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To cite this article: Bert Schreurs, Melvyn R. W. Hamstra & Tina Davidson (2019): What's in a word? Using construal-level theory to predict voice endorsement, European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology, DOI: [10.1080/1359432X.2019.1694509](https://doi.org/10.1080/1359432X.2019.1694509)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1359432X.2019.1694509>



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Published online: 26 Nov 2019.



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## What's in a word? Using construal-level theory to predict voice endorsement

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### ABSTRACT

Voice endorsement is a pivotal means by which employees can influence leadership processes and the organization at large. Up till now, research on voice endorsement has lacked unified theoretical frameworks that can shed light on antecedents of voice endorsement in a more integrative way as well as help identify new and relevant antecedents in a systematic and theory-based manner. We propose that construal-level theory can serve as *one* such unifying framework and showcase this potential by applying it to voice endorsement. Drawing on construal-level theory we propose that when an employee frames his/her voice messages in a manner that is compatible with the psychological distance between the employee and the supervisor, the supervisor will find the employee's voice messages easier to process and, consequently, will be more likely to endorse them. Three experiments using different manipulations of voice message frame and psychological distance, and a mini meta-analysis of the three experiments, provide support for our construal compatibility hypothesis and initial evidence for the experienced ease-of-processing logic. We discuss how our construal-level approach to voice endorsement can shed light on previous findings as well as open up new avenues for future research.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 15 November 2018  
Accepted 10 November 2019

### KEYWORDS

Construal-level theory;  
employee voice; voice  
endorsement; upward  
communication

Employee voice behaviour refers to voluntary upward communication of ideas and suggestions intended to benefit the organization (Maynes & Podsakoff, 2014; Van Dyne, Cummings, & McClean Parks, 1995). Voice behaviour is vital for organizational functioning because employees' suggestions for change can reveal innovative solutions, advance performance, expose harmful policies and behaviour, and uncover opportunities for learning that might otherwise go unnoticed (Edmondson, 1999, 2003; LePine & Van Dyne, 1998; Li, Liao, Tangirala, & Firth, 2017; Nemeth & Staw, 1989). For these benefits to materialize, however, voice receivers need to be willing to listen to, and act upon, voiced suggestions (Detert, Burris, Harrison, & Martin, 2013). Unfortunately, prior work shows that even sound ideas often go *unheard* and *unimplemented* (e.g. Fast, Burris, & Bartel, 2014; Howell, Harrison, Burris, & Detert, 2015), thereby threatening the possibility for organizations to benefit from employee voice. In view of this conundrum, *voice endorsement* – defined as a voice receiver's favourable response to improvement-oriented suggestions, including a willingness to implement said suggestions (Burris, 2012) – has become a topic of significant scholarly interest in the voice literature (Burris, 2012; Chiaburu, Farh, & Van Dyne, 2013; Morrison, 2011, 2014).

Scholars have started to explore when and why supervisors are more or less likely to endorse employee voice (e.g. Burris, 2012; Sijbom, Janssen, & Van Yperen, 2015a, 2015b; Urbach & Fay, 2018). Most determinants of voice endorsement map onto one of the four core elements of persuasive communication: sender, message, context, and receiver (McGuire, 1985; Petty, Wegener, Fabrigar, 1997). For example, receiver-factors such as

managerial self-efficacy (Fast et al., 2014), sender-factors such as trustworthiness (Whiting, Maynes, Podsakoff, & Podsakoff, 2012) and status (Howell et al., 2015), message-factors such as the importance of the issue (Burris, Rockmann, & Kimmons, 2017), and context factors such as timeliness of the message (Whiting et al., 2012) have all been shown to affect voice endorsement. However, a key question that scholars have only recently begun to address in this area is: "How do these factors interact to influence voice endorsement?"

Examining the *interplay* of several determinants on voice endorsement is important because communication is complex and dynamic, and because supervisors are likely to simultaneously attend to several cues in a voice event and make sense of those in a relatively holistic manner (e.g. Lam, Lee, & Sui, 2018). Whereas prior work has begun to examine interaction effects of communication elements (e.g. Sijbom et al., 2015b), there is a lack of a unifying principle that pulls together findings and guides efforts in this area. Furthermore, sender and receiver elements are often examined independently (see Urbach & Fay, 2018, for an exception) and rarely have researchers considered relational factors unique to a particular sender and receiver dyad in interactive investigations. A comprehensive understanding of voice endorsement, however, requires that we consider relational context factors. This is important because voice events are inherently relational (i.e., they take place *between* sender and receiver) (e.g. Liu, Zhu, & Yang, 2010; Tröster & Van Knippenberg, 2012) and the meaning of messages is socially constructed (Knapp, Daly, Albada, & Miller, 2002). We propose that construal-level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010) can serve as

such a unifying principle guiding examinations into the interplay of communication elements and relational context elements in particular.

Invoking insights from construal-level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010), we put forward our construal compatibility hypothesis, which contends that voice endorsement is an interactive function of voice message frame (message factor) and psychological distance between the voicing employee and voice-receiving supervisor (sender-receiver relationship). Psychological distance between the employee and the supervisor affects the supervisor's "construal" (i.e., interpretation, understanding) of the voice event. Large distance (i.e., for example created by an employee being in a remote location or who is demographically different from the supervisor, causes the supervisor to create a representation of the event that focuses on "high" level features; high construal level means that the supervisor will be focusing on the big picture, superordinate features, desirability, abstractness and so forth. In contrast, small distance, for example when an employee is in the same office or is demographically similar to the supervisor, causes the supervisor to create a representation of the event that focuses on "low" level features; low construal level means that the supervisor will be focusing on the details, feasibility, concrete information and so forth. Voice messages whose features match the level of construal of the supervisor are processed more easily (Amit, Wakslak, & Trope, 2013; Yang, Ringberg, Mao, & Peracchio, 2011), and therefore feel truer and will be more persuasive (Schreurs, Hamstra, Segers, & Schmitte, 2018; Winkielman, Schwarz, Fazendeiro, & Reber, 2003). Message-features associated with construal level are numerous (see Lee, 2019). In this research we consider two such features: 1) voice communication in which the employee emphasizes the *feasibility* versus the *desirability* of the improvement suggestion, and 2) the use of *colloquial*, informal phrasing versus the use of *polite*, formal phrasing.

In short, we propose that construal-compatible voice messages will yield higher levels of voice endorsement than construal-incompatible messages. Further, we propose that experienced ease-of-processing underlies the effect of construal compatibility on voice endorsement. We test our conceptual model by means of three laboratory experiments. To determine the robustness of the model, we examine it using varying operationalizations of employee-supervisor psychological distance and of voice message frame. Furthermore, after presenting each study and its findings we report a mini meta-analysis across the three studies.

## Theory and hypotheses development

The central proposition of this article is that voice messages that are framed to be compatible with the psychological distance between the voicing employee and the voice-receiving supervisor are more easily processed and therefore more likely to be endorsed. Before advancing the construal-compatibility hypothesis, we introduce the concepts of psychological distance and message framing.

