview, when M10 was asked what a perfect proposal would look like, M10 again talked only about factors that were related to the content of voice. Similar patterns were identified by several others (e.g., M18, M19, M20).

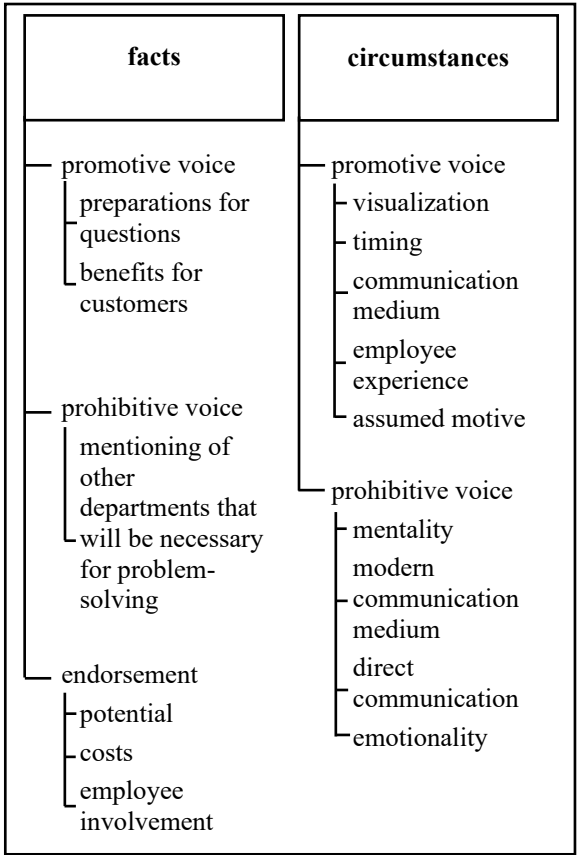
In contrast, other managers seemed to pay less attention to facts and more to the circumstances of the expression of voice (e.g., M2, M6, M7). For instance, with regard to the valuation of promotive voice, M15 mentioned only *visualisation* (the *content of voice*) as influential but that the *timing* and *communication medium* (*manner of communication*), as well as an employee's *experience* and the *assumed motive* (*employee*), is important. Regarding prohibitive voice, M15 mentioned no factors related to the *content of voice* but only that an employee's *mentality* (*employee*), *modern communication media*, *direct communication*, and *emotionality* (*manner of communication*) matters:

"That's all done with open sights on a very, very short official channel. Sometimes that clashes, too. That is quite normal. It's more of a positive clash [...]." (M15)

Although it was not possible to clearly assign the remaining managers (e.g., M3, M4, M5) to one of the two groups, most of the managers' perceptions of voice seemed to be influenced either by facts or by the circumstances of the expression of voice. Figure 4 visualises the identified factors that are linked to both groups of managers.

Although the interviewed managers were not directly asked about the relative importance of the mentioned factors in comparison to or in combination with other factors, the data revealed some patterns in this regard. As described before, the data was analysed by using an inductive-deductive approach (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019). Therefore, the interviewed managers were first asked openly about the factors that influence their perceptions of voice. In a second step, they were asked about what matters to them with regard to the four already identified categories (content, manner of communication, employee, recipient). It can be assumed that those factors mentioned first during the interviews, without being pointed in a direction, are the most important for managers' perceptions of voice.

**Figure 4. Differentiation of identified factors with regard to facts and the circumstances of the expression of voice**



Regarding promotive voice, especially content-related factors were mentioned at the beginning of the interviews. Thereby, a *proposal's benefit*, in general (M5, M12, M16), for *customers* (e.g., M8, M10, M13), and for the whole *organisation* (e.g., M4, M17, M18) is particularly relevant to them. M13 spoke a lot about the *benefits for customers*, mentioned this factor several times, and explained its relevance to the company strategy:

“At [Company], we look at customer satisfaction, which we call Net Promoter Score, i.e. the willingness of customers to recommend us to others, and we would try to improve that [...]” (M13)

Some managers addressed the importance of a *proposal's benefits* several times during the interviews and mentioned it even after being asked about the role of other factors in their perceptions of voice:

“What influence had the manner of communication on your perception of the proposal?”

