

**LEADER IDENTITY DECONSTRUCTION:  
A SOCIAL-COGNITIVE APPROACH TO EXAMINE HOW AND WHEN  
FOLLOWERS THREATEN LEADER IDENTITIES**



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**I AM MADE AND REMADE CONTINUALLY.  
DIFFERENT PEOPLE DRAW DIFFERENT WORDS FROM ME.**

Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*

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**DEUTSCHE ZUSAMMENFASSUNG:**

**„DIE DEKONSTRUKTION VON FÜHRUNGSIDENTITÄTEN:**

**EIN SOZIAL-KOGNITIVER ANSATZ ZUR UNTERSUCHUNG WIE UND WARUM**

**MITARBEITENDE DIE IDENTITÄT VON FÜHRUNGSKRÄFTEN BEDROHEN“**

### Deutsche Zusammenfassung

*Ohne die Bereitschaft zu folgen, gibt es keine Führung* (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). – Diese Aussage spiegelt wider, dass Führung nicht als Einbahnstraße betrachtet werden kann, sondern vielmehr als ein Wechselspiel zwischen Führungskraft und Mitarbeitenden. Der Führungsanspruch, der von Führungskräften gestellt wird, muss von Mitarbeitenden entsprechend angenommen werden, damit effektive Führung stattfinden kann (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Dabei bestimmen starke und klare Identitäten wer gerade führt und wie geführt werden sollte.

Führungsidentitäten beantworten die Frage: „Wer bin ich als Führungskraft?“ und dienen somit als Verhaltenskompass im Führungsalltag (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Führungsidentitäten sind hierbei nicht als starre Konstrukte zu verstehen, sondern verändern sich über die Zeit hinweg durch den stetigen Austausch mit der sozialen Umwelt. Vor allem Mitarbeitende gestalten die Identitäten ihrer Führungskräfte maßgeblich mit, denn sie geben durch ihr verbales und non-verbales Verhalten ständig Rückmeldung darüber, wie sie die Führungskraft wahrnehmen und fungieren somit als Spiegel.

Mitarbeitende können mit ihrem Verhalten die Führungsidentität ihrer Führungskraft bestärken und gleichzeitig auch destabilisieren oder gar bedrohen. Führungskräfte erleben eine Bedrohung, wenn sie Erfahrungen machen, die potenziell die Werte, die Bedeutung oder das Ausleben ihrer Führungsidentität verletzen (Petriglieri, 2011). Eine Führungsidentitätsbedrohung ist vor allem dann wahrscheinlich, wenn Mitarbeitende den Führungsanspruch der Führungskraft ablehnen (Epitropaki et al., 2017). Fühlen sich Führungskräfte in ihrer Führungsidentität bedroht, ist das nicht nur ein aversiver Zustand für die Führungskraft selbst, sondern kann auch unmittelbar negative Konsequenzen für die Mitarbeitenden und letztlich für die Organisation haben. So neigen Führungskräfte, welche sich in ihrer Identität bedroht fühlen, schnell zu einem autonomie-einschränkenden (Güntner

et al., 2021) und bestrafenden Verhalten (z.B., schlechtere Leistungsbewertung/ Karrierefortschritt der entsprechenden Mitarbeitenden; Burris, 2012; Seibert et al., 2001).

Die vorliegende Arbeit untersucht in zwei Teilen und mit unterschiedlichen methodischen Ansätzen, warum und unter welchen Umständen sich Führungskräfte durch ihre Mitarbeitenden in ihrer Führungsidentität bedroht fühlen. Der erste Teil der Arbeit besteht aus zwei prä-registrierten Experimentalstudien und fokussiert sich auf Mitarbeitende, die konstruktive Verbesserungsvorschläge einbringen (Voice; Morrison, 2014; Van Dyne & LePine, 1998) und damit über ihre formale Rolle als Mitarbeitende hinausgehen. Obwohl konstruktive Verbesserungsvorschläge von Mitarbeitenden förderlich sind, zeigen bisherige Forschungsergebnisse, dass Führungskräfte sehr unterschiedlich darauf reagieren. Um diese gemischten Befunde besser zu verstehen, wird in diesem ersten Teil der Arbeit der Frage nachgegangen, inwiefern Mitarbeitende, die Verbesserungsvorschläge machen, bei Führungskräften eine Identitätsbedrohung auslösen. Konkret postuliert diese Arbeit, dass Mitarbeitende, die aktiv Ideen und Vorschläge einbringen, von ihren Führungskräften prototypische Führungseigenschaften zugeschrieben bekommen (agentisch, kommunal), was sowohl schützend als auch bedrohlich für die Führungsidentität von Führungskräften ist.

Der zweite Teil der Arbeit wendet ein Tagebuchdesign an und fokussiert somit verstärkt auf kurzfristige, intra-personale Schwankungen in der Identität von Führungspersonen. Dieser Teil rückt die Sonderposition von Führungskräften innerhalb eines Teams in den Vordergrund: Obwohl Führung aus sozialen Interaktionen mit Mitarbeitenden bestehen, fühlen sich Führungskräfte im Arbeitsalltag nicht immer in den Kreis ihrer Mitarbeitenden eingeschlossen. In diesem Teil wurde untersucht, inwieweit ein tägliches Erleben von Exklusion durch Mitarbeitenden eine Identitätsbedrohung für Führungskräfte darstellt. Konkret postuliert die Arbeit, dass Exklusion von Mitarbeitenden besonders schädlich für diejenigen Führungskräfte ist, welche Führung als einen eher geteilten (versus

hierarchischen) Prozess verstehen. Weiter beleuchtet diese Arbeit die Konsequenzen einer Führungsidentitätsbedrohung für das Wohlbefinden der Führungskraft nach der Arbeit.

### **Teil I: Bedrohte Führungskräfte? Konstruktive Verbesserungsvorschläge von Mitarbeitenden als zweiseitiges Schwert für Führungsidentitäten**

[Engl. Titel: Leaders under threat? The two sides of voice for leader identity threat]

Unternehmen sind auf engagierte Mitarbeitende angewiesen, die durch das aktive Einbringen von Verbesserungsvorschlägen dazu beitragen, dass im internationalen Vergleich flexibel auf schnelllebige Anforderungen reagiert werden kann. Gleichzeitig ist nach aktuellem Forschungsstand nicht geklärt, wie sich Vorschläge von Mitarbeitenden auf Führungskräfte auswirkt. Dies ist kritisch, denn Führungskräfte sind in der Praxis meist diejenigen, die mit Verbesserungsvorschlägen und Ideen konfrontiert werden. Tatsächlich deuten Befunde an, dass zwar manche Führungskräfte solch proaktives Verhalten gut heißen und die Vorschläge tatsächlich implementieren (Burriss, 2012; Duan et al., 2022), andere sich jedoch durch das engagierte Verhalten ihrer Mitarbeitenden bedroht fühlen und dieses daher verhindern oder abstrafen (Burriss, 2012; Fast et al., 2014; Seibert et al., 2001). Ziel dieses Projektes ist es daher die Mechanismen aufzudecken, die erklären, inwiefern konstruktive Verbesserungsvorschläge seitens der Mitarbeitenden mit einer Identitätsbedrohung (d.h., rollenspezifische Selbstwertbedrohung) bei Führungskräften zusammenhängt.

**Theoretischer Hintergrund und Hypothesen.** Die sozial-kognitive Führungstheorie (Epitropaki et al., 2017; Lord et al., 2020) beschreibt wie Führung und Führungsidentitäten sozial konstruiert und aufrechterhalten werden. Menschen besitzen implizite Vorstellungen darüber, welche Eigenschaften eine prototypische Führungskraft aufweisen sollte (z.B. intelligent, dynamisch, einfühlsam; Epitropaki & Martin, 2004). Führungsprototypische Eigenschaften lassen sich übergeordnet in agentische (d.h., Ich-Orientierte Eigenschaften, die auf Kompetenz, Durchsetzungsvermögen und Zielerreichung abzielen) und kommunale (d.h.,

gruppenorientierte Eigenschaften, die auf das Wohl der Gemeinschaft abzielen) Eigenschaften einteilen (Lee & Fiske, 2008).

Mitarbeitende nutzen diese impliziten Führungsprototypen, um Führungskräfte zu bewerten. Je stärker die Führungskraft dem prototypischen Bild entspricht, desto eher entscheiden sich Mitarbeitende dafür der Führungskraft Führung zu gewähren. Wird der Führungskraft von ihren Mitarbeitenden kontinuierlich Führung gewährt, stärkt und festigt dies deren Führungsidentität (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Sobald Mitarbeitende aber keine Führung gewähren oder Führung für sich selbst beanspruchen, kann dies die Führungsidentität bedrohen.

Diese Arbeit postuliert nun, dass Mitarbeitende, die konstruktive Verbesserungsvorschläge machen, führungsprototypische (d.h., agentische und kommunale) Attribute aufweisen, welche die Führungsidentität von Führungskräften sowohl stärken als auch bedrohen können. Mitarbeitende, die ihre Ideen und Meinungen einbringen, drücken herausfordernde und gleichzeitig konstruktive Kritik aus (Morrison, 2014; Van Dyne & LePine, 1998). Sie versuchen mit ihren Vorschlägen Einfluss zu nehmen und aktuelle Arbeitspraktiken zu verändern. Dies signalisiert Führungskräften Durchsetzungsfähigkeit und Stärke (agentische Führungseigenschaften), was als ein situatives Nicht-Gewähren von Führung verstanden werden kann und somit eine Identitätsbedrohung hervorruft. Andererseits signalisieren Mitarbeitende durch ihre Vorschläge auch, dass sie ihrer Führungskraft, dem Team und der Organisation konstruktiv durch ihr aktives Engagement weiterhelfen möchten. Dies signalisiert Führungskräften Wärme und Unterstützung (kommunale Führungseigenschaften), was Führungsidentitäten bestärkt und einer Identitätsbedrohung vorbeugt. Zusammenfassend postulieren wir somit zwei gegenläufige indirekte Effekte: Mitarbeitende, die konstruktive Vorschläge einbringen, hängen über eine agentische (kommunale) Personenwahrnehmung positiv (negativ) mit einer Führungsidentitätsbedrohung zusammen.

