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## The Valuation of Social Media Voice: An Experimental Investigation\*\*

### Abstract

Social media offers individuals and organisations new opportunities for speaking up. The receiver's valuation of the sender's voice is a prerequisite for resulting change. However, the influence of modern communication channels like social media on this valuation has not yet been investigated. Against this background, our study investigates the valuation of social media voice. We conduct a scenario-based experiment in which the participants imagine themselves to be a manager who is evaluating a proposal. The results show that the valuation of voice is better if a proposal is communicated via voicemail than if it is communicated via social media, if the proposal is based on the opinion of an individual rather than that of a group, and if the source is an expert. We also find a three-way interaction between the channel, source, and source credibility. The paper provides contributions to research on employee voice, the ELM, and the Social Presence Theory. We discuss our findings and derive opportunities for future research and implications for both employees and organisations.

Keywords: employee voice, social media, social influence, source credibility, valuation of voice (JEL: M50, M59, O33, C9)

### Introduction

The crash of United Airlines flight 173 in 1978, the Enron fraud scandal in 2001 and the destruction of the Columbia space shuttle in 2003—all were triggered or aggravated by employees who failed to transmit information about problems to authorities (Milliken et al., 2003; Morrison, 2011). Although these examples are extreme cases, even in everyday working situations, many individuals are faced with the decision about whether to share important information. This behaviour, which research refers to as (employee) voice, describes "how employees are able to have a say in work activities and organisational decision-making issues" (Barry &

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Wilkinson, 2016, p. 264). Employees often challenge the status quo in an effort to improve ways of working or to focus attention on past and present problems that can harm the organisation (Liang et al., 2012).

Research on voice focuses on factors that predict voice and voice consequences (Mowbray et al., 2015). For example, conscientiousness, extraversion (Maynes & Podsakoff, 2014), and feelings of psychological safety (Köllner et al., 2018) increase the amount of voice expressed by employees, while abusive supervision and work-related dissatisfaction tend to discourage voice (Ng & Feldman, 2012). Voice can be used to increase teams' and organisations' effectiveness, while employees who express voice gain a sense of control and appreciation that can have a positive effect on their job satisfaction and loyalty (Morrison, 2014). On the downside, voice can, for example, negatively affect employees' promotability because challenging the status quo and the resulting change may upset others at work (Seibert et al., 2001).

One central prerequisite for benefitting from voice as an organisation is the endorsement of the suggested proposal (Morrison, 2014), so recipients—usually managers—have to value the employees' proposals (Burriss et al., 2017). This assessment is a subjective process that depends particularly on the frequency of voice and its content, manner, and source (Howell et al., 2015). The few studies on recipients' valuation of voice show, for example, that the repression of emotions such as frustration positively affects voice valuation, as comments are otherwise perceived as unconstructive and as being similar to complaints and accusations (Grant & Mayer, 2009).

With regard to how voice is communicated, Howell et al. (2015) investigate the influence of communication channels on the valuation of voice. Digitisation offers new ways to express voice. For instance, social media provides opportunities to make suggestions or draw executives' attention to grievances (Leonardi & Vaast, 2017; McCloskey & McDonnell, 2018; McFarland & Ployhart, 2015). Within seconds, news, pictures, and videos can be shared not only between the employee and the manager but with the whole world (Kapoor et al., 2018). In this way, suggestions can be illustrated with initial sketches and problems in the operational business as they occur. To date, organisations use social media primarily for external communication with customers or job applicants and for internal communication and collaboration (Leonardi & Vaast, 2017). IBM, for instance, states that more than 300,000 employees have used the company's internal enterprise social media platform (ESMP) for online brainstorming and problem-solving sessions (Martin et al., 2015). Those platforms bundle features like blogs and networking services into a single application for organisation-wide use (Estell et al., 2021; McAfee, 2009).

Besides the potential of social media for organisations, such communication channels may facilitate employee involvement, as it can be a replacement for employees' participation in trade unions (Budd, 2014; Holland et al., 2019), which is declining, and lower response rates to attitude surveys and concealment of concerns

(Donaghey et al., 2011; Holland et al., 2016). Further potential lies in the possibility for employees to speak up when they are working from home, and channels like personal conversations are not accessible. In this case, even virtual meetings via video platforms are often not a satisfactory alternative for employees who wish to express voice (Lantz, 2001). During those meetings, task orientation is higher than it is in face-to-face meetings, where little time is left for discussing topics like personal concerns and proposals to improve organisational functioning. However, the increasing use of social media is also associated with risks for individuals and organisations. Especially if the organisation has no established social media policies, faster and wider dissemination of false information, online witch-hunts, and privacy abuses could occur (Baccarella et al., 2018).