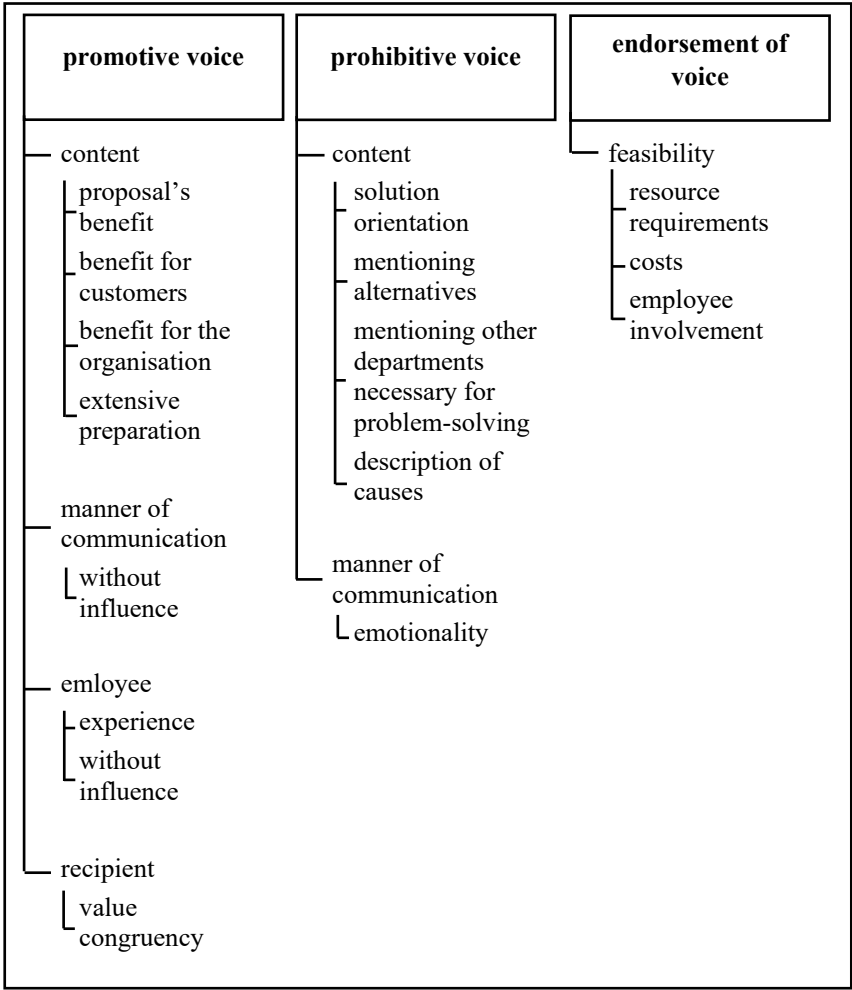
So, as I said, I don't want to put up too big of a hurdle, or I don't really care about the type of communication. As I said, for me it's much more important that they have thought about what they see as the added value of their idea for the users outside or for the company. That is really much more important to me." (M10)

After that, managers mentioned other content-related factors, for example, an *extensive preparation* (M4, M16). Some of the managers who talked about other factors at the beginning of the interviews mentioned the content of voice shortly after that (e.g., M1, M3, M6). Further, several managers said that neither the manner of communication (M10, M11) nor the employee (M4, M5, M8) influences that highlight the relative importance of a proposal's *content*. No pattern could be identified regarding the role of the *manner of communication* for managers' perceptions of promotive voice. Regarding the *employee*, his or her *experience* was directly mentioned several times once the interview questions referred to their own role (e.g., M6, M8, M19). A few other managers directly answered that the employee is *without influence* regarding their perceptions of voice (e.g., M4, M12, M18). M5 even argued in this way without being pointed to the employee's role. The role of the *recipient*, especially managers' *value congruency*, was mentioned (M1, M2). M1 talked about this at the very beginning of the interview and later again after the interview subject was changed to the role of the recipient.

Regarding prohibitive voice, the majority of managers also mentioned the *content* at the very beginning. Specifically, they first talked about *solution orientation* (e.g., M2, M3, M19). Thereby, managers supported his/her point of view with sentences like "What I expect in principle in this regard" (M2), "What I always say" (M4), "basically, the first question is" (M6), and "The most beautiful thing is" (M19) what further underlines the relative importance of this factor to them. After that, the interviewed managers especially talked about other content-related factors, like *mentioning alternatives* (M2), *mentioning other departments necessary for problem-solving* (M10), and the *description of causes* (M12). Concerning the *manner of communication*, managers specifically mentioned employees' *emotionality* (M6, M7, M20) as most important because it underlines the importance of the proposal. No patterns could be identified with regard to the relative importance of the *employee* and the *recipient* for managers' perceptions of prohibitive voice.