**Methode und Ergebnisse.** Um die postulierte Mediation zu testen, wurde ein doppeltes Randomisierungsdesign angewandt (Pirlott & MacKinnon, 2016), welches zwei präregistrierte Experimente beinhaltet. In Studie 1 ( $N = 396$ ) wurde das Verhalten von Mitarbeitenden (Verbesserungsvorschlag vs. Kein Verbesserungsvorschlag) manipuliert, um den kausalen Zusammenhang zwischen der unabhängigen Variable (Mitarbeitende, die Verbesserungsvorschläge einbringen) und den Mediatoren (agentische und kommunale Personenwahrnehmung) zu prüfen. Weiter wurde in Studie 1 das Gesamtmodell, d.h. die Mediation, getestet. In Studie 2 ( $N = 270$ ) wurden die Mediatoren (agentische vs. kommunale Personenwahrnehmung) manipuliert, um den kausalen Zusammenhang zwischen Mediatoren und Outcome (Identitätsbedrohung der Führungskraft) zu prüfen. Der Ablauf beider Experimente lief gleich ab: Die Versuchspersonen sollten sich in die Rolle einer Führungskraft hineinversetzen, welche in einem Meeting ein Konzept vorstellt. Von einem\*r Mitarbeiter\*in kam daraufhin (k)ein Verbesserungsvorschlag (Studie 1) bzw. der\*die Mitarbeiter\*in drückte sich auf agentische (kommunale) Art und Weise aus (Studie 2). Danach wurden die restlichen Zielvariablen gemessen.

Die Ergebnisse bestätigten unser angenommenes Modell und zeigen, dass Mitarbeitende, die Verbesserungsvorschläge einbringen, über eine *agentische* Personenwahrnehmung indirekt eine Identitätsbedrohung auslöst, während über eine *kommunale* Personenwahrnehmung die Führungsidentität gestärkt wird.

**Diskussion und Schlussfolgerung.** Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass Mitarbeitende, die Verbesserungsvorschläge einbringen, die Führungsidentität von Führungskräften unterschiedlich beeinflussen kann. Diese Befunde tragen dazu bei, die inkonsistenten Reaktionen von Führungskräften aus vorherigen Studien zu erklären. Zudem können unsere Forschungsergebnisse Organisationen darüber aufklären, warum engagiertes Verhalten von Mitarbeitenden zu negativen Reaktionen der Führungskraft führen kann. Organisationen sollten daher ihre Mitarbeitenden darin schulen, die kommunale Intention hinter

Verbesserungsvorschlägen und Ideen hervorzuheben (McClellan et al., 2022). Auch sollten Führungskräfte für die Vorteile von Mitarbeitenden, die konstruktiv ihre Meinung äußern, sensibilisiert werden.

## **Teil II: Wenn Führungskräfte nicht dazugehören: Die Folgen täglicher Exklusion von Mitarbeitenden für die Identität von Führungskräften und Interferenz von Arbeit und Privatleben**

[Engl. Titel: When leaders don't belong: Consequences of daily exclusion from followers for leaders' identity and work-life interference]

Obwohl Führungskräfte die meiste Zeit ihres Tages mit ihren Mitarbeitenden interagieren (Bligh & Hess, 2007; Mintzberg, 1973), bleiben vieler dieser täglichen Interaktionen aufgrund der gesonderten Führungsposition eher oberflächlich, wenig authentisch und distanziert (Zumaeta, 2019). Führungskräfte haben daher in ihrem Arbeitsalltag oftmals das Gefühl von ihren Mitarbeitenden exkludiert zu werden, was wiederum negative Konsequenzen für das Wohlbefinden von Führungskräften haben kann (z.B. Rumination, Schlafprobleme und emotionale Erschöpfung; Gabriel et al., 2020; Lam et al., 2018).

Gleichzeitig ist eine gewisse Distanz zu ihren Mitarbeitenden funktional für Führungskräfte, um die eigene Führungsposition zu legitimieren, schwierige Entscheidungen zu fällen und sich nach der Arbeit mental distanzieren zu können (Hornsey & Jetten, 2004; Zumaeta, 2019). Bisher ungeklärt ist daher die Frage, unter welchen Umständen sich tägliche Exklusion von Mitarbeitenden negativ auf die momentane Identität von Führungskräften auswirkt und deren Identität bedroht. Ziel dieses Forschungsprojektes ist es daher herauszufinden, bei welchen Führungskräften tägliche Exklusion eine Führungsidentitätsbedrohung (d.h., rollenspezifische Selbstwertbedrohung) auslöst und inwiefern sich dies auch nach dem Arbeitstag auf ihr Wohlbefinden auswirkt.

**Theoretischer Hintergrund und Hypothesen.** Nach der Zugehörigkeitstheorie von (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) haben alle Menschen das fundamentale Bedürfnis

dazugehören und bedeutsame Beziehungen aufrechtzuerhalten. Für Führungskräfte sind hierbei die täglichen Interaktionen mit ihren Mitarbeitenden besonders relevant, da sie auf diese angewiesen sind, um effektiv führen und somit ihre Führungsidentitäten aufrechterhalten zu können. Bei der Konstruktion von Führungsidentitäten ist aber nicht nur der reine soziale Austausch in Form von „wer gewährt/beansprucht Führung“ wichtig (DeRue & Ashford, 2010), sondern auch, welche kognitive Idealvorstellung man von der *Führungsverteilung* innerhalb eines Teams hat (Wellman et al., 2022). So gibt es Menschen, die Führung als streng hierarchisch betrachten und dann wiederum solche, die Führung als fluktuierendes Phänomen sehen, welches zwischen mehreren Personen aufgeteilt werden sollte (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; DeRue et al., 2015). Führungskräfte mit einem geteilten Führungsverständnis erwarten von ihren Mitarbeitenden Offenheit in der Zusammenarbeit und sehen es als ihre Verpflichtung an Mitarbeitende im Führungsprozess partizipieren zu lassen (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; DeRue et al., 2015; Wellman et al., 2022). Führungskräfte mit einem hierarchischen Führungsverständnis sehen sich hingegen in der alleinigen Verantwortung zu führen. Dieser Teil der Arbeit geht daher davon aus, dass Führungskräfte, die ein eher geteiltes Führungsverständnis haben, sich durch tägliche Exklusion von ihren Mitarbeitenden in ihrer Identität bedroht fühlen, während dies für Führungskräfte mit einem eher hierarchischen Führungsverständnis nicht der Fall ist. Da Führungsidentitäten außerdem ein zentraler Teil des Selbstkonzeptes von Führungskräften sind, postulieren wir, dass sich die bedrohte Führungsidentität auch nach der Arbeit noch negativ auf das Privatleben am selben Tag auswirkt.

**Methode und Ergebnisse.** Es wurde eine Tagebuchstudie mit  $N = 140$  Führungskräften durchgeführt. Die Teilnehmenden wurden nach einer Erstbefragung gebeten über die kommende Arbeitswoche hinweg (Montag bis Freitag) zweimal täglich (nach Feierabend und vor dem Schlafengehen) an Umfragen teilzunehmen. In der allgemeinen Erstbefragung wurde neben demographischen Daten auch das Führungsverständnis der

Führungskraft abgefragt. Im täglichen Feierabend-Fragebogen wurde die erlebte Exklusion von Mitarbeitenden sowie die Identitätsbedrohung erfasst. Vor dem Schlafengehen wurde täglich die wahrgenommene Interferenz zwischen Arbeit und Privatleben gemessen. Die Ergebnisse bestätigen, dass eine tägliche Exklusion von Mitarbeitenden nur für Führungskräfte mit einem eher geteilten Führungsverständnis identitätsbedrohend ist und sich die Identitätsbedrohung auch nach der Arbeit negativ auf das Privatleben auswirkt. Dies war für Führungskräfte mit einem eher hierarchischem Führungsverständnis nicht der Fall.

**Diskussion und Schlussfolgerung.** Unsere Ergebnisse beleuchten, dass besonders für Führungskräfte mit einem eher geteilten Führungsverständnis tägliche Erlebnisse der Exklusion mit einer Identitätsbedrohung einhergehen und dass sich diese auch nach der Arbeit noch negativ auf das Privatleben am selbigen Tag auswirken können. Diese Befunde unterstützen die theoretischen Annahmen, dass Führungsidentitäten auf täglicher Ebene mit Mitarbeitenden konstruiert werden und dass das kognitive Führungsverständnis hierbei eine zentrale Rolle spielt. Um effektive Führung zu gewährleisten, ist es daher vorteilhaft, wenn das kognitive Führungsverständnis einer Führungskraft zur Team- bzw. Organisationskultur passt. Da geteilte Führung positiv mit Teamleistung, Kreativität und Zufriedenheit zusammenhängt (Zhu et al., 2018), müssen Organisationen außerdem Maßnahmen ergreifen, um Führungskräfte mit einem geteilten Führungsverständnis zu schützen. Das kann beispielsweise mit Trainings zu bestimmten Führungsstilen wie Empowering Leadership gelingen, welche sich auf die Befähigung und Autonomie von Mitarbeitenden fokussiert (Cheong et al., 2019) oder Trainings, welchen Führungskräften dabei helfen nach der Arbeit besser abzuschalten (Hamilton Skurak et al., 2021). Auch kann ein starkes soziales Netzwerk bei der Arbeit für Führungskräfte – bestehend aus gleichrangige Kolleg\*innen (Lindorff, 2001; Zumaeta, 2019) oder durch Mentoring-Programme – hilfreich sein (Barnett, 1989; Dussault & Barnett, 1996). Trotz der potenziell einsamen Arbeitstage, kann durch solche Maßnahmen das Zugehörigkeitsbedürfnis von Führungskräften erfüllt werden.