### *Psychological distance between voice receiver and voice sender*

Psychological distance is a core dimension along which supervisor-employee relationships vary (Berson, Halevy, Shamir, &

Erez, 2015). According to construal-level theory, psychological distance (versus proximity) is the subjective experience that something is far from (or close to) the self, here, and now, as the self serves as the *de facto* reference point in perceptual processing (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Psychological distance can be affected by the perception of *when* an event occurs (i.e., temporal distance), *where* it occurs (i.e., spatial distance), *whom* it involves (i.e., social distance), and *whether* it occurs (i.e., hypotheticality). For example, a supervisor can experience psychological distance from an employee because the latter works in a different country (spatial distance), or because the employee differs in terms of age and gender (social distance).

Construal-level theory contends that, to the extent that an event, object, or person becomes removed from the perceiver's immediate experience (i.e., psychological distance increases), detailed specifics about the event, object, or person become less available and unreliable. Accordingly, to think about these events, individuals are inclined to engage in high-level construal, using cognitive abstraction to extract the essential, stable, goal-relevant features of the event. High-level construals are relatively structured, de-contextualized representations that, through the process of abstraction, retain few, superordinate, core features of the event. Conversely, construals of psychologically near events are relatively unstructured, contextualized representations that include subordinate and incidental features of the event (Trope & Liberman, 2010). The link between psychological distance and looking at the big picture or the details may be quite intuitive, but high versus low levels of construal are not just related to abstraction. Various other construal level dimensions and instantiations of distance have been incorporated in the theory. For example, Stephan, Liberman, and Trope (2010) showed that polite versus colloquial language was affected by and, itself, affected high versus low level construal and/or estimations of different distance dimensions.

When applied to employee voice, construal-level theory would suggest that a supervisor will tend towards a different construal perspective depending on whether the voice message comes from an employee at a close or distant location (i.e., spatial distance), or from an employee who is similar versus dissimilar to the supervisor (i.e., social distance). Specifically, when voice comes from a psychologically distant employee, the supervisor will be ready to construe the voice event at a high level. In contrast, when voice comes from a psychologically proximal employee, the supervisor will be ready to construe the voice event at a low level.

It is important to explain that dimensions of distance and levels of construal are fundamentally cognitively associated with each other (Liberman & Trope, 1998; Stephan et al., 2010; Trope & Liberman, 2010). That is, activating one of these dimensions also leads to activation of other dimensions, as they have become part of the basic cognitive structures that people use to process information (Trope & Liberman, 2010). As an example, when thinking about a spatially far away (vs. close-by) event, individuals should more readily pay attention to other high-level (vs. low-level) construal information. They may for example be more responsive to desirability (vs. feasibility) information, or they may be more responsive to polite (vs. colloquial) requests. In a sense, therefore, by activating certain cognitive structures, the mere experience of psychological

distance versus proximity makes people ready to construe the event at high versus low levels. This readiness to construe the event in high-level or low-level terms, in turn, determines whether incoming information, such as a voice message framed in a particular way, is more easily processed, which, we suggest, significantly influences voice endorsement.

### **High-level and low-level voice messages framing**

By changing mental construal, psychological distance influences how incoming information about the event is processed (Fujita, Eyal, Chaiken, Trope, & Liberman, 2008; for a recent review, see Lee, 2019). Incoming information can also vary in the extent to which its message features emphasize a high construal level versus a low construal level. More specifically, because psychologically distant events tend to prompt a high-level representation of the event, distance facilitates the processing of messages whose level of construal matches this high level of construal. Conversely, as psychologically near events tend to prompt a low-level representation of the event, proximity facilitates the processing of messages whose level of construal matches this low level (Amit et al., 2013). That is, the activation of the cognitive structures associated with a certain level of construal makes it easier to process information that is framed or formulated at that same level of construal – this information is, simply put, associated with a level of construal that is similar to the activated cognitive structures. Because these cognitive structures are, thus, already active, construal level-matching information is recognized and processed more readily (Yang et al., 2011).

Therefore, construal-compatible information is processed more quickly than construal *in*-compatible information (Amit et al., 2013), which affects the experience of “ease-of-processing” (Kim, Rao, & Lee, 2009). Experienced ease-of-processing refers to “the metacognitive experience of ease or difficulty associated with a cognitive process” (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2008, p. 162). The experience of ease-of-processing influences subjective evaluations, resulting in more favourable attitudes (Winkielman et al., 2003). Easy-to-process voice messages may be evaluated more positively because the information is perceived to be more common (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973), truer (Reber & Schwarz, 1999), and more insightful (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2006). Therefore, supervisors will more strongly endorse voice messages focusing on high- (vs. low-) level features when the voice is raised by a spatially or socially distant (vs. proximal) employee. We refer to this as the construal compatibility hypothesis of voice endorsement.

### **Overview of hypotheses and studies**

We investigate the interplay between psychological distance (distal versus proximal), and voice message framing (high construal level versus low construal level) in the context of the endorsement of employee voice messages. As discussed above, both variables vary in various ways. Some of these ways are directly relevant to the real-world ways in which voice messages are communicated and the real-world contexts in which the voice event plays out.

That is, when it comes to psychological distance, it is relevant to consider that today’s workforce is becoming increasingly (a) diverse and (b) geographically dispersed. Accordingly, we believe that of the four dimensions of psychological distance, social distance (interpersonal similarity) and spatial distance are the most relevant when studying the supervisor-employee relationship (see also Berson et al., 2015). That is, these two dimensions of distance occur in the supervisor-employee relationship in reality. The distance dimensions of hypotheticality and temporal distance are less applicable to the voice sender-receiver relationship: the former would imply varying the occurrence likelihood of the relationship itself, and the latter would imply varying whether the relationship occurred now or in the future (or past) – both of these may be less relevant from a practical perspective.

Voice message construal level could realistically (and operationally) vary along several dimensions, but the most clearly connected to voice messages are (1) the use of polite versus colloquial language (Stephan et al., 2010), and (2) the use of desirability versus feasibility considerations and arguments (e.g. Liberman & Trope, 1998). This is not to say that other dimensions are less *relevant*; it is only to imply that these two dimensions are closely connected to what features of voice may vary realistically. First, voice is a form of verbal communication and polite versus colloquial language is a dimension on which verbal communication varies. Second, voice is about suggesting an improvement and implies a kind of persuasion, which can be accomplished by providing an argument and arguments can focus on how feasible the suggestion is or how desirable the outcomes are.

Polite language is associated with social distance and, thus, according to construal-level theory, associated with high-level construal. For example, Stephan et al. (2010) found that individuals asked to communicate in a polite way tended to use more abstract language (adjectives). As the politeness level of requested communication decreased, communication concreteness tended to increase, as shown by the increasing use of action verbs. Polite language is associated with high construal also in a different way: polite language tends to be more hypothetical than colloquial language as it, for instance, includes words such as “would” or “could” that express matters in less certain, more tentative ways. Hence, polite language is more compatible with psychologically distant events, whereas colloquial language is more compatible with psychologically proximal events.

Messages emphasizing the desirability of the voiced suggestion for change reflect the superordinate “why” aspects of the voiced suggestion. Conversely, messages focusing on the feasibility of the voiced suggestion for change reflect the subordinate “how” aspects of the suggested change. Why-aspects convey the action’s meaning, purpose, overarching goal; how-aspects convey the concrete means and implementation of the suggested idea (Liberman & Trope, 1998). Hence, desirability (why) arguments are more compatible with psychologically distant events, whereas feasibility (how) arguments are more compatible with psychologically proximal events.