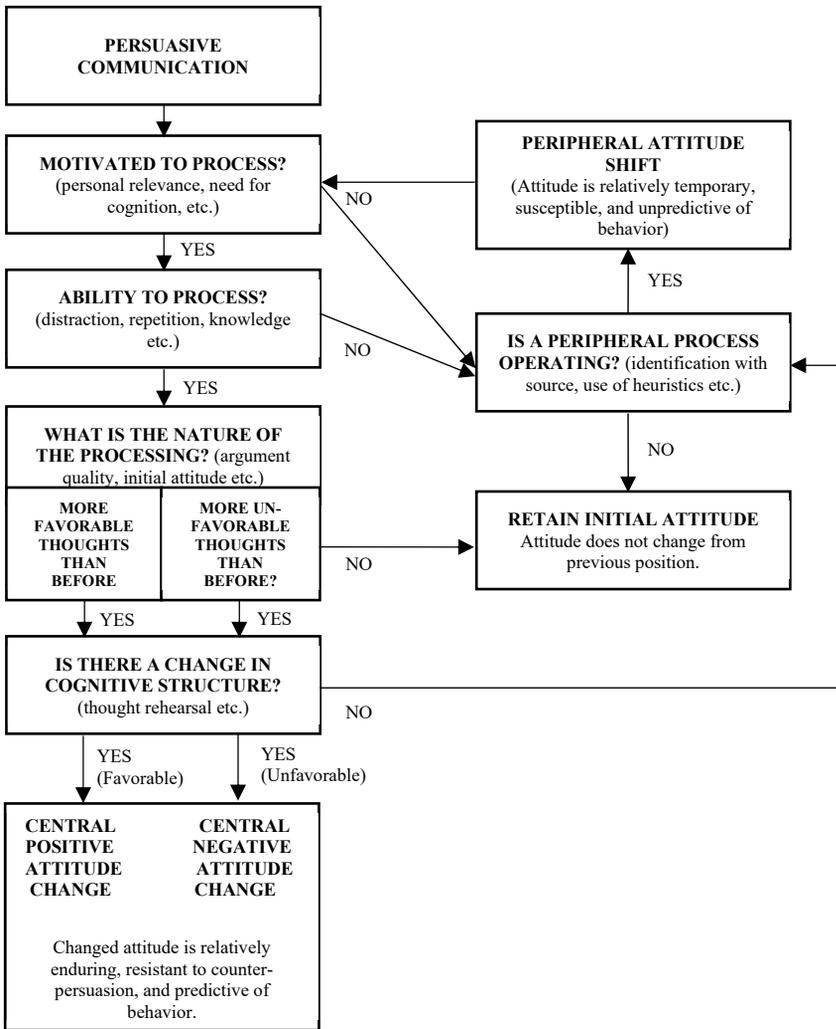
Despite the popularity of electronic communications in organisations, studies that deal with individual attitudes toward their use in everyday work are lacking (Kapoor et al., 2018). As a result, little is known about the influence of social media on employee voice and especially about the outcomes of social media voice in comparison to the outcomes of traditional voice channels (Holland et al., 2019). Depending on its features, such as anonymity, visibility, and the employees' perceptions of being part of an online community (Martin et al., 2015), social media may either encourage or discourage voice (Ellmer & Reichel, 2020). Furthermore, managers' reactions to concerns expressed through employee voice are central to realising the full potential of modern communication channels, and the organisations benefit from voice (Holland et al., 2016). If managers do not react to voice, employees will keep their concerns to themselves (Miles & Mangold, 2014; Saunders et al., 1992) and will instead turn to use these channels to complain (Richards, 2008). In such cases, organisations may choose to rely exclusively on established channels for voice and remove the modern communication channels. However, if managers react to voice, the employee's self-perception increases, promoting the future exercise of employee voice (Janssen & Gao, 2015).

Information about the differences in the valuation of voice based on the communication channel can help employees choose the right channel for speaking up. Huang et al. (2018) show that managers tend to give negative evaluations to employees who express voice too frequently because their proposals may not be well thought through. Against this background, our study investigates recipients' valuation of social media voice. Thus, we will answer the following question: Is social media an appropriate channel to express voice, or do employees run the risk that their proposals will not be valued, so they are better off continuing to use traditional channels. Therefore, we first present the theoretical background and the development of our hypotheses. Then we describe the study's research design and sample. Next, we describe our results and discuss them with regard to their applicability to research and practice. Finally, we discuss the study's limitations and make suggestions for future research.

## Theoretical Background and Development of Hypotheses

When individuals speak up in organisations, managers do not automatically pay attention and process the information, as they handle reams of information and multiple concerns daily (Walsh, 1995). The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), which describes the underlying processes of persuasive communication (see Figure 1), postulates that individuals' propensity to deal with topics depends on their personal motivation and ability to process information (Petty et al., 1983). Depending on the values of both, information processing proceeds on a continuum between "not wasting a thought" and "complete integration of the information into own attitudes" (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). If a recipient is motivated and able to process information, the likelihood of responding and elaborating is high. The ability to do so is influenced by prior knowledge, distraction, and complexity, among others (Petty et al., 1983). A recipient is motivated to process information, for instance, if he has a strong view about a topic (Fabrigar et al., 1998) or is inclined to effortful cognitive activity (Cacioppo et al., 1983). Consequently, information processing occurs via the central route, which leads to critical cognitive thinking, a recall of relevant past associations and experiences from memory, carefully analysed arguments, and well-considered and persistent attitudes (Haugtvedt et al., 1992; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Under the central route, information is not necessarily processed objectively but possibly with bias. Thus, strong initial attitudes can lead to greater attention being paid to arguments that support them. If the elaboration likelihood is low, for example, if a message is of low personal relevance, information processing occurs via the peripheral route, which requires little cognitive effort (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The peripheral route relies on peripheral cues or inferences like heuristics or the attractiveness of the message's source instead of argument quality (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and is less stable and predictable in the long run (Bhattacharjee & Sanford, 2006). In general, the factors that influence the route that is taken are the message, the source, the context, and the recipient (O'Keefe, 1990; Whiting et al., 2012).

**Figure 1. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Wegener, 1999)**



The communication channel is a contextual influencing factor (Di Blasio & Milani, 2008). The Social Presence Theory (Short et al., 1976) provides a possible explanation for the differential influence of communication channels on how information is processed. The theory states that communication channels differ in the extent to which they give individuals the subjective feeling of being present with a "real" person, such as whether the feeling of intimacy and immediacy can be created by nonverbal cues (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997). Without being able to use such cues as body language and facial expression (McGinley et al., 1975), individuals find it

more difficult to create trust and empathy and to be perceived as well-meaning and sympathetic (Roghanizad & Bohns, 2017). Furthermore, miscommunication may occur if a person, for example, does not understand sarcasm or humour in written text (Kruger et al., 2005).

As a result, specific communication channels, such as face-to-face and telephone communication, have a higher social presence than emails, for example, do. Therefore, they are more appropriate for certain interpersonally involving communication tasks like negotiating, bargaining, and generating new ideas (Rice, 1993). An email is more efficient and sufficient for exchanging information and asking questions, especially if a message is simple and unequivocal, because communication requires no coordination and can be done regardless of individual availabilities (Daft & Lengel, 1986).