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**PART I**

**LEADERS UNDER THREAT?**

**THE TWO SIDES OF VOICE FOR LEADER IDENTITY THREAT**

## **Leaders under threat?**

### **The two sides of voice for leader identity threat**

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### **Abstract**

Although voice has been widely studied in organizational research, little attention has been paid to how it affects the identity of leaders, who are a common target of voice. We build on social-cognitive leadership theory to argue that voice has differential effects on leaders through two distinct pathways that provoke versus prevent the experience of leader identity threat. Specifically, we argue that voice provokes leader identity threat because leaders perceive voicing employees as high on agentic leadership attributes. At the same time, voice prevents leader identity threat, because leaders perceive the voicing employee as high on communal leadership attributes. We tested these hypotheses with a double randomization design comprising two pre-registered online experiments (Study 1:  $N = 396$ ; Study 2:  $N = 270$ ). Results supported the opposing effects of voice on leader identity threat, showing that voice provoked (prevented) leader identity threat because of leaders' perceiving the voicing employee as agentic (communal). Exploratory findings further highlighted the consequences of leader identity threat on leaders' behavior and relevant boundary conditions. We discuss implications for voice, leadership and identity research.

*Keywords:* voice, leader identity threat, agency, communion, double randomization design

## Introduction

Employees who express their independent thoughts, suggestions, and concerns towards their leader – that is their voice – (Morrison, 2014) have widely been regarded as crucial contributors to successful leadership (Grant et al., 2009; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). It is thus not surprising that over the past few decades, scholars have built a systematized understanding of how leaders may encourage voice (Chamberlin et al., 2017; Morrison, 2011, 2014). More recently, research progressed to better understand the outcomes of voice and, particularly, how leaders respond to the voicing employee (e.g., performance evaluations; social support; Kim et al., 2009), and the ideas raised (e.g., idea endorsement or implementation; Fast et al., 2014; Howell et al., 2015; Schreurs et al., 2020).

While this helped to understand when and how voice benefits or hurts the voicing employee, much less is known about how voice affects leaders, and particularly their leader identity. Research showed that voice can have positive consequences for leaders' self-concept as it boosts leaders' self-efficacy (Duan, et al., 2022) and drives their motivation (Carsten et al., 2018). At the same time, leaders decline voice out of feelings of threat (Burriss, 2012; Isaakyan et al., 2021; Popelnukha et al., 2021; Sijbom et al., 2015b), indicating that voice might be a double-edged sword for leaders, with potential harm for their leader identity. Voice is raised by employees out of a sense of power (Kim et al., 2019) and with the attempt to take influence (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). As such, voice may interfere with leaders' self-views of "I am someone who influences others at work", resulting in a leader identity threat which describes experiences "appraised as indicating potential harm to the value, meanings, or enactment" of their leader identity (Petriglieri, 2011, p. 644). While identity scholars argued that leader identity threats are key to better understanding leader-follower interactions (Epitropaki et al., 2017), threat experiences in response to voice were previously

considered loosely without relation to leader identity, and without focusing on the mechanisms that explain why and how voice relates to leader identity threat.

We see it as crucial to understand why and how voice relates to leader identity threat, because leaders are the ones who are often the target of voice. Not knowing leaders' socio-cognitive response to voice may even mask potential detrimental effects of voice for those who need to implement it, fueling the critical oversimplification of voice as always wanted and helpful (Bashshur & Oc, 2015). In fact, when aiming to implement structures that foster employees' voice, organizations often struggle as those in leadership positions seem to oppose. Disentangling the socio-cognitive mechanisms that explain how voice relates to leader identity threat will thus help to better understand the risks and benefits voice has for leaders.

The goal of our research is to unravel how voice relates to the experience of leader identity threat. We integrate social-cognitive leadership theories (Epitropaki et al., 2017; Lord et al., 2020) into the voice literature to argue that leaders who are confronted with voice ascribe prototypical leadership attributes of agency (i.e., taking control) and communion (i.e., benefitting the group) to voicing employees (cf., Weiss & Morrison, 2019). We further propose that these perceptions will differentially relate to leader identity threat. That is, perceiving voicing employees as high in agency will threaten leaders' identity, as it signals the employee's assertiveness and strength. Perceiving voicing employees as high in communion, on the other hand, helps leaders to sustain their leader identity, as it signals the employee's relational concern.

To test our propositions, we apply a double randomization design (Pirlott & MacKinnon, 2016) to experimentally examine the effect of voice on leaders' perception of voicing employees' agency and communion (Study 1), and the effect of voicing employees' agency and communion on leader identity threat (Study 2). We thereby make the following

contributions. First, we advance research on voice outcomes by explicitly focusing on the perception and experiences leaders have in response to voice. The main interest in prior research on voice outcomes relied on the voicing employees and how they are affected by leaders' response (e.g., evaluation of voicers' performance, salary or promotability; Burris, 2012; Seibert et al., 2001). However, leaders are key decision-makers in teams and often get confronted with voice. Understanding the outcomes of voice thus requires to better understand the effects voice has on leaders. By shifting our focus to leaders, we acknowledge that voice likely has consequences for both, those who express it (voicing employee) and those who receive and need to deal with it (leaders). Knowing how and why leaders are affected by voice may further help to explain why leaders respond in certain ways to employees who voice (e.g., leaders' supportive and defensive reactions; Burris, 2012; Fast et al., 2014; Maner & Mead, 2010; Williams, 2014).

Second, by examining how voice affects leaders' perception of others (i.e., the voicing employee) and themselves (i.e., leader identity threat) we contribute to leadership and identity research. Scholars argued that proactive behaviors such as voice may be seen as an active claim for leadership (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Support stems from prior research that shows that voice boosts employees' social status in the eyes of co-workers and facilitates their leader emergence (McClellan et al., 2018; Weiss & Morrison, 2019). We extend these findings and argue that leaders perceive voicing employees as prototypical in leadership attributes (i.e., agency, communion; Lee & Fiske, 2008), which has consequences for their leader identity. By thus, our research shows that voice affects how leaders see and define themselves and others, thereby informing the identity construction and de-construction processes between leaders and their employees (Epitropaki et al., 2017; Lührmann & Eberl, 2007).

Third, our focus on leader identity threat advances earlier findings on other forms of threat in relation to voice (e.g., image threat; Fast et al., 2014; Isaakyan et al., 2021; Sijbom et al., 2015b). Leader identity threat has been argued to be highly relevant in leader-follower interactions, particularly when employees do not grant leadership or claim it for themselves (Epitropaki et al., 2017). However, not much has been understood about it, neither from a conceptual nor an empirical standpoint. By examining the relationship between voice and leader identity threat we inform whether and how voice may backfire, producing detrimental effects for leaders' identity (i.e., leader identity threat). Based on our research we can give recommendations on how to counteract negative consequences of voice for leaders, helping organizations to successfully meet the challenges of promoting voice for the good of both employees and leaders.

### **Theory and Hypotheses**

Voice describes employees voluntary and proactive expression of work-related ideas, opinions, suggestions, problem-information or concerns towards those in authority positions, such as their leaders (Detert & Burris, 2007; Morrison, 2011, 2014; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2012; Van Dyne & LePine, 1998). Voice is a form of extra-role behavior with two defining characteristics: It is challenging, and it is constructive by intend (Ashford et al., 2009; Morrison, 2014; Van Dyne & LePine, 1998). Voice is challenging as it questions the status quo and aims to bring about change to work-related practices and procedures. At the same time, voice is constructive as it is “intended to improve rather than merely criticize” (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998, p. 109).

Voice reveals how the voicing employee positions themselves and what they care about (Ashford et al., 2009; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Grant & Ashford, 2008). Based on voice, leaders draw conclusions about how the employee stands in relation to them as leaders, including the employee's momentary intentions (prosocial, egoistic; Urbach & Fay, 2018),

and characteristics (competent, benevolent; McClean et al., 2022). How leaders perceive an employee because of voice has been shown to explain their subsequent responses (e.g., Burris, 2012; Kim et al., 2009; Maynes & Podsakoff, 2014; McClean et al., 2022), such that leaders respond more favorably to voicing employees whom they perceive to be rather supportive (Burris, 2012), prosocially oriented (Urbach & Fay, 2018), or concerned for the collective (e.g., Kim et al., 2009; Maynes & Podsakoff, 2014). Contrarywise, perceptions of voicers as being egoistically oriented, threatening or personally attacking resulted in leaders' non-endorsement of voice, negative performance evaluations or even social undermining of the voicer (Burris, 2012; Kim et al., 2009; Urbach & Fay, 2018). We argue that the attributes that leaders ascribe to voicing employees have the potential to inform leaders' momentary identity sustainment (Epitropaki et al., 2017). How leaders perceive employees because of their voicing will indicate to them who leads and who follows in the specific situations, offering an explanation of why and how voice relates to leader identity threat.

### **Agency and Communion Leader Prototype**

There is a long tradition in social-cognitive approaches to leadership in determining the characteristics that individuals rely on when making sense of who leads in their immediate social environment (i.e., leader prototypes; Epitropaki et al., 2013; Epitropaki & Martin, 2004; Lord et al., 1984, 2020; Offermann et al., 1994; Offermann & Coats, 2018). Leader prototypes are simplified mental representations that guide individuals' information processing as they combine the characteristics and attributes that distinguish leaders from non-leaders. If a person behaves in a way that matches the leader prototype of the receiver, then the person will likely be seen as a leader (Epitropaki et al., 2013; Lord et al., 2020; Shondrick & Lord, 2010).

Leader prototypes can be characterized along the two fundamental dimensions of agency and communion (Lee & Fiske, 2008). Agency and communion are widely studied in

social-cognitive research on self- and other-perception (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014; Fiske et al., 2007; Judd et al., 2005) and have strong links to leadership perception and emergence (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Badura et al., 2018; Braun et al., 2018; Koenig et al., 2011; Scott & Brown, 2006). Agency combines attributes of self-oriented interests, self-expansion and goal attainment (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007), that link to masculine stereotypes (e.g., determined, strong, dominant; Braun et al., 2018; Hsu et al., 2021; Scott & Brown, 2006), and to prototypical leader attributes such as intelligence (e.g., knowledgeable), dynamism (e.g., bold), strength (e.g., assertive), and dedication (e.g., determined) (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004; Johnson et al., 2008; Lord et al., 2020; Offermann & Coats, 2018). Communion, on the other hand, combines attributes that refer to other-orientation and integration of the self in the larger group (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007). It links to femininity (e.g., considerate, caring; Braun et al., 2018; Hsu et al., 2021; Scott & Brown, 2006), and relates to the prototypical leader dimension of sensitivity (e.g., sincere; Epitropaki & Martin, 2004; Offermann & Coats, 2018). Although both agency and communion combine attributes that are associated with leadership, individuals put a stronger emphasis on agentic attributes when evaluating leaders (Badura et al., 2018; Koenig et al., 2011; Powell et al., 2002).