In summary, with increasing (vs. decreasing) distance, an event is construed at a higher (vs. lower) level, and the persuasiveness of messages framed in high-level (vs. low-level) terms

increases due to an experience of relatively easy versus difficult processing. Applying this construal compatibility hypothesis to voice messages that can vary along the dimensions discussed above, we formulated the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1:* Voice messages framed at a low level (colloquially-toned or feasibility-focused) are more strongly endorsed when supervisors experience a near (versus far) psychological distance.

*Hypothesis 2:* Voice message framed at a high level (politely-toned or desirability-focused) are more strongly endorsed when supervisors experience a far (versus near) psychological distance.

*Hypothesis 3:* Experienced ease-of-processing mediates the relation between construal compatibility and voice endorsement.

We test these hypotheses in three laboratory experiments that use different operationalizations of psychological distance and of voice message frame. Psychological distance is manipulated as social distance in Studies 1 and 3, and as spatial distance in Study 2. Voice message frame is manipulated in terms of feasibility versus desirability in Study 1, and in terms of polite versus colloquial language in Studies 2 and 3. Hence, the three experiments utilize all three possible combinations of the psychological distance and voice message framing dimensions that are, as we argued above, most pertinent to realistic variation in voice message content, style and framing, as well as to the relational context within which voice behaviour plays out. To further test the robustness of our model, we additionally conducted a mini meta-analysis on the effects that we observed in the three studies.

## Study 1

### Method

#### Participants

We recruited 106 professionals (34.0% female) with an average age of 31.52 ( $SD = 11.72$ ,  $range = 19-60$ ) through email and social media sites. All participants had at least one year of working experience in a role as supervisor. Hence, our participants have experience in the hierarchical, supervisory position that is associated with being a voice receiver and their reactions are, thus, relatively reliable and valid (e.g. compared to college student participants with no supervisory organizational job experience).

#### Procedure and materials

The experiment was conducted online using Qualtrics software. Participants were first informed that they would take part in a study on managerial decision making. After giving informed consent, participants completed a set of demographic measures and were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions of a 2 (voice frame: feasibility vs. desirability)  $\times$  2 (social distance: close vs. distant) between-subjects design. Participants were asked to adopt the role of aircraft turnaround manager. Their main responsibility is to lead and manage the day to day activities relating to

turnaround (loading and unloading) services, and to ensure that department strategic plans and set targets are accomplished. After reading about their managerial role, the next screenshot showed an email sent by one of the employees. The email included the voicing employee's picture and through this picture, social distance was manipulated (details below). In the email, the employee raises concerns about the current working conditions (i.e., lifting of overweight luggage) and suggests an alternative solution (i.e., use of hydraulic lifts). This voice message was varied in that it focused either on desirability or feasibility (details below). Participants then responded to several questions measuring voice endorsement and they completed manipulation checks. At the end of the study, participants were asked to speculate about the general purpose of the study. None of the participants guessed the study's hypothesis.

## Manipulations

### Social distance

In both the socially close and the socially distant condition, the email showed a picture of the voicing employee. In the socially close condition, the email showed a picture of an employee of the same sex and ethnic origin as the participant. In the socially distant condition, the email showed a picture of an employee of the opposite sex and ethnic origin (this procedure is identical to the procedure used by Liviatan, Trope, & Liberman, 2008). For example, a white male participant would see a picture of a white male employee in the socially close condition and a picture of a black female employee in the socially distant condition. A black male participant would see a picture of a black male employee in the socially close condition and a picture of a white female employee in the socially distant condition. Sex and ethnic origin were chosen because they are among the most manifest attributes of interpersonal similarity (Kacmar, Harris, Carlson, & Zivnuska, 2009).

### Feasibility vs. desirability

In the desirability condition, the employee explained *why* s/he proposes a different course of action (but did not mention feasibility concerns). Sample sentences from the desirability condition are: "I hope it becomes clear why we would love to see that the lifting of overweight luggage is going to be done in another manner in the future"; "... and hope that you understand why we desire a change". In the feasibility condition, the employee explained *how* his/her suggestion could be implemented and used to solve the problem (but did not mention desirability concerns). Sample sentences from the feasibility condition are: "The hydraulic lifts are easy to operate", and "This makes the purchase of the hydraulic lifts also financially feasible." Both email messages contained an approximately equal number of words (desirability: 239 words vs. feasibility: 234 words).

## Measures

### Voice endorsement

was measured using four items based on Burris (2012). The items read: "The employee's comments should be implemented", "The

employee's comments are valuable", "I would encourage other employees to speak out the way that this employee did", and "If a position were available, I would recommend this employee for a promotion" (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .75$ ). Items were answered on a scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*).

### Manipulation checks

Because desirability and feasibility are theoretically orthogonal (Lu, Xie, & Xu, 2013), we included separate measures of perceived desirability and feasibility. That is necessary because, for example, a low score on desirability for the feasibility condition does not imply that the feasibility condition was high in feasibility. Perceived feasibility was measured using the two items: "The employee communicated how he/she wanted to resolve his/her concern" and "The employee expressed the practicality of his/her suggestion" ( $r [106] = .67, p < .001$ ). Perceived desirability was measured using the two items: "The employee communicated why he/she wanted his/her concern resolved" and "The employee expressed the desirability of his/her suggestion" ( $r [106] = .37, p < .001$ ). Four items checked the social distance manipulation, asking participants to indicate how close and similar they felt to the employee. Sample items read: "I feel close to the employee" and "The employee is similar to me" (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .79$ ). All items were answered on a scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*).

## Results

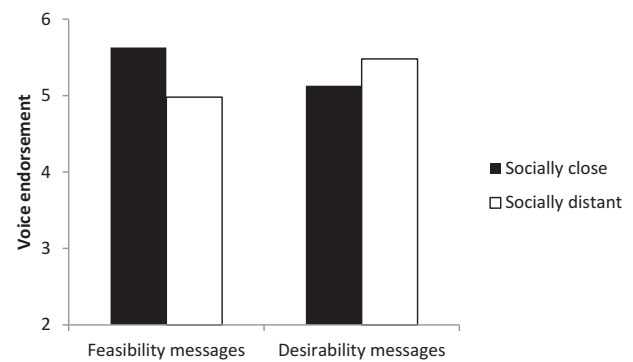
### Manipulation checks

The results of a 2 (voice message frame: feasibility vs. desirability)  $\times$  2 (social distance: small vs. large) between-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) on perceived feasibility and desirability showed that participants in the feasibility condition perceived the message to be more feasible ( $M = 5.86, SD = 0.70$ ) than those in the desirability condition ( $M = 5.08, SD = 1.28$ ),  $F(1, 102) = 14.79, p < .001, \eta^2 = .13$ . There was no main effect of social distance on perceived feasibility,  $F(1, 102) = 0.00, p = .983, \eta^2 = .00$ , and no interaction effect,  $F(1, 102) = 0.722, p = .400, \eta^2 = .01$ . Participants in the desirability condition perceived the message to be more desirable ( $M = 5.67, SD = 0.95$ ) than those in the feasibility condition ( $M = 5.24, SD = 0.93$ ),  $F(1, 102) = 5.55, p = .020, \eta^2 = .05$ . There was no main effect of social distance on perceived desirability,  $F(1, 102) = 1.43, p = .234, \eta^2 = .01$ , and no interaction effect,  $F(1, 102) = 0.70, p = .404, \eta^2 = .01$ .