Referring to the ELM, Robert and Dennis (2005) argue that using a medium with a high social presence results in information processing occurring via the central route and message recipients' having to make a greater effort to communicate. In addition, communication via a medium with a high social presence requires more attention from the participants since, for instance, simultaneous occupation with other activities would be noticed. As a result, recipients are also more motivated to process the message when using media with a high social presence. The voice literature suggests that the factors that influence attitude change have a similar effect on the perception of voice (Whiting et al., 2012). Several studies found that communication that uses a channel with a high social presence, such as face-to-face communication, is more effective for persuasion than certain kinds of computer-mediated communication (e.g., McGuire et al., 1987; Wilson, 2003). For example, emails are typically characterised by a low social presence, as by their use, communication occurs mostly only via written text. Therefore, we propose:

*Hypothesis 1: The valuation of voice is more positive if a proposal is communicated via a medium with a high social presence than if it is communicated via a medium with a low social presence.*

With regard to the source of a message, the ELM can help to understand attitude changes in social influence settings. The desire to make good decisions and to reduce uncertainty can lead people to consider divergent external information and rethink their own attitudes (Lee et al., 2006). Baron, Vandello, and Brunsman (1996) argue that individuals prefer to rely on their own evaluations when the motivation to process a message is high. If that motivation is low, they prefer to use the peripheral strategy of relying on the opinion of others (Wood, 2000). Messages are more easily accepted if they are transmitted by groups, regardless of whether individuals could find the right answer on their own (Winter & Krämer, 2016). Moreover, already existing attitudes may be adapted if individuals are persuaded or just want to follow the predominant opinion. Social media makes others' opinions

obtainable within seconds by, for example, commenting on shared information, which is considered one of the technology's main features (Leonardi & Vaast, 2017). Through the use of social media, it is no longer just the recipient who can observe and monitor a message's content, its source, and the subsequent interaction (Stuart et al., 2012).

Messages are perceived as more accurate if they are based on the opinion of a group (Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994; Nemeth, 1986; Surowiecki, 2004), which can lead to positively influenced attitudes (Winter et al., 2015), and individuals are more likely to be persuaded by group opinions (e.g., Asch, 1951; Axsom et al., 1987; Levitan & Verhulst, 2016; Mannes, 2009). If communication is computer-mediated, feelings of accountability are reduced, and the lack of visual presence of group members reduces fear of rejection, such as social isolation from a group (Yamaguchi, 1994; Cinnirella & Green, 2007).

Therefore, with regard to the effects of group opinions on persuasion, we propose:

*Hypothesis 2: The valuation of voice is more positive if a proposal corresponds with the attitude of a group than if it corresponds to the attitude of an individual.*

In addition to communication via a medium with a low social presence and communication corresponding with the attitude of a group, source credibility—that is, a person's expertise and trustworthiness (McGinnies & Ward, 1980; Tuppen, 1974)—is another peripheral factor, which is discussed as one of the most influential in the persuasion literature (Jones et al., 2003; O'Keefe, 1990; Pornpitakpan, 2004; Wilson & Sherell, 1993). Regarding social media, source credibility can help to process the vast amounts of generated content and reduce the risk of encountering misinformation (Colliander, 2019). Users are, for instance, better able to decide whether or not to believe (Sterrett et al., 2019) and share information (Yaqub et al., 2020), trust a brand and purchase a product (Lou & Yuan, 2019). In most situations, highly credible sources are more persuasive than less credible ones (Hass, 1981; Sternthal et al., 1978), especially if the message's personal relevance (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981) and comprehensibility (Ratneshwar & Chaiken, 1991) are low. With regard to ELM, source factors can help in the assessment of a message's arguments and merits if the likelihood of the recipient elaborating on it is high (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984). In addition, when information about the source follows the processing of a message, the recipient's thoughts about a topic can be validated and held with greater confidence, increasing the message's persuasiveness (Briñol et al., 2004). If the elaboration likelihood is low—that is, if the recipient is unmotivated or unable to process a message (Moore et al., 1986)—the source functions as a simple acceptance or rejection cue, regardless of the argument's quality (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984). If a source is perceived as an expert, recipients may substitute their own effortful cognitive processes with the less effortful peripheral route and

rely on the source's opinion without questioning the message (Bhattacharjee & Sanford, 2006; Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994) or developing counterarguments (Stephenson et al., 2001). When employee senders are perceived as experts, the message's recipient is more likely to perceive that the core of a problem addressed by voice has been identified and that proposed solutions are promising (Whiting et al., 2012). Moreover, proposals expressed by an expert are more likely to be perceived as constructive and accurate and the source as competent, resulting in the assumption that organisational functioning will be improved if the proposal is enacted. Trustworthiness has the consequence that voice is perceived as more prosocial and constructive (Whiting et al., 2012). Hence, we propose:

*Hypothesis 3: The valuation of voice is more positive if a proposal is communicated by a highly credible source than if it is communicated by a less credible source.*

In the social media context, studies show that source credibility increases the perceived quality of information and its ability to persuade (Liu et al., 2012; Sparks et al., 2013; Teng et al., 2014). In face-to-face communication, the assessment of whether a message source is credible often depends on previous interactions with the source or observations of interactions between the source and others (Zhang & Watts, 2008). With regard to social media, source credibility can function as a peripheral cue based on, for example, the source's name, the number of the source's past contributions, and the replies to the source's contributions (Chen & Ku, 2012). In social media, this information is often shown next to the message and is easy to notice. Thus, source credibility increases the persuasiveness of people who use various media for communication (see the meta-analysis of Wilson & Sherell, 1993), such as face-to-face or audio communication (e.g., Heesacker et al., 1983) and social media (e.g., Teng et al., 2014). Therefore, we propose that:

*Hypothesis 4: Source credibility positively moderates the influence of the channel, such that the valuation of voice is more positive if a proposal is communicated by a highly credible source via a channel with a high or low social presence than if it is communicated by a less credible source via a channel with a high or low social presence.*