### **The Effect of Voice on Agentic and Communal Leader Prototype**

Due to the proactive and extra-role nature of voice, leaders may perceive voicing employees as high in both agentic and communal leader prototype. Voice combines the two – almost contradictory – aspects of being challenging yet constructive (Ashford et al., 2009; Morrison, 2014), and shares similarity with what has been describes as a verbal claim for leadership (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Raising voice conveys agency as employees need sufficient knowledge about their working environment to recognize relevant issues and the confidence to address them to their leader. Employees who proactively put forth problem-related information and answers are seen as competent, and gain influence in groups

(Anderson & Kilduff, 2009). Just recently, Newton et al. (2021) showed that challenging voice that aims to alter the status quo relates to perceptions of quality work, which heightens the voicing employee's personal reputation. At the same time, through voicing up, employees convey communion as they express their interest in the work group and take personal risks in order to play for the team (Heaphy et al., 2022), all of which signals communal attributes. Accordingly, voice that reflects relational qualities of cooperation and care has been linked to friendship and trust (Newton et al., 2021).

In line with our argumentation that voicing employees are seen as prototypical to leaders (i.e., agentic, communal), prior research showed that speaking up promotively heightened employees' social status among peers, making them likely to emerge as leaders within their workgroup (McClellan et al., 2018). Similarly, Weiss and Morrison (2019) demonstrated that co-workers at different ranks ascribed a higher social status to employees who voiced than those who did not, because they saw them as higher in agency and communion. In sum, we propose that voice falls in line with both the agentic and communal aspects of the leader prototype so that leaders perceive voicing employees as high in both agency and communion.

*Hypothesis 1:* Employees who voice up are perceived by leaders as (a) more agentic, and (b) more communal as compared to employees who do not voice.

### **Differential Effects of Agency and Communion Perceptions on Leader Identity Threat**

Individuals in formal leadership roles are likely to see themselves as leaders (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Kragt & Day, 2020), and their formal role legitimizes that they repeatedly claim leadership in the interactions with employees (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Lanaj, Gabriel, et al., 2021). When these claims are responded by employees' granting leadership, a leader's identity is reaffirmed (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). However, environmental triggers can affect and sometimes destabilize leaders' momentary leader identity (Jennings et al., 2021; Lanaj,

Jennings, et al., 2021). In the most extreme, others rejecting a leaders' claim may result in the experience of a devalued leader identity (i.e., threatened leader identity).

We argue that the prototypical leadership attributes leaders ascribe to voicing employees will differentially impact leaders' identity. More specifically, the attribution of agency will provoke, whereas the attribution of communion will prevent the experience of leader identity threat. When employees demonstrate agency, leaders may see it as a violation of relational norms (Epitropaki et al., 2020), as not granting them the lead but instead claiming influence, authority and leadership for themselves. Marchiondo and colleagues (2015) demonstrated that responders who reject a leadership claim through expressing disagreement are seen as higher in leadership than those who grant it. Through demonstrating agency, voicing employees may be experienced by leaders as an internal rival that threatens their value as leaders (Menon et al., 2006). Prior findings supported that employees who oppose leaders by raising their voice in more agentic ways (i.e., publicly rather than privately, or aggressively rather than considerate) evoke experiences of image threat, and defensive responses (Isaakyan et al., 2021; Sijbom et al., 2015a). Accordingly, we argue that employee voice provokes leaders to experience a leader identity threat, because voicing employees are seen as high in agentic attributes.

*Hypothesis 2a:* Leaders' perception of voicing employees' agency positively relates to leader identity threat.

*Hypothesis 3a:* Voice relates indirectly and positively to leader identity threat via leaders' perception of voicing employees' agency.

In contrast, leaders' perception of voicing employees' communion is likely to protect them from experiencing a leader identity threat. Communion demonstrates employees' care for the benefit of the collective. That is, employees who are perceived as high in communion convey to leaders their support of the team and the leaders. Prior research showed that

employees who express disagreement were protected from punishment when leaders had clear signs that they belong to the same group (Oc et al., 2019). Further, voicers perceived high in prosocial values received better evaluations from their leaders (Grant et al., 2009) (Grant et al., 2009). Similarly, Benson and colleagues (2016) underscored via qualitative interviews the importance of employees' collective orientation for leaders favorable response to proactive behaviors. Finally, Urbach and Fay (2018, 2021) demonstrated that leaders provide more support to employees' ideas when they perceived the employee to be driven by prosocial intentions. In sum, we argue that voicers' communion prevents leaders from experiencing a leader identity threat.

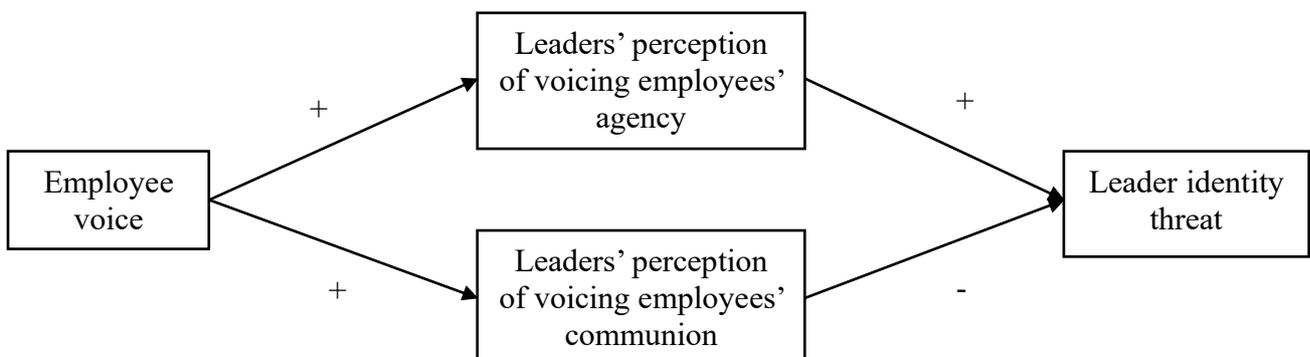
*Hypothesis 2b:* Leaders' perception of voicing employees' communion negatively relates to leader identity threat.

*Hypothesis 3b:* Voice indirectly and negatively relates to leader identity threat via leaders' perception of voicing employees' communion.

Our conceptual model is depicted in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Conceptual model*



## Overview of Studies

We applied a double randomization design for our proposed mediation (Pirlott & MacKinnon, 2016). A double randomization design consists of two separate experiments to test mediation. First, the independent variable is manipulated to establish its causal effect on the mediating variable(s). Second, the mediating variable is manipulated to establish its causal effect on the outcome variable. Accordingly, we conducted two online-experiments. In Study 1 we randomized the factor voice (voice vs. no voice) to test its causal effect on our mediators (perceived agency and communion). We further assessed leader identity threat to estimate the relationship between all focal variables. In Study 2, we manipulated the mediator (i.e., voicing employees' agency vs. communion) to test its causal effect on leader identity threat. Figure 2 gives an overview of the procedure used in both studies.

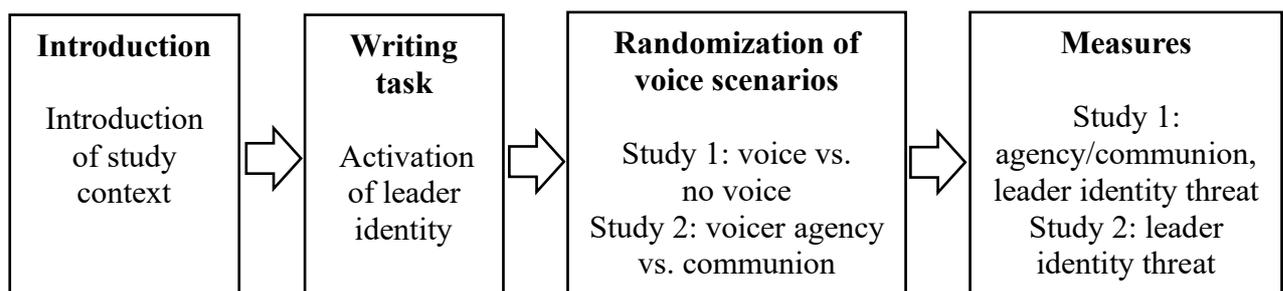
### Study 1

#### Method

Study 1 hypotheses and analysis plan were pre-registered via AsPredicted.org ([https://aspredicted.org/QLT\\_GVP](https://aspredicted.org/QLT_GVP)). In this experiment we manipulated voice (voice vs. no voice) as our main factor of interest, and measured leaders' perception of the voicing employees' agency and communion, as well as leader identity threat. In addition to voice, we randomly varied the gender of voicing employees as a control.

#### Figure 2

*Procedure in Study 1 and 2*



### ***Participants***

We recruited students from a large German university, who were offered course credits and a small lottery in exchange for participation. Based on an a priori power analysis we targeted a minimum of 350 participants (see preregistration for more details). Initially, 401 participants completed the study. We excluded five participants that indicated low attentiveness (below three) on an item ranging from 1 (not attentive at all) to 7 (very attentive). Out of the resulting sample of 396 participants, 73% were female (26.8% male, 0.3% other) with an average age of 23.45 years ( $SD = 4.74$ , ranging from 18 to 60). Participants had on average 3.27 years of work experience ( $SD = 4.27$ , ranging from 0 to 40) and 0.81 years of leadership experience ( $SD = 2.26$ , ranging from 0 to 25).

### ***Procedure***

We collected data via the platform SoSci Survey (Leiner, 2014). Following the recommendations outlined by Aguinis and Bradley (2014), we provided detailed and realistic scenarios and experimental vignettes. We adapted prior voice vignettes (Burriss, 2012; Fast et al., 2014; Weiss & Morrison, 2019) to fit the student context. The voice message was presented via text and audio, to enhance a realistic scenario. We pre-tested the experimental procedure and our manipulation in a separate study ( $N = 352$ ; for detailed results see supplemental material).