The same ANOVA on perceived social distance showed that participants in the socially close condition rated the voicer to be more close and similar to them ( $M = 4.46, SD = 1.07$ ) than participants in the socially distant condition ( $M = 3.60, SD = 0.99$ ),  $F(1, 102) = 17.86, p < .001, \eta^2 = .15$ . There was no main effect of voice message frame on perceived social distance,  $F(1, 102) = 0.17, p = .682, \eta^2 = .00$ , and no interaction effect,  $F(1, 102) = 0.68, p = .411, \eta^2 = .01$ . These results attest to the validity of the manipulations in relation to the underlying dimensions we sought to systematically vary.

### Test of hypotheses

We expected feasibility-focused voice messages to be more strongly endorsed when the supervisor is socially close to,



**Figure 1.** The interactive effect of social distance and feasibility vs. desirability voice messages on voice endorsement (study 1;  $N = 106$ ).

rather than socially distant from, the employee, while desirability messages were expected to be more strongly endorsed when the supervisor is socially distant from, rather than socially close to, the employee. Using the same ANOVA as above, we found a significant interaction effect on voice endorsement,  $F(1, 102) = 11.14, p = .001, \eta^2 = .10$  (see Figure 1). The same ANOVA showed no main effects of voice message frame,  $F(1, 102) = 0.00, p = .990, \eta^2 = .00$ , and social distance,  $F(1, 102) = 0.94, p = .334, \eta^2 = .01$ , on voice endorsement.

Next, planned contrasts showed that feasibility messages were more strongly endorsed when employee and supervisor were socially close ( $M = 5.63, SD = 0.74$ ), compared to when they were socially distant ( $M = 4.98, SD = 0.92$ ),  $F(1, 102) = 9.28, p = .003, \eta^2 = .08$  (Hypothesis 1 supported). For the desirability message, the difference in endorsement between the socially close ( $M = 5.13, SD = 0.85$ ) and socially distant condition ( $M = 5.48, SD = 0.55$ ), was also in the expected direction, but was not significant  $F(1, 102) = 2.80, p = .097, \eta^2 = .03$  (Hypothesis 2 not supported at a two-sided p-value of .05).

## Discussion

The results of Study 1 provided initial support for the hypothesis that construal-compatible voice messages receive stronger endorsement than construal-incompatible voice messages. The contrast analysis showed the effects to be significant for low-level messages (feasibility), and close to significant ( $p < .10$ ) for high-level messages (desirability). Replication of the construal compatibility effect would strengthen the confidence in the results. Therefore, we conducted a second experiment.

## Study 2

In Study 2, we sought to replicate the findings of Study 1 using a different set of manipulations of psychological distance and of voice message frame – *polite vs. colloquial* for the voice message frame and *spatial distance* for the psychological distance. That is, we tested the hypothesis that *polite* voice messages are endorsed more strongly by supervisors who are spatially far from (vs. close to) the voicing employee, while *colloquial* messages are endorsed more strongly by supervisors who are spatially close to (vs. far from) the employee.

## Method

### Participants

We recruited 106 professionals (12.3% female) with an average age of 47.45 ( $SD = 11.43$ ,  $range = 23\text{--}68$ ) through email and social media sites. As in Study 1, all participants had at least one year of supervisory experience.

### Procedure and materials

The procedure was similar to that of Study 1, except that we used different manipulations of psychological distance and voice message frame (see below), and a slightly different voice scenario. The experiment began with a presentation of a managerial scenario similar to the one used by Fast et al. (2014). Participants were asked to adopt the role of Chief Operations Officer (COO) of a commuter airline. As COO, they are responsible, among other things, for customer satisfaction. Participants read that they (as COO), in response to an increasing number of complaints, had created a strategic plan to restructure the company (see Fast et al., 2014, for more details). The next screenshot showed an email sent by one of the employees. In the email, the employee raises concerns about the plan (i.e., shortage of time and personnel) and offers suggestions for improving the current plan. Participants then responded to several questions measuring voice endorsement and they completed manipulation checks. Participants were also asked to speculate about the general purpose of the study. None of the participants guessed the study's hypothesis.

### Manipulations

#### Spatial distance

In the spatially close condition, participants read that they and the employee were both operating Amsterdam. In the spatially distant condition, participants read that they were stationed in Amsterdam and that the employee was operating from Madrid (for a similar approach, see Jia, Hirt, & Karpen, 2009). In addition, participants were shown a map representing their current location (Amsterdam), and the location of the employee (spatially close: Amsterdam; spatially distant: Madrid) (See Supplemental Materials, Figure S1).

#### Polite vs. colloquial voice

In the polite voice condition (high-level message frame), the employee used formal language, for instance by using softening words, indirect expressions, and modal verbs (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Stephan et al., 2010). Sample sentences from the polite condition are: "Through this email, I would like to share with you my view on the recently communicated strategic plan", "Looking at the resources and demands required by the plan, I regrettably have to conclude that there will be a shortage of time and personnel", "Should you need any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me."

In the colloquial voice condition (low-level message frame), the employee used informal language. The tone was more casual and conversational. Sample sentences from the colloquial voice condition are: "I want to respond to the new strategic plan that was recently communicated", "We will never be able to do our jobs in such short notice, and certainly not with the current

numbers.", and "Get in touch with me if you have questions." Both email messages contained approximately the same number of words (polite: 203 words vs. colloquial: 173 words).

### Measures

#### Voice endorsement

was measured using the same items as in Study 1 (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .78$ ).

#### Manipulation checks

The voice message manipulation check consisted of one item asking participants to assess the politeness of the email message (from 1 = *Strongly disagree* to 7 = *Strongly agree*). The item read "The employee expressed his concerns in a polite manner." For the spatial distance manipulation check we asked participants to judge the geographical distance between them and the employee who sent the email (1 = *very close*; 7 = *very far*).

### Results

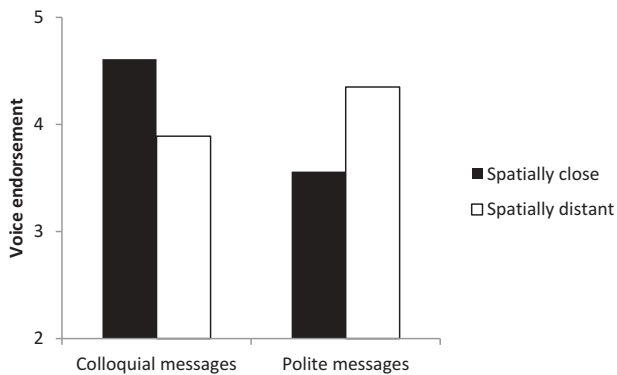
#### Manipulation checks

We again used a set of 2 (voice message frame: polite vs. colloquial)  $\times$  2 (spatial distance: close vs. far) ANOVAs. First, the polite message was perceived as more polite ( $M = 4.94$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ) than the colloquial message ( $M = 4.03$ ,  $SD = 1.50$ ),  $F(1, 102) = 10.79$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .10$ . There was no main effect of spatial distance on message politeness,  $F(1, 102) = 1.50$ ,  $p = .224$ ,  $\eta^2 = .01$ , and no interaction effect,  $F(1, 102) = 0.25$ ,  $p = .621$ ,  $\eta^2 = .00$ . Second, distance to the employee was perceived as closer in the spatially close condition ( $M = 2.48$ ,  $SD = 1.62$ ) than in the spatially distant condition ( $M = 3.89$ ,  $SD = 2.03$ ),  $F(1, 102) = 13.98$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .12$ . There was no main effect of voice message frame on perceived spatial distance,  $F(1, 102) = 0.32$ ,  $p = .575$ ,  $\eta^2 = .00$ , and no interaction effect,  $F(1, 102) = 1.00$ ,  $p = .320$ ,  $\eta^2 = .01$ . These results indicate that the manipulations worked as intended.