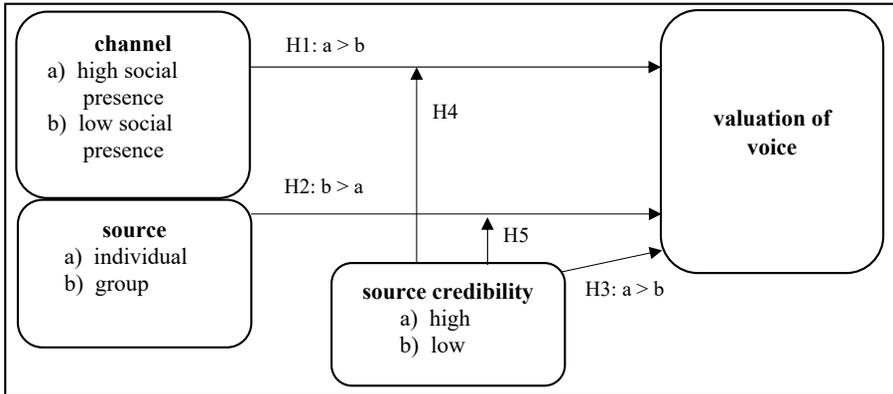
If messages are communicated by a group that is perceived as a credible source, social influence is increased, so recipients use the peripheral route for information processing, reduce their cognitive efforts, and rely on the opinion of others (Budeescu & Rantilla, 2000; Hu et al., 2019; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). Therefore, we suggest:

*Hypothesis 5: Source credibility positively moderates the influence of the source, such that the valuation of voice is more positive if a proposal is communi-*

*cated by a highly credible individual or group than if it is communicated by a less credible individual or group.*

In Figure 2, our proposed research model is shown.

**Figure 2. Research Model**



## Research Design and Sample

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a randomised vignette-based quasi-experiment using a  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  between-subject design. In this way, attitudes, intentions, and behaviour can be measured while simultaneously controlling for confounding effects (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014). This method is especially useful for investigating outcomes and processes, which is why it has been used several times before to successfully replicate field findings on the evaluation of employee voice (e.g., Burris, 2012; Maynes & Podsakoff, 2014). Participants were employees of German organisations without limitations regarding the industry, company size, or other factors. They were contacted via social media platforms such as Facebook, Xing, and LinkedIn.

### Pilot Study

To ensure the adequacy of the design, a pilot study (N = 105) was conducted in March 2020. The participants were randomly assigned to one of eight scenarios in which a proposal for process improvement was described. The scenarios varied with regard to the communication channel (voicemail/ESMP), the source (individual/group), and the source's credibility (low/high). All other aspects, such as the message content, were held constant.

First, the participants read a short introduction that asked them to imagine themselves as the head of the accounting department (as done before, e.g., by Isaakyan et al., 2020) of a logistics company and responsible for twenty-five employees.

Then, they read that a first-year apprentice (individual/low source credibility), an experienced and qualified expert for financial accounting (individual/high source credibility), a group of first-year apprentices (group/low source credibility), or a group of experienced and qualified experts for financial accounting (group/high source credibility) communicated a proposal to them. The proposal suggested introducing a new accounting software that, in the opinion of the employee(s), could help to manage customer data centrally and store documents in a legally compliant manner. In addition, the program could check entries for plausibility and inform the user of any discrepancies. The proposal was communicated either via a 40-second voicemail, to which the participant could listen or via a screenshot of the company's own social media platform. The screenshot displayed either the message with no comments (individual/ESMP) or the message with comments by other employees who agreed with the proposal (group/ESMP). To enhance external validity, the ESMP was created based on real ESMPs, such as Yammer and Jive. Next, participants assessed the value they attached to the proposal by rating two statements on a scale from 1 ("I totally disagree") to 7 ("I totally agree"): "The ideas that my employee brings me are useful" and "My employee's ideas have a lot of value for improving things around here" (Burriss et al., 2017).

To ensure that the participants had read the scenario attentively and were aware of the manipulations, we included several attention (Kung et al., 2018) and instructional manipulation-check items (Oppenheimer et al., 2009), including "Was the proposal communicated by an individual or a group?", "Was the proposal communicated via a voicemail or an enterprise social media platform?" and "Did the proposal address the implementation of a new accounting software or a new payment system?". We also checked whether the proposing employee or group of employees were perceived as experts using five items developed by Ohanian (1990), with answers ranging from 1 (e.g., "unqualified") to 7 (e.g., "qualified") and whether the proposal was perceived as promotive voice using five items from Liang et al. (2012). An example item of the promotive voice scale was "the proposal aims at improving the unit's working procedure", with answers ranging from 1 ("I totally disagree") to 7 ("I totally agree"). We also performed a realism and sympathy check on the responses. We controlled for the daily social media usage, the number of friends/contacts on social media, and social media intensity (using an adapted version of Ellison et al.'s (2007) Facebook intensity scale (example item: "social media has become part of my daily routine"), along with experience with ESMPs, sex, age, education, organisational tenure, company size, managerial responsibility, duration of managerial responsibility, and span of control.