Our experimental procedure followed four steps (Figure 2). First, we introduced participants as leaders of the student organization Campus Talks that organizes regular speaker events. Following that, participants completed a leader identity writing task in order to facilitate immersion and to heighten the saliency of their leader identities (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014; Lonati et al., 2018). We developed the leader identity writing task based on prior identity-oriented writing tasks (Strauss et al., 2012), prompting participants to reflect and write about their thoughts and feelings in relation to their leader role at Campus Talks.

Next, participants were randomly assigned to one of the experimental conditions (voice vs. no voice). Aligning established procedures (Burris, 2012; Fast et al., 2014; Weiss & Morrison, 2019), we told participants that they just presented their action plan for the forthcoming Campus Talks event in a team meeting. In the voice condition, one employee (Julia/Julian) looked skeptical, raised the hand and spoke up with concerns and suggestions for change (for similar approach: Burris, 2012; Weiss & Morrison, 2019). For the no-voice condition, the employee Julia/Julian looked skeptical but did not raise any concerns or suggestions about the plan (for a similar approach: Weiss & Morrison, 2019). As a final step, participants rated their perceptions of voicers' agency and communion, as well as the extent to which they experienced a leader identity threat. All scenarios and vignettes are available in Appendix A.

### ***Measures***

All measures were conducted in German and translated via an independent back-translation procedure (Brislin, 1970). If not indicated otherwise, items were rated on 5-point Likert scales (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*).

***Perceptions of Agency and Communion*** were measured via two separate approaches. For the main analyses we assessed agency ( $\alpha = .91$ ) and communion ( $\alpha = .91$ ) with the six items each by Weiss and Morrison (2019), rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). The items stem from prior research on person perception (Abele, 2003; Caprariello et al., 2009; Cuddy et al., 2011; Fiske et al., 2002) and comprised: competent, intelligent, capable, efficient, independent, confident (agency), helpful to others, trustworthy, supportive, friendly, warm, sincere (communion). For additional confirmatory evidence, we further assessed the dimensions of the Implicit Leadership Theories (ILTs; Epitropaki & Martin, 2004) that are associated with agency (intelligence, dedication, dynamism;  $\alpha = .95$ ) and communion (sensitivity;  $\alpha = .81$ ).

**Leader Identity Threat** was measured by 15 items ( $\alpha = .92$ ) adapted from the state self-esteem measure by Heatherton and Polivy (1991). Maintaining and losing identities are theoretically and empirically linked to self-esteem (Cast & Burke, 2002; Ervin & Stryker, 2001). Accordingly, the scale has previously been used to measure leader self-esteem threat (Yu et al., 2018), and parallels to the definition of identity threat as described by Petriglieri (2011) as potential harm to the value, meaning, or enactment of identity. We recoded the items so that high values equaled high levels of leadership identity threat. Sample items: In this situation, I feel displeased about myself as a leader; I feel self-conscious as a leader; I feel like I'm not doing well as a leader.

**Control variables.** We included control variables based on their theoretical and empirical relationship with our outcome variable, and ran our analyses with and without controls (Becker, 2005; Becker et al., 2016). Because results remained the same, we report the results without control variables (see supplemental material for results including controls). We controlled for the prior leadership experience in years, as more leadership experience may reduce the vulnerability to possible threats (Fiedler, 1992; Kragt & Day, 2020; Lord & Hall, 2005); general self-esteem (i.e., I have high self-esteem; Robins et al., 2001), since low general self-esteem may prompt threat appraisals (Campbell et al., 1991; Rector & Roger, 1997; Schütz, 1998); participants' age since older leaders tend to be more participative than younger leaders (Oshagbemi, 2008; Thrasher et al., 2020).

**Variable for exploratory analyses.** We measured leaders' consultation intention with the three items ( $\alpha = .60$ ) adapted from Tangirala and Ramanujam (2012). Participants rated the extent to which they intent to consult the voicing employee. Sample item: I will encourage Julia/Julian to express any concerns or doubts that he/she may have about a proposal under consideration.

## Results

### *Measurement Model*

To examine the discriminant validity of our measured variables, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) for perceived agency, communion and leader identity threat. We used using maximum likelihood estimation with robust standard errors and the Satorra-Bentler scaling corrections (Satorra & Bentler, 2001). Our proposed three-factor model achieved moderate fit with the data ( $\chi^2(321) = 1120.59, p < .001, SRMR = .08, RMSEA = .08, CFI = .88$ ). It provided a better fit than the two-factor model with agency and communion perception combined into one factor ( $\chi^2(323) = 1329.26, p < .001, SRMR = .09, RMSEA = .09, CFI = .84, \Delta\chi^2(2) = 153.07, p < .001$ ) or the single factor model ( $\chi^2(324) = 3686.50, p < .001, SRMR = .25, RMSEA = .16, CFI = .48, \Delta\chi^2(3) = 228.01, p < .001$ ).

### *Preliminary Analyses*

Prior to hypotheses testing, we examined if the voicer's gender had any effect on agency or communion perceptions. A 2 (voice vs. no voice)  $\times$  2 (voicer gender: male vs. female) analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed no effect of gender on agency (male:  $M = 4.07$ ; female:  $M = 3.95$ ),  $F(1,392) = .49, p = .48$ , or communion ratings (male:  $M = 4.82$ ; female:  $M = 4.80$ ),  $F(1,392) = 2.63, p = .11$ . However, we found a just significant interaction effect of voice and voicer gender on agency perception such that when voicers were female but not male they were perceived as more agentic in the voice as compared to the no voice condition,  $F(1,392) = 3.91, p = .049$ . We found no interaction effect on communion perception,  $F(1,392) = 3.36, p = .07$ . Overall, voicer's gender did not seem to bias agency and communion perception, thus we continued with our hypotheses testing.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> We also tested whether voicer's gender had any effects on our ILTs measures. In line with our reported results, we found no effect of gender on our ILTs dimensions as measures of agency (male:  $M = 4.70$ ; female:  $M = 4.74$ ),  $F(1,392) = .02, p = .88$ ) and communion (male:  $M = 4.04$ ; female:  $M = 3.97$ ),  $F(1,392) = 1.17, p = .28$ ). We also found no interaction effect of voice and voicer's gender on our ILTs dimensions measuring agency,  $F(1,392) = 2.74, p = .10$  and communion,  $F(1,392) = 2.79, p = .10$ .

### *Hypotheses Testing*

Table 1 reports the correlations and descriptive statistics for all measured variables. Hypothesis 1 predicted that employees who raised voice are perceived as (a) more agentic and (b) more communal than those who do not raise voice. We tested the assumption via two-sample *t*-tests. Results indicated a significant main effect of voice on agency perception (voice:  $M = 5.80$ ; no voice:  $M = 3.83$ ),  $t(394) = 22.01$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.89$ , 95% CI [-2.46, -1.96] and on communion perception (voice:  $M = 5.01$ ; no voice:  $M = 3.01$ ),  $t(394) = 20.66$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.96$ , 95% CI [-2.32, -1.83]. We repeated the analysis with the ILTs dimensions as alternative measures of agency and communion. Again, results confirmed higher perceptions of agency (voice:  $M = 5.88$ ; no voice:  $M = 3.23$ ),  $t(359.92) = 26.78$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.88$ , 95% CI [-2.82, -2.29] and communion ( $M = 5.03$ ; no voice:  $M = 2.99$ ),  $t(394) = 20.15$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 1.01$ , 95% CI [-2.27, -1.78] in the voice condition compared to the no-voice condition. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that perceptions of voicers' (a) agency was positively, and (b) communion was negatively related to leader identity threat. To test the relationship between agency (communion) and leadership identity threat, we applied linear regression analyses whilst controlling for communion (agency). Our findings supported the differential relationships with leader identity threat (agency:  $b = .25$ ,  $p < .001$ ; communion:  $b = -.28$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Again, the analyses via the ILTs dimensions as alternative measures of agency and communion supported these findings (agency:  $b = .15$ ,  $p < .001$ ; communion:  $b = -.22$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Thus, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

Hypothesis 3 predicted (a) a positive indirect effect of voice on leadership identity leaders' identity threat via perceptions of voicing employees' communion. We tested the parallel mediation (model 4) with direct inferential tests of the indirect paths via bootstrapping (10 000 draws) using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2017). Mediation analysis

**Table 1***Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations of Variables (Study 1)*

| Variable                           | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | 1      | 2      | 3      | 4      | 5     | 6     | 7     | 8     | 9     | 10  |
|------------------------------------|----------|-----------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-----|
| 1 Age                              | 23.45    | 4.74      |        |        |        |        |       |       |       |       |       |     |
| 2 Leadership tenure                | 0.81     | 2.26      | .54**  |        |        |        |       |       |       |       |       |     |
| 3 General self-esteem              | 3.40     | 0.98      | .00    | .11*   |        |        |       |       |       |       |       |     |
| 4 Leader identity threat           | 2.89     | 0.80      | -.19** | -.17** | -.30** |        |       |       |       |       |       |     |
| 5 Perceived voicer agency          | 4.81     | 1.33      | -.03   | .05    | -.01   | .05    |       |       |       |       |       |     |
| 6 Perceived voicer communion       | 4.01     | 1.39      | .01    | .09    | .02    | -.16** | .77** |       |       |       |       |     |
| 7 Perceived voicer agency (ILT)    | 4.72     | 1.43      | .02    | .07    | -.02   | .01    | .94** | .83** |       |       |       |     |
| 8 Perceived voicer communion (ILT) | 4.01     | 1.43      | .03    | .08    | .02    | -.12*  | .75** | .93** | .82** |       |       |     |
| 9 Collective identity              | 4.14     | 0.62      | .07    | .24**  | .15**  | -.21** | .15** | .22** | .15** | .17** |       |     |
| 10 Leader consultation intention   | 4.11     | 0.73      | .03    | .04    | .06    | -.17** | .10   | .16** | .12*  | .17** | .34** |     |
| 11 Voice <sup>a</sup>              | .49      | .51       | .04    | .06    | -.02   | .03    | .74** | .72** | .79** | .71** | .12*  | .01 |

*Notes.* *N* = 396.<sup>a</sup>No Voice = 0; Voice = 1\* *p* < .05\*\* *p* < .01

supported the proposed differential indirect effect via agency,  $b = .41$ ,  $SE = .11$ , 95% CI [.21; .63], and communion,  $b = -.63$ ,  $SE = .11$ , 95% CI [-.85; -.42]. The findings were further confirmed via the additional analysis with the ILTs dimensions as agency and communion measures (agency:  $b = .28$ ,  $SE = .13$ , 95% CI [.03; .55]; communion:  $b = -.44$ ,  $SE = .10$ , 95% CI [-.64; -.24]). Thus, Hypothesis 3 was supported.