#### Test of hypotheses

We expected that the colloquial voice message would be more strongly endorsed when the supervisor is spatially close, rather than distant, to the employee, whereas polite messages would be more strongly endorsed when the supervisor is spatially distant, rather than close, to the employee. We conducted the same ANOVA as above, on voice endorsement. In line with our hypothesis, this analysis yielded a significant  $2 \times 2$  interaction between voice message frame and spatial distance on voice endorsement,  $F(1, 102) = 11.46$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .10$  (see Figure 2). The ANOVA showed no main effects of voice message frame,  $F(1, 102) = 1.80$ ,  $p = .182$ ,  $\eta^2 = .02$ , and spatial distance,  $F(1, 102) = 0.02$ ,  $p = .882$ ,  $\eta^2 = .00$ , on voice endorsement.

Next, planned contrasts showed that colloquial voice messages were more strongly endorsed when distance was near ( $M = 4.61$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ), compared with far ( $M = 3.89$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ),  $F(1, 102) = 5.58$ ,  $p = .020$ ,  $\eta^2 = .05$  (Hypothesis 1 supported). In contrast, polite voice messages were more strongly endorsed when distance was far ( $M = 4.35$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ), compared with near ( $M = 3.56$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ),  $F(1, 102) = 5.94$ ,  $p = .017$ ,  $\eta^2 = .06$  (Hypothesis 2 supported).



**Figure 2.** The interactive effect of spatial distance and colloquial vs. polite voice messages on voice endorsement (study 2;  $N = 106$ ).

### Discussion

Consistent with our construal compatibility hypothesis, supervisors more strongly endorsed colloquial voice messages when the employee was spatially close, rather than far, whereas supervisors more strongly endorsed polite voice messages when the employee was spatially far, rather than close. Taken together, Studies 1 and 2 largely provide converging evidence for the effect of construal compatibility on voice endorsement, and they did so using varying experimental manipulations of both psychological distance and voice message frame. This consistency across different operationalizations provides confidence in the findings. The objective of our next study was to further corroborate these findings and to provide an initial test of our experienced ease-of-processing explanation.

### Study 3

In Study 3, we again sought to replicate the construal compatibility effect under slightly different circumstances. Voice message frame was manipulated as in Study 2 (polite vs. colloquial). Psychological distance was manipulated by varying the social distance between employee and supervisor as in Study 1. Furthermore, we sought to extend the findings from Studies 1 and 2 by investigating whether experienced ease-of-processing explains the construal compatibility effect. Experienced ease-of-processing was measured prior to measuring the dependent variable, voice endorsement.

### Method

#### Participants

We recruited 102 professionals (38.1% female) with an average age of 40.48 ( $SD = 10.77$ , range = 22–68) through email and social media sites. As in Studies 1 and 2, all participants had at least one year of supervisory experience.

#### Procedure and materials

The procedure was similar to the procedure of Studies 1 and 2. Identical to Study 1, participants were asked to adopt the role of aircraft turnaround manager.

### Manipulations

#### Social distance

Social distance was manipulated in the exact same way as was done in Study 1 by showing the participants a picture of the voice sender (see above for details).

#### Polite vs. colloquial voice

Similar to Study 2, voice message frame was manipulated by varying the politeness of the voice message. Sample sentences from the polite condition read: "I am sorry to bother you with my concern", and "If I may suggest, Flycheap may think of using hydraulic lifts for the overweight luggage". Sample sentences from the colloquial condition read: "I bet that this backache issue will increase over time", and "As I see it, all this can be avoided if you provide us with hydraulic lifts." Both messages had approximately the same number of words (polite: 164 words vs. colloquial: 173 words).

**Experienced ease-of-processing** was measured using three items derived from Lee and Aaker (2004). The items read: "The employee's message was easy to process", "The employee's message was difficult to comprehend" and "I felt immersed when reading the information" (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .71$ ). Participants responded to the items on a scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*).

**Voice endorsement** was measured using the same items as in Studies 1 and 2 (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .84$ ).

#### Manipulation checks

Four items checked the voice message manipulation, asking participants to assess the politeness of the email message. Sample items read: "The employee expressed his/her concerns in a polite manner" and "The employee addressed me courteously" (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .84$ ). The same four items as in Study 1 were used to check the social distance manipulation (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .80$ ). All items were answered on a scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*).

### Results

#### Manipulation checks

The results of a 2 (voice message frame: polite vs. colloquial)  $\times$  2 (social distance: near vs. far), ANOVA on perceived politeness showed that the polite message was perceived to be more polite ( $M = 5.63$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ) than the colloquial message ( $M = 4.08$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ),  $F(1, 98) = 43.77$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .31$ . The main effect of social distance,  $F(1, 98) = 1.11$ ,  $p = .295$ ,  $\eta^2 = .01$ , and the interaction effect,  $F(1, 98) = 0.01$ ,  $p = .920$ ,  $\eta^2 = .00$ , on message politeness were not significant. The same ANOVA on perceived social distance showed that participants in the socially close condition rated the employee to be more close and similar ( $M = 3.11$ ,  $SD = 0.7$ ) than participants in the socially distant condition ( $M = 2.60$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ),  $F(1, 98) = 10.19$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $\eta^2 = .09$ . The main effect of voice message frame,  $F(1, 98) = 1.46$ ,  $p = .230$ ,  $\eta^2 = .02$ , and the interaction effect,  $F(1, 98) = 0.06$ ,  $p = .809$ ,  $\eta^2 = .00$ , on perceived social distance were not significant. These results indicate that the manipulations worked as intended.



## Test of hypotheses

### Voice endorsement

We expected colloquial voice messages to be more strongly endorsed when the supervisor is socially close to, rather than socially distant from, the employee, while polite messages are more strongly endorsed when the supervisor is socially distant from, rather than socially close to, the employee.

As before, a  $2 \times 2$  ANOVA on voice endorsement revealed a significant interaction effect,  $F(1, 98) = 11.09, p = .001, \eta^2 = .10$  (see Figure 3). Planned contrasts showed that the colloquial voice message was more strongly endorsed when it came from a socially close employee ( $M = 5.28, SD = 0.92$ ), compared to a socially distant employee ( $M = 4.14, SD = 1.54$ ),  $F(1, 98) = 11.80, p = .001, \eta^2 = .11$  (Hypothesis 1 supported). For the polite message, the difference in endorsement between socially close ( $M = 5.07, SD = 0.99$ ) and socially distant employees ( $M = 5.47, SD = 1.03$ ), was also in the expected direction but was not statistically significant,  $F(1, 98) = 1.54, p = .218, \eta^2 = .02$  (Hypothesis 2 not supported). The analysis also showed a significant main effect of voice message frame on voice endorsement,  $F(1, 98) = 5.86, p = .017, \eta^2 = .06$ ; voice endorsement was higher in the polite condition ( $M = 5.29, SD = 1.02$ ) compared to the colloquial condition ( $M = 4.65, SD = 1.41$ ). There was no main effect of social distance on voice endorsement,  $F(1, 98) = 2.58, p = .112, \eta^2 = .03$ .