## Main Study

The results of the pilot study led us to adjust the scenarios to make the differences in the scenarios clearer. Other than that, the research design of the main study was the same as that for the pilot study. The main study was conducted from April

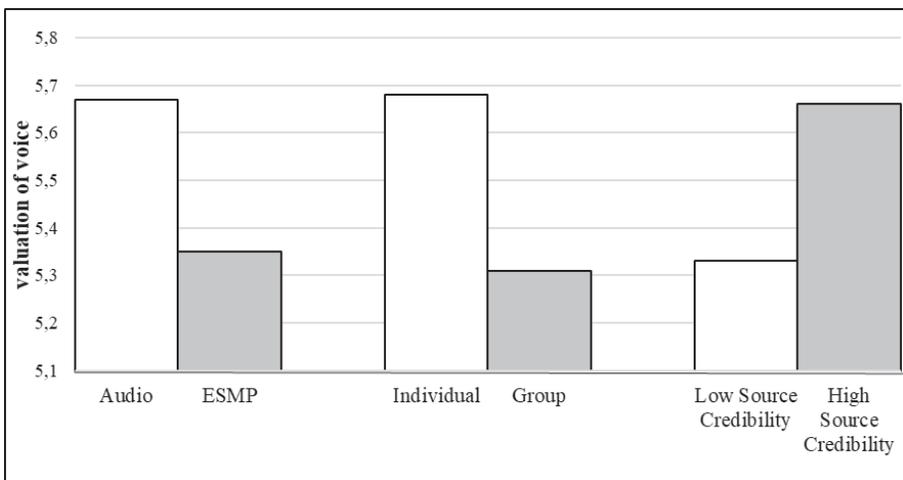
2020 to August 2020. We got high scores for the responses to the sympathy check ( $M = 5.09$ ,  $SD = 1.52$ ) and the realism check ( $M = 5.28$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ) and the internal consistency of the dependent variable was good ( $\alpha = 0.752$ ).

The main study's final sample consisted of 266 employees, of which 60 per cent were female and 40 per cent were male. The employees' ages varied between 17 and 69 years ( $M = 34.20$  years,  $SD = 11.71$ ). About a quarter (24.4 %) of the participants had managerial responsibilities for an average of about eight years and with an average span of control of about eleven employees. A large majority (98.5 %) of the participants used social media for an average of between one and two hours a day ( $M = 3.8$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ), and half of the participants used ESMPs during work.

## Results

We conducted a three-way ANOVA to test our hypotheses. The results of the ANOVA revealed that the channel as well the source's credibility have a significant effect on the participants' valuation of voice, supporting hypothesis 1 and hypothesis 3 ( $F[1,258] = 9.217$ ;  $p < .05$ ;  $\eta^2 = .034$  and  $F[1,258] = 8.985$ ;  $p < .05$ ;  $\eta^2 = .034$ ). Whether a proposal was expressed by an individual or a group had a significant effect on participants' assessments of the value of voice but in the opposite direction. The participants accorded more value to a proposal that was based on an individual's opinion, so hypothesis 2 is rejected ( $F[1,258] = 10.747$ ;  $p < .05$ ;  $\eta^2 = .040$ ). The differences in the participants' valuations across the conditions are shown in Figure 3 and Table 1. The different number of participants per scenario is due to excluding data, for example, because of failed attention checks.

**Figure 3. Differences in the Valuation of Voice**



**Table 1. Means Across Each Condition**

Scenario	111	110	101	100	011	010	001	000
Channel	voice-mail	voice-mail	voice-mail	voice-mail	ESMP	ESMP	ESMP	ESMP
Source	individual	individual	group	group	individual	individual	group	group
Source credibility	low	high	low	high	low	high	low	high
Valuation	5.50	6.03	5.57	5.59	5.58	5.65	4.54	5.41
Totals (N=266)	31	29	28	37	39	40	28	34

Hypothesis 4, which proposes that source credibility moderates the effect of the channel on the valuation of voice, is not supported, as the ANOVA showed no statistically significant effects ( $F[1,258] = .607$ ;  $p = .437$ ;  $\eta^2 = .002$ ). The interaction effect between the source and source credibility was also not significant ( $F[1,258] = .337$ ;  $p = .562$ ;  $\eta^2 = .001$ ), so hypothesis 5 is also rejected. The overall model explains 12 per cent of the variance ( $R^2 = .120$ ;  $corr. R^2 = .096$ ). Table 2 provides an overview of the ANOVA.

**Table 2. Three-Way ANOVA**

Source of Variation	Type III SS	df	MS	F	p	$\eta^2$
Channel	9.496	1	9.496	9.217	.003	.034
Source	11.073	1	11.073	10.747	.001	.040
Source credibility	9.257	1	9.257	8.985	.003	.034
Channel x Source	3.384	1	3.384	3.284	.071	.013
Channel x Source credibility	.625	1	.625	.607	.437	.002
Source x Source credibility	.347	1	.347	.337	.562	.001
Channel x Source x Source credibility	7.043	1	7.043	6.836	.009	.026
Error	265.810	258	1.030			
Total	8348.500	266				
Corrected total	302	265				

Notes. Dependent variable: participants' valuation; R-squared = .12 (adjusted R-squared = .096)

We obtained similar results when we included the control variables. The results showed a significant three-way interaction effect of the channel, the source, and the source credibility ( $F[1,258] = 6.836$ ;  $p = .009$ ;  $\eta^2 = .026$ ). After splitting the data

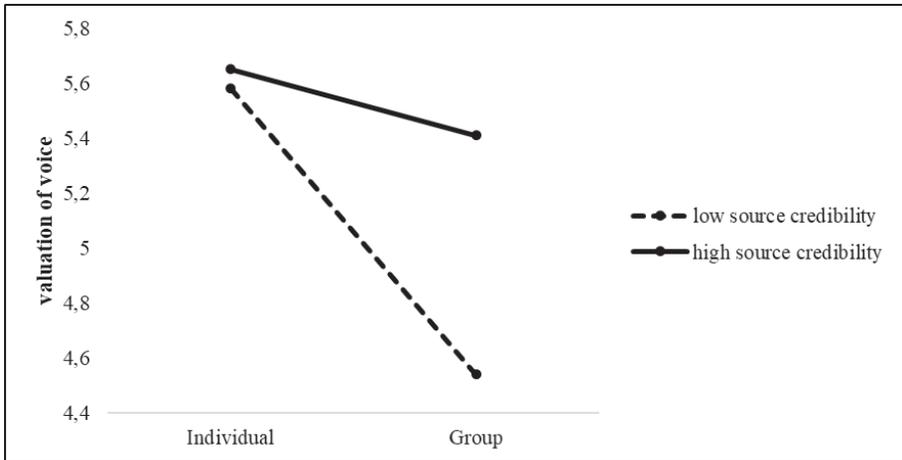
set in half based on the channel variable, we conducted two additional two-way ANOVAs (e.g., van Hove & Lievens, 2007) with the source and source credibility as independent variables (Table 3). The results showed a significant interaction effect of the source and source credibility with ESMP ( $F[1,137] = 4.553$ ;  $p = <.05$ ;  $\eta p^2 = .032$ ) but no significant interaction effect of the source and source credibility with voicemail ( $F[1,121] = 2.487$ ;  $p = .117$ ;  $\eta p^2 = .020$ ). Table 4 shows a summary of the rejected and confirmed hypotheses.