Whether managers endorse a proposal depends particularly on its *resource requirements*, the *costs* (e.g., M1, M21, M22), and *employee involvement* (M16, M17, M18), above all other factors. The factors that were identified as the most important to managers are demonstrated in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Most important factors for managers' perceptions of voice



Limitations and Future Research

This study is subject to several limitations. First, the generalizability of the study's findings is limited for several reasons. On the one hand, this is due to the qualitative research design, the sample size, and the heterogeneous sample. On the other hand, the interviews were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a consequence, the personal relevance of some of the mentioned factors for managers may have been influenced by the changes in everyday work. For example, people have become accustomed to using modern communication channels, which replaced face-to-face interaction as a popular way for employees to express voice (Ellmer &

Reichel, 2020; Kramer & Kramer, 2020). Due to the digital communication, the interviewed managers could also have been unaware of factors that influence their perceptions of voice under normal circumstances, like, for example, the emotionality of employees, which may be reduced depending on the communication channel (Brosi & Schuth, 2020; Derks et al., 2008). Furthermore, a self-selection bias may have resulted from managers' voluntary participation (Heckman, 1990), as only those managers with a particular interest in the study's topic may have declared their willingness to be interviewed. Therefore, this study's findings should be taken with caution as they are not representative. Quantitative research on the factors that influence the perception of voice and that have not yet been investigated after the pandemic is necessary. Such research could also rank the identified factors according to their influence on managers' perceptions of voice.

Generalizability could also be increased by conducting longitudinal investigations and establishing causality using a time-lagged research design. Managers may pay attention to other factors regarding their perceptions of voice over time when they know an employee better and trust—a factor that was mentioned in the interviews—in the employee's competence has developed. Such an investigation would be especially useful, as voice frequency was named as an influencing factor and because of Huang et al.'s (2018) finding that managers perceive both low-frequency and a high frequency of voice negatively. While high frequency leads to managers' perceptions that proposals are not well thought out, managers may perceive low frequency as a lack of interest in the organisation's well-being.

Second, although anonymity was assured multiple times, visual communication tools were used, the interviews were conducted in private, and follow-up questions were asked (Archibald et al., 2019; Bergen & Labonté, 2020), this study's findings could have been influenced by social desirability. Some statements, such as "So the individual employee doesn't matter" (M11) and "My direct team, I treat them absolutely the same" (M12), in combination with some manager's facial expressions and body language, give reason for concern. Besides that, several managers explained at the very beginning of the interviews that they are, in general, very open to employees' proposals—regardless of the situation's circumstances:

"In general, I am a fan of progress and am also very open to improvements and am always happy when employees get involved and make suggestions for improvement." (M14)

Therefore, future research could conduct interviews in an even more natural setting, such as face-to-face, to reduce potential influences of social desirability by building greater trust. Besides that, quantitative research designs could at least minimise the influence of social desirability by including scales to measure it (e.g., Satow, 2012; Stöber, 2001).

Third, only managers of German organisations were interviewed in this study, so cultural differences may limit the results' transferability to other countries. Brockner et al. (2001) showed, for example, that a culture's power distance influences the

perception of voice, and some of the interviewed managers mentioned that their perceptions of voice are influenced by their open-mindedness (e.g., M11, M14, M17). The relationship between culture and managerial perceptions of voice could also be demonstrated in quantitative studies (e.g., Burris, 2012). Further, since Martin et al. (2013) showed that managerial openness differs between cultures, future research on this cultural difference could be promising.

Future research is also needed regarding the definition of managers' perceptions of voice. The few extant studies defined managers' perceptions of voice in the same way but measured or defined it differently but measured it in the same way. For example, Isaakyan et al. (2021) investigated the "endorsement of voice" and assessed it using Burris' (2012) scale (e.g., "I think this person's comments should be implemented"), while Xu et al. (2020) investigated the "success of voice" and measured it using the same scale, and Urbach and Fay (2018) investigated "supervisors' intention to support an idea" and measured with another, but similar, scale (e.g., "I will seriously consider what has to be done to implement the idea"). Other studies that have dealt with managers' perceptions of voice have investigated "voice recognition" (Howell et al., 2015), "voice valuation" (Burris et al., 2017), or just "managers' reactions" (T.-Y. Kim et al., 2009). Therefore, conceptual clarification is necessary to ensure that participants in similar studies are no longer confused when asked about constructs presented as different that they see as identical.

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