### Experienced ease-of-processing

We expected that colloquial voice messages would be experienced as easier to process when the supervisor is socially close to, rather than distant from, the employee, whereas polite messages would be experienced as easier to process when the supervisor is socially distant from, rather than close to, the employee. As predicted, we observed a significant interaction effect,  $F(1, 98) = 27.78, p < .001, \eta^2 = .22$ . Planned contrasts showed that colloquial voice messages were experienced as easier to process when coming from a socially close employee ( $M = 5.48, SD = 0.48$ ), compared to a socially distant employee ( $M = 4.89, SD = 0.50$ ),  $F(1, 98) = 18.26, p < .001, \eta^2 = .16$ . In contrast, polite messages were experienced as easier to process when coming from a socially distant employee ( $M = 5.60, SD = 0.46$ ), compared to a socially close employee ( $M = 5.17, SE = 0.51$ ),  $F(1,$

$98) = 10.05, p = .002, \eta^2 = .09$ . The ANOVA on experienced ease-of-processing also revealed a significant main effect of message frame,  $F(1, 98) = 4.18, p = .044, \eta^2 = .04$ ; experienced ease-of-processing was higher in the polite condition ( $M = 5.40, SD = 0.52$ ) compared to the colloquial condition ( $M = 5.16, SD = 0.57$ ). There was no main effect of social distance on perceived ease-of-processing,  $F(1, 98) = 0.69, p = .407, \eta^2 = .01$ .

### Conditional indirect effect analysis

To investigate whether experienced ease-of-processing mediates the interactive relationship between voice message framing and social distance on voice endorsement, a conditional indirect effects analysis was conducted following the procedures of Hayes (2018). For this analysis, we used model 8 in the PROCESS macro for SPSS with 10,000 bootstrapped samples. The conditional indirect effect of the message framing by social distance interaction on voice endorsement through experienced ease-of-processing was computed and 95% confidence intervals for the effects were computed. If the confidence intervals do not contain zero it implies the results support mediation.

Results showed that the total indirect effect (interaction between message frame and social distance  $\rightarrow$  experienced ease-of-processing  $\rightarrow$  voice endorsement) was  $B = -1.14, SE = 0.32, 95\% \text{ CI bias corrected } [-1.90, -0.63]$ , and the confidence interval thus does not include zero. The conditional indirect effect was supported in the polite condition, indirect effect =  $0.49, SE = 0.18, 95\% \text{ CI bias corrected } [0.20, 0.92]$ . This result means that the socially distant polite employee's message was endorsed more strongly compared with the socially close polite employee's message *because* the message felt easier to process. The conditional indirect effect was also supported in the colloquial condition, indirect effect =  $-0.65, SE = 0.21, 95\% \text{ CI bias corrected } [-1.14, -0.29]$ . This result means that the socially close colloquial employee's message was endorsed more strongly compared with the socially distant colloquial employee's message *because* it was felt easier to process. Following our prediction, experienced ease-of-processing statistically accounted for the construal compatibility effect on voice endorsement (Hypothesis 3 supported). Despite the direct effect on voice endorsement only being significant in the colloquial message condition, and not in the polite message condition, both indirect effects are strongly supportive of the hypothesis.

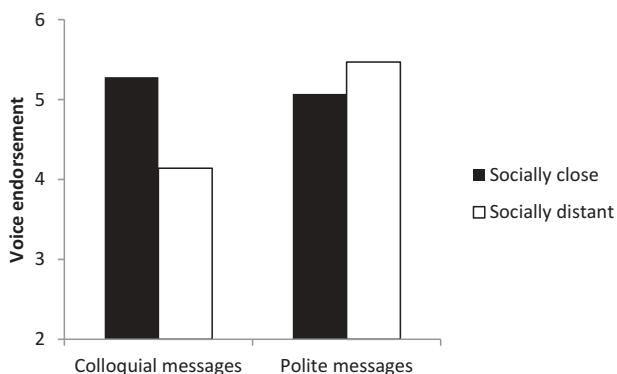


Figure 3. The interactive effect of social distance and colloquial vs. polite voice messages on voice endorsement (study 3;  $N = 102$ ).

## Discussion

The findings of Study 3 corroborated those of Studies 1 and 2. Again, voice message frame and psychological distance interacted in predicting voice endorsement. Voice messages formulated at a low level (i.e., colloquial) were more strongly endorsed when the psychological (i.e., social) distance to the employee was close rather far. Endorsement of high level of construal (i.e. polite) messages did not differ significantly between the psychologically close or distant conditions, although the pattern was in the anticipated direction. Moreover, we found that for both frames of the voice message, experienced ease-of-processing carried the construal compatibility effect of psychological distance on voice endorsement. Construal-compatible voice messages foster

experienced ease-of-processing, whereas construal-incompatible messages lower experienced ease-of-processing. Experienced ease-of-processing, in turn, increased the likelihood of the message being endorsed. The effect on experienced ease-of-processing was strong and significant, but the effect on endorsement was less (and in one case not significant) strong than in the other studies. One explanation of this is that the measurement of experienced ease-of-processing interfered with the measurement of endorsement (Spencer, Zanna, & Fong, 2005). In any case, this study combined two of the design features of Studies 1 and 2 and found evidence that construal compatibility significantly affected experienced ease-of-processing, and that experienced ease-of-processing accounted for the effect on voice endorsement.

### Meta-analysis & further comparisons across studies

Because some of the hypothesized contrasts in the three individual studies were not statistically significant using a two-sided criterion, we conducted a meta-analysis across our three studies. Specifically, just as in the individual studies, we look at the difference between the two psychological distance conditions within each of the voice message frame conditions. We used the mean values, standard deviations, and cell counts to determine Cohen's *d* statistics for all of the comparisons, which we then meta-analysed according to the procedure by Goh, Hall, and Rosenthal (2016). The cell counts are given here so that the reader may reproduce our meta-analysis in detail.

First, within the *low construal level* message condition (colloquially-toned or feasibility-focused), Cohen's *d* for the difference between near and far distance conditions, for Studies 1, 2, and 3, were, respectively, 0.78 ( $n_1 = 27, n_2 = 26$ ), 0.70 ( $n_1 = 29, n_2 = 30$ ), and 0.88 ( $n_1 = 23, n_2 = 27$ ). The meta-analytic mean *d* was 0.78, ( $SE = 0.16$ ),  $Z = 4.78, p < .00001$ , and the confidence interval around this mean *d* was 0.46 to 1.10.

Within the *high construal level* message condition (politely-toned or desirability-focused), Cohen's *d* for the difference between near and far distance conditions, for Studies 1, 2, and 3, were 0.49 ( $n_1 = 26, n_2 = 27$ ), 0.62 ( $n_1 = 21, n_2 = 26$ ), and 0.40 ( $n_1 = 24, n_2 = 28$ ), respectively. The meta-analytic mean *d* was 0.50, ( $SE = 0.17$ ),  $Z = 3.01, p = .0026$ , and the confidence interval around this mean *d* was 0.17 to 0.82. As in the preceding results sections of the paper, these *p* values are for a two-tailed hypothesis. Thus, meta-analytically across the three studies, the data provide support for our construal compatibility hypotheses.