**Table 3. Two-Way ANOVAs for Voicemail and ESMP**

Source of Variation	Type III SS	df	MS	F	p	$\eta p^2$
voicemail						
Source	1.049	1	1.049	1.291	.258	.011
Source credibility	2.402	1	2.402	2.958	.088	.024
Source x source credibility	2.019	1	2.019	2.487	.117	.020
Error	98.242	121	.812			
Total	4119.250	125				
Corrected total	103.472	124				
Notes. Dependent variable: participants' valuation; R-squared =.051 (adjusted R-squared =.027)						
ESMP						
source	14.140	1	14.140	11.561	.001	.078
Source credibility	7.782	1	7.782	6.362	.013	.044
Source x Source credibility	5.570	1	5.570	4.553	.035	.032
Error	167.569	137	1.223			
Total	4229.250	141				
Corrected total	191.872	140				

Notes. Dependent variable: participants' valuation; R-squared =.127 (adjusted R-squared =.108)

**Figure 4. Differences in the Valuation of Voice Communicated Via ESMP**



**Table 4. Summary of the Results of the Assumed Hypotheses**

#	Hypothesis	Result
1	<i>The valuation of voice is more positive if a proposal is communicated via a medium with a high social presence than if it is communicated via a medium with a low social presence</i>	<b>Supported</b>
2	<i>The valuation of voice is more positive if a proposal corresponds with the attitude of a group than if it corresponds to the attitude of an individual.</i>	<b>Rejected</b>
3	<i>The valuation of voice is more positive if a proposal is communicated by a highly credible source than if it is communicated by a less credible source.</i>	<b>Supported</b>
4	<i>Source credibility positively moderates the influence of the channel, as the valuation of voice is more positive if a proposal is communicated by a highly credible source via a channel with a high or low social presence than if it is communicated by a less credible source via a channel with a high or low social presence.</i>	<b>Rejected</b>
5	<i>Source credibility positively moderates the influence of the source, as the valuation of voice is more positive if a proposal is communicated by a highly credible individual or group than if it is communicated by a less credible individual or group.</i>	<b>Rejected</b>

## Discussion

The purpose of the present study is to compare the valuation of voice communicated via social media with that communicated via a more traditional channel. If proposals are communicated via an ESMP, managers value them less than proposals communicated via an audio message. These results support the view of the Social Presence Theory (Short et al., 1976) that channels with higher social presence are

more persuasive than channels with lower social presence (Robert & Dennis, 2005). Thus, the results are in line with, for example, studies conducted by McGuire et al. (1987) and Wilson (2003). Compared to communication via social media, a voicemail message could trigger a sense of personal communication and feelings of intimacy and immediacy (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997), resulting in the appearance of being trustworthy and well-meaning (Roghanizad & Bohns, 2017).

Hypothesis 2, regarding groups' influence on the valuation of voice, was not supported. Although the ANOVA revealed a significant main effect, its direction is opposite to that hypothesised. If a proposal is based on the opinion of a group, the valuation of the proposal is less positive than if the proposal is based on the opinion of an individual. Our results are contrary to those of, for example, Axsom et al. (1987), Levitan and Verhulst (2016), and Neuwirth and Frederick (2004) but support the findings of Isaakyan et al. (2020). The latter authors found that managerial voice endorsement is lower if a proposal is expressed in public than if it is expressed in private. Issakyan et al. (2020) argue that managers are generally expected to be competent and effective in their role (Meindl et al., 1985). Managers may see their image threatened in case of a voice attempt because voice aims at improving the status quo and could be interpreted as criticism of previous decisions made by them (Edmondson, 2003). This image threat increases with the number of observing people, for which reason managers tend to reject publicly expressed voice, regardless of the proposal's potential benefit.

Another explanation for our results may be derived from the psychological reactance theory (Brehm, 1966). According to the theory, attempts to persuade often fail because of a perceived threat to an individual's freedom, choice, and autonomy (Brehm & Brehm, 1981; Wicklund, 1974). In social influence settings, reactance may occur because of feelings of pressure to change, accompanied by reactions opposite to the influence attempt (Clee & Wicklund, 1980). With regard to the expression of voice, resulting changes and individuals' cognitive reorientation can lead to the perception of restrained autonomy if the proposal deviates from preconceived views (Nesterkin, 2013). To reassert the threatened autonomy, proposals to change the status quo meet with a refusal, independent of the proposals' potential benefits.

Next to the psychological reactance theory, the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad & Wright, 1994) may explain the less positive valuation of voice expressed by a group. The model suggests that individuals develop knowledge about persuasion during life, such as from experiences in social interactions. This knowledge influences the perception of persuasion attempts as the perception of the tactics used. If an individual learns about a tactic, such as that guilt is often used in persuasion attempts, and notices that tactic in a certain situation, the individual's processing of the persuasive information can be influenced in a way that results in his or her resisting the persuasion (Friestad & Wright, 1994). With reference to the

findings of our study, a manager's assumption that the opinion of a group is used for persuasion purposes may have led to their less positive valuation of the proposal.