### ***Exploratory Analysis***

We examined reduced subsequent consultation intent as a potential, detrimental consequence of leader identity threat. Regression analysis provided support for this assumption ( $b = -.16$ ,  $p < .01$ ), showing that leader identity threat was associated with leaders' reduced willingness to subsequently consult with voicing employees on important decisions at work.

## **Study 2**

Study 1 showed that voice differentially affects leaders' leader identity because leaders perceive voicing employees as higher in agentic (i.e., positive indirect effect voice on identity threat) and higher in communal (i.e., negative indirect effect of voice on identity threat) attributes than employees who did not voice. While Study 1 established a causal relationship between voice (vs. no voice) and leaders' perception of agency and communion, the relations between the latter and leader identity threat were of correlational nature. In order to allow for causal inferences and strengthen our findings (Pirlott & MacKinnon, 2016), we conducted a second experiment to manipulate our mediator and measure its effect on leader identity threat.

### **Method**

In Study 2 we aimed to manipulate our mediator. We thus tested the effects of a voicing employee high in agency vs. a voicing employee high in communion on leader identity threat. We conducted a single factor between-subjects experiment (perception of the

voicer: agentic vs. communal) and randomized the gender of the voicing employee as a control. The study was pre-registered via AsPredicted.org (see: [https://aspredicted.org/CLZ\\_G2C](https://aspredicted.org/CLZ_G2C)).

### ***Participants***

We followed the same recruitment procedure as in Study 1. Based on a prior power-analysis with 80% probability to observe a small to medium effect (Faul et al., 2009), we targeted a sample of 278 participants (see preregistration for details). A total of 271 participants completed the study. After excluding one participant with low attentiveness, our final sample consisted of 270 participants (77.8% female, 21.9% male, 0.4% other). On average, participants were 24 years old ( $SD = 4.93$ , ranging from 18 to 52), with 2.34 years of work experience ( $SD = 3.91$ , ranging from 0 to 26) and 0.56 years of leadership experience ( $SD = 1.43$ , ranging from 0 to 12).

### ***Procedure***

The procedure and material aligned those described in Study 1 (see Figure 2). To manipulate perceptions of voicing employees' agency and communion, we followed a similar approach as outlined in McClean et al. (2022) and varied the content and delivery style of the voice vignette from Study 1 (vignettes are displayed in Appendix B).

In the agency condition, the employee confidently expressed voice with an emphasis on personal needs (e.g., "Campus Talks would therefore have to spend money on the licenses again every year, which would *certainly* be a burden *for myself personally*"). In the communion condition, the employee tentatively expressed voice with a collective concern (e.g., "Campus Talks would therefore have to spend money on the licenses again every year, which *could* become a *potential* burden *for the team*"; Appendix B). We developed the manipulation based on a separate pre-study ( $N = 162$  students; for detailed results see supplemental material).

### ***Measures***

Leader identity threat ( $\alpha = .91$ ) and our control variables (age, leadership experience, general self-esteem) were measured via the same measures as in Study 1. We further collected several measures for exploratory analyses: (1) leaders' subsequent consultation intention (same measure as in Study 1;  $\alpha = .78$ ), (2) voicers' fit with leaders' leader prototype (one-item measure: "Use the slider to indicate how close Stephan/Stephanie comes to your image of an ideal leader.", slider from 1 = *absolute opposite* to 21 = *absolute fit*), and (3) participants' collective self-identity (five items, group achievement subscale of Selenta & Lord, 2005;  $\alpha = .68$ ) as a potential moderator, measured via a separate survey one week before the main part of the study took place.

### **Results**

#### ***Manipulation Check***

To reduce demand effects, we used morphed pictures (enhanced vs. reduced agentic/communal faces) from the Basal Face Data (Walker et al., 2018) to test our manipulation of voicer perception (agency vs. communion). Our two-sample *t*-tests revealed that in the agentic condition, voicers were perceived as more agentic (agentic condition:  $M = 1.59$ ; communal condition:  $M = 1.25$ ),  $t(259.99) = 6.09$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.46$ , 95% CI [0.50, 0.99] and less communal (agentic condition:  $M = 1.20$ ; communal condition:  $M = 1.46$ ),  $t(259.70) = -4.83$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.45$ , 95% CI [-0.83, -0.34].

#### ***Hypothesis Testing***

Table 2 report the correlations and descriptive statistics for all variables. Analogous to Hypothesis 2, we expected that participants experience a higher leader identity threat for agentic as compared to communal voicers. We ran a two-sample *t*-test to test our hypothesis. Supporting our assumption, participants in the agentic condition ( $M = 2.72$ ) reported higher

**Table 2***Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations of Variables (Study 2)*

| Variable                                     | M     | SD   | 1      | 2     | 3      | 4      | 5     | 7    | 8    |
|--|-------|------|--------|-------|--------|--------|-------|------|------|
| 1 Age  | 24.00 | 4.93 |        |       |        |        |       |      |      |
| 2 Leadership tenure                          | 0.53  | 1.43 | .29**  |       |        |        |       |      |      |
| 3 General self-esteem                        | 3.36  | 0.95 | .03    | .10   |        |        |       |      |      |
| 4 Leader identity threat                     | 2.56  | 0.71 | -.21** | -.15* | -.31** |        |       |      |      |
| 5 Voicing employee fit with leader prototype | 12.74 | 4.90 | -.11   | -.12* | .04    | .14*   |       |      |      |
| 7 Collective identity                        | 4.02  | 0.63 | .02    | -.04  | .19**  | -.17** | -.03  |      |      |
| 8 Consultation intention                     | 3.90  | 0.66 | -.11   | .03   | -.03   | -.16*  | .15*  | .10  |      |
| 9 Voicing employee agency <sup>a</sup>       | .51   | .50  | -.07   | -.01  | .09    | .23**  | .22** | -.05 | -.09 |

*Notes.*  $N = 270$ .<sup>a</sup> Communal voicing employee = 0; Agentic voicing employee = 1\*  $p < .05$ \*\*  $p < .01$

leader identity threat than participants in the communal condition ( $M = 2.40$ ),  $t(268) = 3.83$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.70$ , 95% CI [0.22, 0.71]. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

### *Exploratory Analyses*

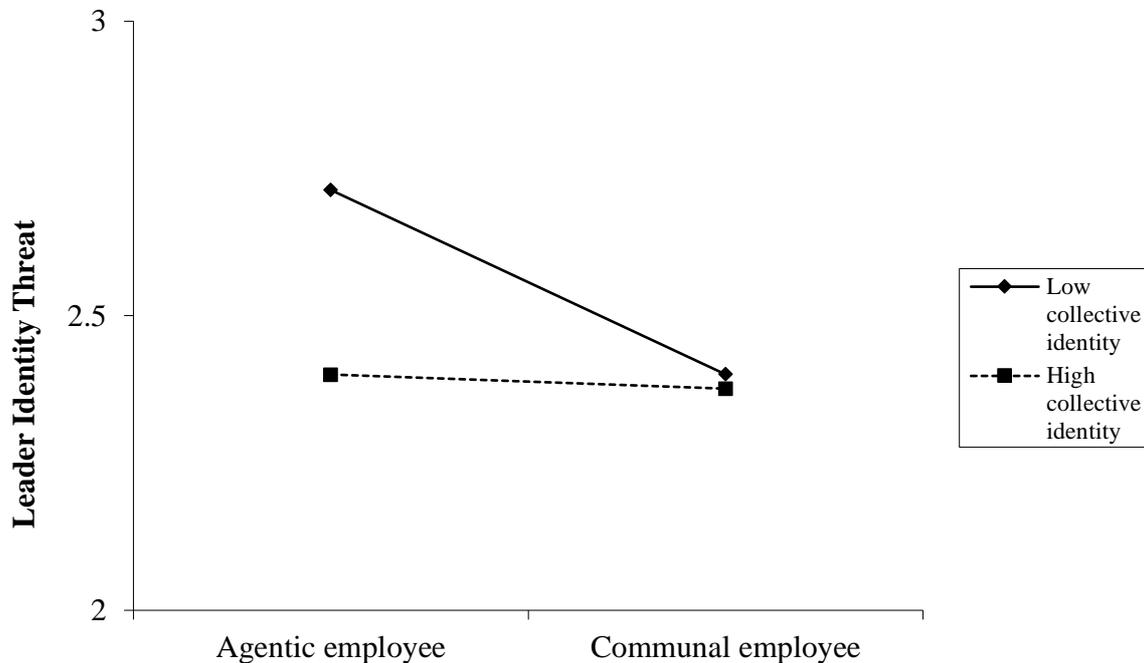
We conducted several exploratory analyses. First, we replicated the exploratory findings from Study 1 on the consequences of leader identity threat for leaders' consultation intention. Regression analytical findings confirmed that the higher leader identity threat, the lower leaders' subsequent intention to consult with the voicing employee ( $b = -.17$ ,  $p = .01$ ).

Second, we were interested in whether leaders perceived agentic voicers as more representative for a prototypical leader than communal voicers. Results confirmed that voicers in the agentic condition matched participants' leader prototypes more than voicers in the communal condition,  $t(253.92) = 3.65$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 4.79$ , 95% CI [0.21, 0.69]. This corroborates our theoretical argument of leadership perception as the mechanism to explain why voice provokes leader identity threat.