In Studies 1 and 3, we manipulated social distance using interpersonal demographic similarity and dissimilarity (gender and ethnicity) and the validity of that manipulation should be discussed in the light of the distribution of those characteristics within the respective studies. The vast majority of our participants in both studies were White Europeans. This raises the question whether the results could be explained by other ethnicity-related factors. We would argue that this would not offer a more reasonable explanation. One might observe that the colloquial message was endorsed considerably less in Study 3's large social distance condition (which therefore has mainly White participants with Black voicers) compared with the other messages. However, the same pattern was found in Study 2 where we did not manipulate *social* distance (so sender-

receiver difference in ethnicity is not a factor in Study 2), and the same was found in Study 1 where we did not manipulate politeness, which shows the same effect regardless of interpersonal tone. Hence, the conclusion and support for construal compatibility stands based on the three studies' collective results.

### General discussion

In this article, we drew on construal-level theory to develop a model of when and why voice-receiving supervisors will be more or less likely to endorse voice. In particular, we hypothesized that supervisors would be more likely to endorse improvement-oriented suggestions when the high level (desirability-focused or politely-toned) versus low level (feasibility-focused or colloquially-toned) framing of the voice message and the level at which the supervisor construes the voice event (due to psychological distance) are compatible. With increasing psychological distance, voice messages that contain high-level features should be evaluated more positively. Conversely, with decreasing psychological distance, voice messages that contain low-level features should be evaluated more positively. We further posited that experienced ease-of-processing explains why construal compatibility enhances voice endorsement.

Results of three laboratory experiments with varying operationalizations of voice message frame and of psychological distance, followed by a mini meta-analysis, provided consistent support for our hypotheses. Specifically, in Study 1 we found that voice messages emphasizing feasibility were more likely to be endorsed when the supervisor was socially close (vs. distant) to the employee. The results of Study 2 similarly showed support for the role of construal compatibility in that colloquially formulated voice messages were more likely to be endorsed when the supervisor was spatially close (vs. far) from the employee, and politely formulated voice messages were more likely to be endorsed when the supervisor was spatially far (vs. close) from the employee. Study 3 further replicated the construal compatibility effect and demonstrated that experienced ease-of-processing accounted for this effect. A mini meta-analysis of these studies indicated that the difference between the psychologically near and far conditions was significant within the high construal level as well as the low construal level message condition. Taken together, our theorizing and empirical results attest to the value of taking a construal-level perspective to advance our understanding of voice endorsement.

### Theoretical contributions

First, the present research contributes to voice literature by introducing and testing construal compatibility as a new interactive logic for understanding voice endorsement. Whereas recent work has started to move beyond *main* effects towards *interactive* effects of message, sender, context, and receiver attributes on voice endorsement (e.g. Lam et al., 2018; Sijbom et al., 2015b; Urbach & Fay, 2018), we propose that our construal-level approach can further advance this emerging area of investigation by offering a unifying principle to guide studies examining different components of voice communication (see Lee, 2019). Although this construal-level approach is not all-

encompassing (see below), it nevertheless can encompass many instantiations of message factors (e.g. desirability-feasibility, polite-colloquial) and relational factors (e.g. social distance, geographical distance) and offers a logic of how to theoretically combine them. In this way, it can potentially shed light on previous inconclusive findings as well as forge new avenues for future research.

For example, construal-level theory may explain why previous research did not consistently find main effects of positive (vs. negative) voice framing (Whiting et al., 2012). In particular, construal-level theory expects receivers to evaluate positive high-level (vs. negative low-level) messages more favourably when they are psychologically distant from (vs. close to) the sender (Eyal, Liberman, Trope, & Walther, 2004); positive information is taken into account in decision-making *before* negative information and is therefore a superordinate, higher-level category of information than negative information. Thus, varying psychological distance levels may explain previous inconsistent findings in this regard (see also Freling, Vincent, & Henard, 2014). In a similar vein, construal-level theory could also stimulate novel insights regarding the effectiveness of prohibitive and promotive types of voice under varying conditions of psychological distance versus proximity. After all, prohibitive voice reflects a largely negative message, where an employee expresses concerns about existing practices, incidents, and behaviours that may harm the organization (“what is/can be wrong/harmful”). Promotive voice reflects a largely positive message, where an employee expresses ideas for how to improve future organizational functioning (“what can be better”) (Liang, Farh, & Farh, 2012).

As another example, although prior research largely demonstrates that voice that occurs early in the process is better received than voice that occurs later in the process (Whiting et al., 2012), construal-level theory suggests that the effect of high temporal distance may hold only for voice that is formulated at high construal level (e.g. desirability, polite). The reverse may hold for voice that is formulated at a low construal level (e.g. feasibility, colloquial). In sum, we contend that taking a construal-level perspective to voice endorsement has the potential to resolve previous partial or inconsistent findings by shedding light on important contingencies in view of either message factors or relational context factors. Construal level theory has done so in other research domains; for example, Berson and colleagues (Berson & Halevy, 2014; Berson et al., 2015) reconciled more abstract visionary approaches to leadership and more concrete goal-based approaches to leadership by showing how both approaches can promote job satisfaction and commitment depending on employees’ social distance to their leader.

Not only can construal-level theory help in understanding prior research, it also has the potential to inform new ways of thinking about voice effectiveness. The theory’s two central concepts – message framing and psychological distance – can be operationalized in myriad ways (Davidson & Van Dyne, 2017). For example, the theory’s distinction between high and low construal levels may give rise to new voice typologies, such as polite versus colloquial voice, indirect versus direct voice (see Lam et al., 2018), desirability-focused versus feasibility-focused voice, and idealistic versus pragmatic

voice. Similarly, accounting for psychological distance in voice endorsement should be increasingly relevant in today’s workplace where managers are leading diverse employees (conducive to variability in social distance) in a global workplace (conducive to variability in spatial distance). Taken together, construal-level theory provides a unifying framework that can encompass existing as well as hitherto unexamined determinants of voice endorsement and therefore promotes a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

This being said, construal-level theory cannot account for all known predictors of voice endorsement. Whereas some existing predictors map onto key constructs in construal-level theory (e.g. positive/negative voice message framing as high/low construal-level), several known predictors do not. For example, motivational predictors such as supervisor’s power motive (Urbach & Fay, 2018) or supervisor’s achievement goals (Sijbom et al., 2015b) have been shown to influence voice endorsement in interaction with other variables, yet these motivational variables cannot readily map onto the proposed message framing and relational context factors in our construal-level theory approach. As another example, whereas Lam et al. (2018) examined voice politeness – which can theoretically map onto message framing at a high/low level of construal – the authors employed voice politeness as a proxy for warmth and let it vary from polite to rude, rather than from polite to colloquial (i.e., high/low construal level), thereby inhibiting correspondence to construal-level theory. Their newly introduced voice directness dimension may however have more potential for integration within a construal-level theory framework as one may imagine that more direct voice tends to reflect a more low-level construal, whereas indirect voice may reflect a high construal-level (Davidson & Van Dyne, 2017). Given the uniqueness of construal-level theory-related constructs compared to constructs in other theoretical frameworks it may not be surprising that previous investigations based on other theoretical accounts cannot readily fit construal-level theory. Rather, to benefit from construal-level theory application to voice endorsement we believe that the application of this theory has to be deliberate and identifying relevant variables within the voice domain requires theoretical rigour (see also Lee, 2019).