Yukl and Tracey (1992) as well as Falbe and Yukl (1992) compare influence tactics and find that coalition tactics, such as attempting to influence a target with the help of other people (Stevenson et al., 1985), are among the least effective tactics. This applies especially in comparison to, for example, the use of logical arguments and factual information. The authors state that coalition-building may easily be recognised as an influence tactic by a recipient and consequently be classified as manipulative. Another explanation may be derived from cross-cultural differences (Fu & Yukl, 2000). For instance, Chinese people use coalition tactics more likely to avoid situations of open disagreement, which may lead to a loss of face for the employee and a manager. In countries with a low power distance, like the United States or Germany (Hofstede, 2000), coalition tactics can result in feelings of resentment towards an employee. As the participants in our study were employees of German organisations, those feelings of resentment may explain managers' less valuing of voice expressed by a group.

The results of the ANOVA also show that source credibility influences how a manager values voice. If proposals are communicated by a source the manager perceives as credible—an expert in our scenarios (McGinnies & Ward, 1980; Tuppen, 1974)—the proposals are more valued than if they are communicated by a source the manager perceives as not credible. This finding is consistent with other studies that show that persuasion is more effective if it comes from a credible source (Hass, 1981; Sternthal et al., 1978). With regard to ELM, the less effortful peripheral route may be used for evaluating the proposal of a highly credible source, leading to the manager's relying on the source's opinion without forming his or her own (Bhattacharjee & Sanford, 2006; Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994). Concerning voice, our results confirm the effect of source credibility on the valuation that Whiting et al. (2012) show in finding that employees receive higher performance evaluations if they are perceived as experts. Our findings indicate that proposals made by such employees are perceived as more constructive, accurate, and well thought-out than proposals made by less expert employees (Whiting et al., 2012).

We found no evidence of an interaction effect with source credibility, so our results contradict the findings of Heesacker et al. (1983), Teng et al. (2014), and Hu et al. (2019), among others. Our participants' valuations of the proposals were not more positive if they were communicated via a channel with a lower or higher social presence or via a credible individual or group. The reasons for the missing interaction effect of source credibility on the relationship between the source and participants' valuation of voice may also be derived from the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad & Wright, 1994) described above: Noticing that a proposal is communicated by a credible group may be seen to be part of a persuasion tactic and increase resistance to the persuasion since a credible group may be perceived as

a threat to one's autonomy (Fitzsimons & Lehmann, 2004; Koestner et al., 1999). Feelings of self-reliance can be enhanced by ignoring a proposal.

The results of the ANOVA showed a significant interaction effect of the source and source credibility for voice communicated via ESMP. Independent of the credibility of the source, the participants seemed to value voice more if it was expressed by an individual, even the case if the group is credible and the individual is not (Figure 3). Resistance to persuasion may be strong enough that the normally amplifying effect of source credibility on the valuation of voice is superseded by the group.

## Contributions

Our study makes several contributions to the research on employee voice. First, we contribute to research on the valuation of voice, about which little is known, especially in comparison to what we know about the antecedents and outcomes of voice (Howell et al., 2015). Our results show that in addition to the content of voice (Burriss, 2012; Burriss et al., 2017; Huang et al., 2018), the manner of communication and source factors influence how managers value voice. Specifically, the research gap is narrowed by providing information about the effects of two communication channels on the valuation of voice (Howell et al., 2015). Using a communication channel with a high social presence seems to increase the chances that managers will value a proposal.

Second, by comparing social media and communication via voicemail, we expand what we know about the valuation of voice expressed via social media (Holland et al., 2019). Even though social media has considerable potential, this channel appears to be less effective in ensuring that change results from expressing voice. For a better understanding of the potential offered by social media, our findings also shed light on the effect of group opinions on the valuation of voice. Group opinions can be obtained within seconds using social media (Balnave et al., 2014). However, as our experimental approach shows, if proposals are communicated by a group, managers value them less.

Third, our study contributes to research on source credibility, which the persuasion literature regards as one of the most influential factors in persuasion (Jones et al., 2003; O'Keefe, 1990; Wilson & Sherell, 1993). We provide information on the effect of source credibility on the valuation of voice and whether their valuation differs depending on the communication channel or the individual or group source. In line with the persuasion literature (Pornpitakpan, 2004) and the voice literature (Whiting et al., 2012), we find that source credibility is important when individuals speak up.

Fourth, our study is among the few (e.g., Whiting et al., 2012) to relate the ELM's implications to the valuation of voice. As shown plenty of times in persuasion literature, attitude change depends on the source (e.g., Hass, 1981; Pornpitakpan,

2004) and contextual factors (Petty & Wegener, 1998), next to the message and the recipient (O'Keefe, 1990). Our results indicate that in the case of a voice attempt, the recipients' elaboration likelihood is influenced by the communication channel, source credibility, and the number of opinions the proposal corresponds with. When social media is the communication channel for expressing voice, the proposal corresponds with an individual opinion, and when source credibility is low, information processing may occur via the central route. The peripheral route may be taken when communication occurs via voicemail, the proposal corresponds with the opinion of a group, and when the source is an expert (Robert & Dennis, 2005).

Finally, by comparing social media and communication via voicemail, we expand what we know about how information communicated via channels with a differing social presence is processed (Short et al., 1976). We find that if a channel with a high social presence is used for communication, managers value proposals more. For example, when communication occurs via voice mail, the recipient of a proposal may be more likely to feel that he is communicating with a real person. Consequently, feelings of intimacy and immediacy may be stronger because of nonverbal cues such as the employees' vocal tone (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997). Information processing may then occur via the central route because more attention is required.

### Practical Implications

This study has several practical implications. Our findings suggest that employees who want to express voice should consider how they do it. Social media is popular and easy to use, and the valuation of proposals tends to be higher if they are communicated via a channel with a high social presence. When it is not possible to communicate, for example, face-to-face, employees should think about postponing their voice attempts. Even if ideas for change result from group processes, it might be wise to communicate them as if they represent the opinion of a single employee. As our results show, the employee should be credible, which could be determined by performing an audit of perceptions of that employee's credibility with others in the organisation (Whiting et al., 2012). However, in doing so, there could potentially be conflict among employees if one of them is taking credit for a group's idea (Graham & Cooper, 2013). The factors included in our experiment are easier to control compared to other given factors, such as the employee's perceived status or organisational tenure (Howell et al., 2015). Considering those factors, such as choosing a communication channel that may lead to proposals' being more valued by managers, can increase employees' chances of a proposal's implementation (Lam et al., 2019) and a good performance evaluation (Grant & Mayer, 2009).