Third, we considered leaders' collective identity as moderator for the relationship between perceptions of the voicer (agentic vs. communal) on leader identity threat. We found that leaders' collective identity served as a boundary condition for the effect of voicer agency (vs. communion) on leader identity threat ( $b = -.29$ ,  $p = .03$ ; Figure 3): Simple slope analysis showed that for leaders lower in collective identity (1 *SD* below the mean), the effect of voicer agency (vs. communion) on leader identity threat was significant ( $b = .49$ ,  $p < .001$ ), while this was not the case for participants higher in collective identity (1 *SD* above the mean; ( $b = .13$ ,  $p = .27$ )). Thus, only leaders who weakly identified in terms of group membership experienced more leader identity threat in response to agentic versus communal voicers. This suggests that leaders' collective identity plays an important role in whether employees' voice has detrimental effects on leaders' leader identity.

**Figure 3**

*Interaction Effect of Leaders' Collective Identity and Perception of Voicing Employee on Leader Identity Threat*



### General Discussion

With the current research we sought to determine how and why voice threatens leaders' identity. Applying social-cognitive leadership theories (Epitropaki et al., 2017; Lord et al., 2020) to the voice literature we argued that leaders ascribe agentic and communal leadership attributes to voicing employees, which differentially affect their experience of leader identity threat. A double randomization approach to experimental mediation (Pirlott & MacKinnon, 2016) supported our propositions. Specifically, Study 1 showed that voice provokes leaders to ascribe both agentic and communal attributes to the voicing employee, which differentially related to their experience of leader identity threat. Study 2 further confirmed that perceiving a voicing employee as agentic resulted in more leader identity threat than perceiving voicing employees as communal. Our results display how voice relates to leader identity threat: Voice provokes leader identity threat via perceptions of voicing

employees' agency, and likewise prevents leader identity threat via perceptions of voicing employees' communion.

### **Theoretical Implications**

Our research contributes to the conversations on voice, leadership, and identity. First, we provide an explicit link between voice behavior and leadership perceptions. In support of prior research (Duan, Lin, et al., 2022; Weiss & Morrison, 2019), we show that voicing employees are seen as high in agentic and communal attributes, both of which have been discussed as prototypical for leadership (Lee & Fiske, 2008). We extend these findings and link voice directly to ILTs as established measure for leader prototypes in the leadership literature (Epitropaki et al., 2013; Epitropaki & Martin, 2004; Lord et al., 2020; Offermann et al., 1994; Offermann & Coats, 2018). We showed that in fact leaders perceived employees who raised voice as more intelligent, dedicated, dynamic, and sensitive than employees who did not raise voice. This finding indicates that employees voice might be seen by leaders as a verbal and indirect claim for leadership (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Seeing employee voice as a claim for leadership provides a further theoretical perspective that explains why voice enhances employees' social status in the eyes of others, and makes it likely that employees emerge as leaders in their groups (Duan, Lin, et al., 2022; McClean et al., 2018; Weiss & Morrison, 2019). Our exploratory findings further supported the higher relevance of agentic versus communal attributes for leadership perceptions (Badura et al., 2018; Koenig et al., 2011; Powell et al., 2002) as participants indicated a greater fit of agentic (vs. communal) voicers with their ideal image of a leader.

Second, by focusing on leaders' differential experiences in response to voice, our findings add to the theoretical explanation why leaders' may respond differently to voice. Prior research showed that leaders' positive response to voice is dependent upon the voicing employee (e.g., trustworthiness; Whiting et al., 2012), the leader (e.g., goal orientation;

Sijbom et al., 2015a), the context (e.g., organizational context, timing, voice setting; Duan, Lin, et al., 2022; Isaakyan et al., 2021; Whiting et al., 2012), or the voice content (e.g., Burris, 2012). Much of these prior works argued that leaders' experience of threat is a key for how they will respond to voice (Burris, 2012; Fast et al., 2014; Isaakyan et al., 2021; Popelnukha et al., 2021) and some of the moderators studied enhanced perceptions of threat (e.g., publicly raising voice; challenging content). We add to this literature in that we show that the person-perceptions (agency, communion) provoked by raising voice itself have differential effects on leaders, even if the context and content of voice remains the same. As such, the relationship between voice for leader identity threat seems to be an ambivalent one. Factors that alter perceived agency and communion of voicing employees might decide the direction of the relationship. In fact, previously studied moderators such as voice content (supportive vs. challenging) or setting (publicly vs. privately) could be seen as enhancing agentic (challenging content, raised publicly) or rather communal perceptions (supportive content, raised privately).

Third, our focus on leader identity threat advances prior perspectives on voice and threat. Prior voice research loosely focused on leaders worrying about losing their status in the eyes of others (e.g., personal threat, image threat, ego threat; Burris, 2012; Fast et al., 2014; Isaakyan et al., 2021; Sijbom et al., 2015b). Identity threat, however, refers to the experience of reduced self-worth and devaluations of relevant personal characteristics such as values or abilities (Ashforth et al., 2007; Piening et al., 2020). Leader identities are socially constructed and incorporate feelings (e.g., being pleased to be a leader), behaviors (e.g., successfully influencing others), and cognitions (e.g., having salient leadership self-schemas) in relation to leadership (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016). Our findings indicate that threats associated with voice are not exclusively about how others' may evaluate oneself but rather how leaders evaluate their identity in response to perceiving their social counterpart. Our

exploratory findings further indicate that the level of inclusiveness of leaders' identity affects how likely a leader identity threat occurs. Specifically, leaders who define themselves more collectively were protected from the detrimental effects of voicing employees' agency for their identity. This indicates that the level of inclusiveness in leaders' identity is a relevant component to consider in the relationship between voice and threat.

### **Practical Implications**

Based on our research we can give recommendations for employees, leaders, and organizations. First, both employees and leaders should be made aware of the differential effects voice can have for leaders' self-experience. Employees may further be trained in how to strengthen the communal aspects of their voice, such as through the type of ideas they bring forward (e.g., relational vs. task content; McClean et al., 2021), the delivery style (e.g., polite vs. assertive; McClean et al, 2021), or their language cues (e.g., collective rather than individualistic pronouns; Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Steffens & Haslam, 2013). Leaders may further be trained in appreciating both, the communal as well as the agentic attributes associated with voice.

Based on our exploratory findings, we further encourage organizations to provide training components for leaders that strengthen their collective identity as a buffer for leader identity threat in response to voice. Leader development programs tend to focus on advancing knowledge, skills, and competencies, while paying less attention to developing leaders' identity level or meaning (Day & Dragoni, 2015; Wallace et al., 2021). Hammond et al. (2017) proposed to consider four developmental dimensions for leader identity, that includes identity strength (i.e., "How much do I identify myself as a leader?"), meaning (i.e., "What does it mean for me to be a leader?"), level (i.e., "Do I define leader identity as being unique or rather as being part of a larger social network?"), and integration (i.e., "How much is my leader identity integrated in my overall sense of self?") across life domains. To develop these

dimensions, the authors proposed exercises to be implemented in training programs, with a variant of the Twenty Statement Test of the self-concept (Kuhn & McPartland, 2017) to encourage leaders' thinking in terms of different identity levels (Clapp-Smith et al., 2019).

### **Limitations and Future Research Directions**

The contributions of our study need to be considered in light of its limitations, which offer avenues for future research. First, while the double randomization approach (Pirlott & MacKinnon, 2016) provides a clear strength of our study, we encourage future research to alter the operationalization of the no-voice condition to test for the generalizability and direction of effects. Specifically, for our manipulation of no voice, we used the procedure from Weiss and Morrison (2019) that taps into the direction of silence (i.e., withholding potentially relevant input; Morrison, 2014). Future research may thus replicate our research with a different operationalization of “no voice” to test if leaders' perception of agency and communion are enhanced by voice (rather than reduced by silence).

Second, as common and legitimate in experimental leadership research (Lonati et al., 2018), our research relied on a student sample. To ensure that our measure of leader identity threat is meaningful for our sample, we applied a writing task (adapted from Strauss et al., 2012) at the onset of the study that made students' leader identity salient. At the same time, the limited prior leadership experience of our participants offers interesting perspectives for future research. For example, scholars argued that with growing leadership experience, leaders' identity level may shift (Lord & Hall, 2005). That is, as leaders develop from novice to intermediate and expert levels, their identity level becomes more inclusive, which may further protect them from identity threat in response to voice. Future research could thus replicate our study with novice and expert leaders from the same organization to test if our findings similarly apply to both groups or whether leaders' perceptions or experiences in response to voice are different for more experienced leaders.

Further, while we provide exploratory evidence that leaders showed reduced consultation intention in response to leader identity threat, future research could extend our research to include other leadership behaviors, such as the ones commonly studied in response to voice (e.g., voice endorsement; overall evaluation of voicers' performance). Including outcomes traditionally studied in the context of voice can inform if leaders' perceptions of voicers' agency and communion explain mixed findings in prior research. For example, future research could link our study to moderating factors identified in prior research (e.g., voice setting: public or private; Isaakyan et al., 2021) and determine if leaders' show less voice endorsement because they perceive public voicers as more agentic in comparison to private voicers.

Finally, we encourage scholars to develop measures to specifically assess leader identity threat. For our research, we measured leader identity threat via a measure for situational leadership self-esteem (scale adapted from Heatherton & Polivy, 1998), which was been used to assess self-threat (Dommer & Swaminathan, 2013; Fein & Spencer, 1997; Hideg & Ferris, 2014) and work-related self-esteem threat (Yu et al., 2018). The scale conceptually overlaps with identity threat defined as potential harm to the value, meaning and enactment of ones' leader identity (Petriglieri, 2011) as it reflects leaders self-experiences in relation to others (e.g., I am worried about what other people think of me as a leader), of themselves as leaders in general (e.g., I feel self-conscious as a leader) and their leadership abilities (e.g., I feel confident about my abilities as a leader). The scale thus indicates how leaders evaluate the value they gain from being a leader as well as how well they enact their leader roles. Nevertheless, we encourage future research to develop measures that directly assess leader identity threat, such as through incorporating three subscales for leader identity value, meaning, and enactment. Such measures could not only be helpful in replicating our

findings but further help to inform the conceptualization of identity threat versus different forms of threat, such as image or even self-esteem threat.