Unlike previous studies on voice endorsement which examined employee and supervisor attributes largely independently, construal-level theory allowed us to explicitly account for a *relational* dimension between the employee and the supervisor by means of the concept of psychological distance. As such, we recognize that all meaning in (voice) communication is inherently social and is socially constructed: the same (voice) message can mean different things to different people, depending on the relationship between sender and receiver (Krauss & Fussell, 1996). Specifically, polite (vs. colloquial) voice messages and voice messages emphasizing the desirability (vs. feasibility) of a solution are more persuasive if sender and receiver have a distant (vs. close) relationship.

Taking a construal-level perspective also contributes to the voice literature by introducing experienced ease-of-processing as a mechanism underlying the impact of construal compatibility on voice endorsement. Prior work has relied on the

elaboration likelihood model, schema-triggered affect, and attribution theory to respectively examine the role of threat and loyalty, the role of liking, and the role of attributed motives (Burris, 2012; Chiaburu et al., 2013; Whiting et al., 2012). Extending these theoretical perspectives, we accentuate the role of experienced ease-of-processing as another key explanatory mechanism. We call for future research to investigate whether these different mechanisms operate in parallel, which of these mechanisms is generally stronger, and under which conditions each is activated.

### **Practical implications**

Organizations cannot function without employee proactive behaviours such as voice, as they need to remain competitive in today's ever-changing business environment. At the same time, however, today's workplace, with its increasing geographical dispersion and social separation, reduces the likelihood that collaborators (e.g. peers, leader-follower) will construe voiced suggestions in a way that leads to favourable evaluations and to serious consideration of the suggestions (Davidson & Van Dyne, 2017). Hence, construal *incompatibility* may be common, and voice may often be misunderstood and evaluated unfavourably, despite potentially high-quality suggestions.

The above-described workplace reality implies that our research has practical implications for employees, supervisors, and organizations. From an employee perspective it will be important to understand how they may formulate their improvement-oriented suggestions so that they are compatible with the receiver's psychological distance. Specifically, our results suggest that employees can facilitate voice endorsement by formulating their ideas at a high construal level (e.g. desirability-focused, politely-toned) when addressing a receiver who is socially or spatially distant to them, versus doing so at a low construal level (e.g. feasibility-focused, colloquially-toned) when addressing a receiver who is socially or spatially close to them. For example, to be effective, out-group members may need to speak up to their supervisor focusing on the desirability ("why?") of their ideas, whereas in-group members may need to speak up by focusing on the feasibility ("how?") of their ideas. In sum, while employees need to be proactive in expressing their improvement-oriented suggestions, an important practical implication of our research is that they also need to be proactive in how they *formulate* their change-oriented ideas so that their expressions fit the construal level of the receiver (Davidson & Van Dyne, 2017).

Second, from an organizational or voice receiver perspective it will be important to exert effort to proactively make sense of others' suggestions. This is especially important given that the most influential receivers of voice are supervisors (Detert et al., 2013), who tend to construe issues and events at a higher level than employees do on average (Davidson & Van Dyne, 2017). Thus, although supervisors may initially believe that some employee voice is irrelevant, ill-informed, or unhelpful, after deliberate and careful sense-making they might conclude otherwise. Sense-making entails "the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing" (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 409). In other words, it may be necessary to train supervisors to attempt to override their

heuristic (difficulty-of-processing-biased) response to voice behaviour. In the context of voice, supervisors may want to put deliberate effort into interpreting why an employee spoke up the way she/he did, and why the message does (not) subjectively feel correct (due to it being felt as easy to process). Organizations can help supervisors in developing this skill by offering training programmes and work contexts that encourage perspective taking and construal compatibility.

Third, organizations could also take actions to prevent construal incompatibility in voice events. For example, organizations could exert effort to create mutual awareness so that sender and receiver are better able to adopt each other's perspectives on important work issues and each gains a more accurate understanding of the other's workplace reality. In addition, organizations could manage its processes to make sure that all actors in the organization find the time and the kind of information to better frame (i.e., sender's perspective) and process (i.e., receiver's perspective) information that is being exchanged.

### **Limitations and future research directions**

A potential caveat of the current studies is that, in all experiments, the voice message was presented in the form of written communication (i.e., email). Although it is no exception that employees convey their concerns and suggestions to authority in writing, it may not be the most common or preferred way of "speaking up". After all, in texts and emails, we lose the ability to ask questions that do not have easy replies, to develop closeness, and to feel known and understood (Colbert, Yee, & George, 2016), all of which are instrumental in getting the message across. Future research may investigate the extent to which the effects that we have found here transfer to "richer" types of communication, and in particular to face-to-face communication. For instance, it may be interesting to see how supervisors respond to situations in which employee verbal and non-verbal behaviour complement (e.g. abstract speech and formal work attire) or contradict each other (e.g. abstract speech and casual work attire). Similarly, while experimental methods have their advantages, their external validity is simultaneously limited. For example, endorsing the voiced suggestion or not endorsing the suggestion did not have real-life consequences in our studies. Thus, future research should extend our findings to field settings.

We found that construal compatibility led people also to report greater ease of processing of voice messages. However, one might object that ease of processing occurs outside of participants' awareness so that participants are not able to truly access the ease of processing that they had or experienced. It is possible that ease of processing simply leads people to agree with positively valenced statements about the message, which is an equally plausible explanation for the finding that construal compatibility led to higher values on our measure of self-reported ease of processing. We suggest that future research should also measure ease of processing in a more direct manner, for instance by tracking reading and response times or using recognition and recollection tasks (e.g. Lee & Aaker, 2004). Furthermore, there are several other paths through which construal compatibility could unfold in the present study and that may serve as an explanation for our results. For instance, proximity to an event may enhance preference for action-oriented communication, which is better fulfilled

when talking concretely. Conversely, when an event is distant, people may prefer openness to diverse possibilities, which is better fulfilled when communicating abstractly. Future research is needed to determine which of these explanations is most viable.

The manners in which message features and distance dimensions are instantiated in organizational life are numerous (e.g. Lee, 2019). Moreover, according to construal level theory, effects of these dimensions are all the same, meaning that they are interchangeable. We did not, for instance, manipulate temporal distance, which would have been a valid and interesting construct to manipulate. Likewise, in long-term leader-follower relationships, it may be that the *perceived* similarity associated with leader-member exchange (LMX; Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Graen, 1976) quality constitutes and important factor of distance, overriding any effect of demographic similarity. While it might be difficult to separate the effects of distance from those of other dimensions associated with LMX, such as trust, these possibilities offer interesting empirical questions. In short, by examining multiple distance dimensions and multiple message dimensions in several combinations, our studies provide coherent evidence of construal level compatibility in voice endorsement.

## Conclusion

We drew on construal-level theory to advance a model where voice endorsement depends on the compatibility between the high level versus low level framing of the voice message and the construal of the voice event as induced by the psychological distance between the receiver and the voicer. Our model and results exemplify the value of this integrative approach and accentuate the relevance of taking a construal-level perspective to voice endorsement. We hope our model and results present a stepping stone for future research in this area.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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