As the main recipients of expressed voice, managers can learn from our study that the manner and source— not just the content— of a communication influence

how they value a proposal, which could cause them to overlook some valuable suggestions. To ensure that employees continue speaking up and use social media for that purpose, managers should be sensitised to this problem and could even solicit voice by telling employees that their voice is welcomed, regardless of the channel used. Employees will keep their concerns to themselves if managers have not recognised proposals they have brought up previously (Morrison, 2014). In this way, organisations can benefit from voice and from the potential of social media.

An organisation that does not yet offer its employees access to social media can find indications in our findings when deciding whether to implement them. If the modern communication channel's primary purpose is to offer employees a new way to express voice, our results indicate that it may be better to refrain from implementing one. Those channels seem to be less effective than traditional channels and can be associated with risks, like disseminating false information and abuse of privacy (Baccarella et al., 2018).

However, our results must be contrasted with the increasing social media usage both in personal and professional environments (Yao & Ling, 2020). Within organisations, it is reasonable to assume that the use of social media will also further increase due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Kramer & Kramer, 2020). If more and more people work from home, there will be fewer opportunities to use traditional channels. As a consequence, organisations may focus more on social media for communication (e.g., Wang & Yang, 2020), collaboration (Schlagwein & Hu, 2017), and knowledge sharing (e.g., Kwayu et al., 2020) purposes. So, despite being less effective, modern communication channels may eventually be necessary if organisations want to benefit from their employees' insights.

### Limitations and Future Research

The present study has strengths, like its experimental design and the resulting control and precision, but it is also subject to several limitations. First, our sample consists of employees who were asked to imagine themselves as managers, and doing so—and evaluating proposals from that perspective—may be difficult for employees who have no managerial experience. Further, it is difficult to represent complex organisational processes in an experimental study, as participants are not emotionally involved in changes in the status quo (Whiting et al., 2012). To counteract concerns regarding external validity, we manipulated the independent variables by creating scenarios that reflected real-life settings, as confirmed by the realism check ( $M = 5.28$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ). We also compared the participants who had managerial responsibilities with those who had not and got similar results.

Second, we used the ELM as a theoretical framework in combination with the Social Presence Theory (Short et al., 1976). We may also not have accounted for several factors, which may have affected the way the participants processed information in our study (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), so it should be considered in

future research. Petty and Cacioppo (1986) argue that the motivation and ability to process a message are influenced by personal relevance, prior knowledge, the need for cognition, and distraction, among other factors. Because we conducted an online survey, the participants may have been distracted by incoming calls, customer inquiries, or their families while answering the questions. Moreover, since the participants worked in a wide variety of industries, their experiences with the content of the proposal could differ.

Third, data collection took place between April 2020 and August 2020, during the Corona Pandemic. The pandemic may have influenced our study results, as the participants' motivation and ability to process the message (Petty et al., 1983) could have been influenced by factors we did not control for. For example, distraction while working from home could have caused information processing to occur via the peripheral route instead of the central route. In addition, the valuation of voice that was communicated via social media could have been more positive because people got accustomed to using modern communication channels in their everyday work (Kramer & Kramer, 2020). Future research is needed to determine if and how the valuation of voice was affected by the pandemic.

Moreover, we did not control for other factors which may have impacted the valuation of voice, according to prior research. Therefore, future research could also consider, for example, managerial openness (Howell et al., 2015), as well as managers' long-term orientation and self-efficacy (Sherf et al., 2019).

To obtain a more complete picture of how social media voice is evaluated, future research could vary several features of social media. Features like the ability to communicate interactively and to share pictures and videos increase social presence, as they lead to feelings of being part of a community (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Our experimental design allowed us to manipulate the communication channel by presenting either a voicemail message or a screenshot of an ESMP, where participants saw the proposal itself and comments by other employees presented in a simple design. As a consequence, these scenarios had a low social presence. Varying the features of social media by, for example, showing a picture of the proposing employee, a visualisation of the expressed voice, or a chart could shed more light on the valuation of voice expressed via modern communication channels.

Several studies show that the content of voice has a strong influence on how a manager evaluates voice (e.g., Burris, 2012; Burris et al., 2017; Huang et al., 2018). The content of voice, which we did not vary in our experimental design, may also explain the differences in how a manager evaluates a proposal based on the communication channel used and the source. For instance, prohibitive voice, which are expressions of concerns that could be harmful to the organisation (Liang et al., 2012), could be valued less favourably if they are expressed in public via social media. Managers may prefer that such issues as inefficiency or employee wrongdoing not be spread or discussed in advance because such grievances could

be embarrassing for the responsible employee, a unit, or the whole organisation. On the other side, the valuation of such grievances could be better if they were communicated by an expert. As a result, proposals to deal with them are more likely to be perceived as constructive and the expressing employee as competent and capable of resolving grievances (Whiting et al., 2012). This perception is presumably more important if the proposal addresses potentially harmful factors rather than, for example, an idea for improving the status quo (promotive voice) (Liang et al., 2012).

Finally, longitudinal research designs could reveal whether the valuation of voice is influenced by voice frequency (Huang et al., 2018) and whether the valuation differs based on the channel used and the source of the proposal. Voice communicated via a channel with a high social presence could be valued less positively if that voice is expressed frequently. The feeling that the proposal must be addressed might be stronger than it would be if it were expressed via a channel with a lower social presence, such as social media. Further, reactance and resistance to persuasion could be higher in the case of a frequent voice event. If voice is expressed frequently, feelings of pressure to change (Clee & Wicklund, 1980) and the assumption that the opinion of a group is used for persuasion purposes (Friestad & Wright, 1994) may strengthen.

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