### **Conclusion**

Our research contributes to the understanding of how voice affects the identity of leaders. Based on findings from two experiments we conclude that being confronted with voice both disrupts and sustains leaders' leader identity. Specifically, voice provoked (prevented) the experience of leader identity threat because leaders perceived voicing employees as high in agentic (communal) leader prototypes. Exploratory findings indicate the consequences of leader identity threat for leaders' behavioral intentions, and further highlight leaders' collective identity as a buffer for the experience of identity threat.

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## Appendix A

### **Voice condition via audio file (English translation)**

Today you present your plan to the board and team members of Campus Talks. After your presentation, you notice that Julia/Julian looks particularly critical and raises her/his hand to express a concern.

Please play the following audio file to listen to Julia's/Julian's reaction:

"Thank you for your presentation and it's good that you address these problems. However, I have a small objection to your approach: I find the digital ticketing system very expensive. All the providers you presented charge high costs for the software licenses. On top of that, there will also be costs for introducing the scanning stations. This will take up almost all of our financial reserves. Also, the licenses are only valid for one year. That means that Campus Talk would have to spend money on them every year. I have two specific suggestions for change instead: First, we should rely on more student admission controls. This will definitely save us money and still shorten the waiting times at the admission. Secondly, I suggest renting professional cloakroom facilities. These cost less than the ticketing system. At the same time, the process at the cloakrooms becomes more organized, so we don't need additional staff and we will also save time. I think that with my suggestions, the problems raised can be successfully solved."

### **No-voice condition (English translation)**

Today you present your plan to the board and team members of Campus Talks. After your presentation, you notice that Julia/Julian looks particularly critical. You suspect that Julia/Julian does not fully agree with your plan and has reservations. However, Julia/Julian does not say anything and does not make any suggestions to revise your plan.

## **Appendix B**

### **Agentic employee (English translation)**

Stephan/Stephanie says that he/she has listened to everything. He/She would like to disclose his/her own opinion and express a fundamental proposal for change of which he/she is very convinced. He/She states that he/she finds the digital ticketing system very expensive, because all the providers charge a high price for the software licenses. On top of that, there will also be costs for the introduction of the scanning stations. He/She is firmly convinced that this will completely take up all of Campus Talks' financial reserves, as the licenses are only valid for one year. Campus Talks would therefore have to spend money on the licenses again every year, which would certainly be a burden for him/her personally.

Stephan/Stephanie says that he/she finds his/her own point of view very understandable. He/She is therefore sure that it is important to change the plan. He/She suggests scheduling more student admission controls and renting professional cloakroom facilities. He/She is convinced that this will undoubtedly save costs and still allow for a more efficient admission process.

### **Communal employee (English translation)**

Stephan/Stephanie thanks you for your presentation. He/She says he/she appreciates your work and understands your intentions and goals. He/She would like to support. He/She says that he/she has a possible proposal for change, but she/he is not sure about it. He/She says that he/she finds the digital ticketing system very expensive, because all providers charge a high price for the software licenses. On top of that, there will also be costs for the introducing of the scanning stations. He/She wonders if this will completely take up all of Campus Talks' reserves, as the licenses are only valid for one year. Campus Talks would therefore have to spend money on the licenses again every year, which could become a potential burden for the team. Stephen/Stephanie says that he/she can understand you and your point of view. He/She

feels unsure whether it might be important for Campus Talk to change the plan. He/She suggests scheduling more student admission checks and hiring professional cloakroom facilities. However, he/she is not entirely sure, but hopes that this might save costs and still allow for a more efficient admission process.

## **Supplemental Material**

### **Scenario used in Study 1 and Study 2**

#### The student organization Campus Talks e.V.

At your university there is a student organization called Campus Talks. It consists of 5 teams with a total of 35 members, a board and a leader. The leader of Campus Talks is elected every year by the board in an application process.

Campus Talks organizes events with high-ranking international speakers from business, politics and society every semester. Up to 1000 students can attend these events. The tickets are always sold out quickly. In addition, all events are released online as videos. These videos are also very popular and receive a high number of clicks worldwide.

#### You as leader of Campus Talks e.V.

Imagine that you are highly motivated to take the lead and organize the next Campus Talks event. You apply for the leadership role at Campus Talks and the board decides in your favor. Imagine that leadership is a very important part of how you see yourself. You have already taken on leadership tasks during your time at school and university and have gained corresponding leadership experience. When you think of yourself, you can well imagine your future as a leader.

Take time to empathize with your role and identity as leader of Campus Talks. Imagine what it means to you to be leader at Campus Talks and how good it feels to be seen as one by others. Please describe your thoughts and feelings in 3-4 sentences.

#### Your action plan as a leader of Campus Talk e.V.

Despite the high attendance so far, there were also complaints about the Campus Talks events: Congestion at the entrance controls and long waiting times. On colder days, the problems aggravate because of the rush to the cloakrooms. To address these problems, you as a leader have invested a lot of time and effort and developed an action plan to organize the

next Campus Talks event. Your plan includes: (a) Distributing tickets through a new digital system. These digital tickets can be scanned and speed up entry, and (b) introducing more cloakrooms, which you want to staff with more people. You are sure that your plan will ensure a smooth process.

### **Results of the Pre-Study for Study 1**

We conducted a pre-study to check whether our manipulation of voice (vs. no-voice) is working as intended. 352 participants (75.3% female, 24.1% male, 0.6% other) completed the pre-study on SoSci Survey (Leiner, 2014). The age ranged between 18 and 61 years ( $M = 23.38$ ,  $SD = 5.36$ ). Using three items from the voice measure by Van Dyne and LePine (1998), results revealed that participants in the voice condition ( $M = 4.34$ ) perceived the team member as showing more voice than participants in the no-voice condition ( $M = 1.59$ ),  $t(328.17) = -34.03$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.76$ , 95% CI [-3.97, -3.29].

### **Results of the Pre-Study for Study 2**

We conducted a pre-study in order to develop and validate our vignettes for the manipulation of agency and communion perception. 162 participants completed our pre-study on SoSci Survey (Leiner, 2014). The age ranged between 19 and 81 years ( $M = 47.06$ ,  $SD = 15.04$ ). 16.7% of the participants were students, 62.3% were employed, 14.2% were retired and 6.8% did not specify. We tested whether the agentic (communal) employees were perceived as more agentic (communal) than the communal (agentic) employees using morphed pictures (enhanced vs. reduced agentic/communal faces) from the Basal Face Data (Walker et al., 2018). Participants had to mentally visualize the employee and indicate which pictures best match their imagination. Indeed, the agentic employees were perceived as more agentic than the communal employees,  $t(156.02) = 3.28$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $d = 0.47$ , 95% CI [0.2, 0.83]. Also, communal employees were perceived as more communal than agentic employees  $t(155.21) = -2.41$ ,  $p = .017$ ,  $d = 0.44$ , 95% CI [-0.67, -0.07].

**Table S1***Regression Analysis with Control Variables (Study 1)*

|                     | Leader identity threat |           | Agency perception |           | Communion perception |           | Agency perception (ILTs) |           | Communion perception (ILTs) |           |
|---------------------|------------------------|-----------|-------------------|-----------|----------------------|-----------|--------------------------|-----------|-----------------------------|-----------|
|                     | <i>B</i>               | <i>SE</i> | <i>B</i>          | <i>SE</i> | <i>B</i>             | <i>SE</i> | <i>B</i>                 | <i>SE</i> | <i>B</i>                    | <i>SE</i> |
| Intercept           | 4.34***                | 0.27      | 4.38***           | 0.31      | 3.34                 | .34       | 3.19***                  | 0.34      | 2.98***                     | 0.35      |
| Age                 | -0.03**                | 0.01      | -0.03*            | 0.01      | -0.02                | 0.01      | 0.00                     | 0.01      | -0.01                       | 0.01      |
| Leadership tenure   | -0.02                  | 0.02      | 0.03              | 0.02      | 0.04                 | 0.03      | 0.01                     | 0.03      | 0.03                        | 0.03      |
| General self-esteem | -0.23***               | 0.04      | 0.00              | 0.05      | 0.04                 | 0.05      | 0.00                     | 0.05      | 0.05                        | 0.05      |
| Voice <sup>a</sup>  | 0.05                   | 0.08      | 1.97***           | 0.09      | 2.00***              | 0.10      | 2.61***                  | 0.10      | 2.04***                     | 0.10      |
| F                   | 14.51***               |           | 123.06***         |           | 108.10***            |           | 178.11***                |           | 101.74***                   |           |
| Adj. R <sup>2</sup> | 0.12                   |           | 0.55              |           | 0.52                 |           | 0.64                     |           | 0.51                        |           |

*Notes.* *N* = 396.<sup>a</sup>No voice = 0; Voice = 1\* *p* < .05\*\* *p* < .01\*\*\* *p* < .001

**Table S2***Mediation Effects of Agency and Communion Perception on the Relationship between Voice and Leader Identity Threat including Control**Variables (Study 1)*

| Effects                                  | Estimate | SE  | 95% CI |       |
|--|----------|-----|--------|-------|
|  |          |     | Lower  | Upper |
| Total                                    | -.22     | .10 | -.42   | -.03  |
| Direct                                   | .28      | .11 | .05    | .50   |
| Indirect via agency perception           | .36      | .10 | .18    | .56   |
| Indirect via communion perception        | -.59     | .10 | -.80   | -.39  |
| Total                                    | -.14     | .10 | -.34   | .07   |
| Direct                                   | .19      | .12 | -.05   | .43   |
| Indirect via agency perception (ILTs)    | .27      | .12 | .03    | .53   |
| Indirect via communion perception (ILTs) | -.41     | .10 | -.61   | -.22  |

*Notes.*  $N = 396$ .

**Table S3***Regression Analysis with Control Variables (Study 2)*

|                                      | Leader identity threat |           |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------|-----------|
|                                      | <i>B</i>               | <i>SE</i> |
| Intercept                            | 3.80***                | 0.26      |
| Age                                  | -0.02*                 | 0.01      |
| Leadership tenure                    | -0.03                  | 0.03      |
| General self-esteem                  | -0.25***               | 0.04      |
| Voicing employee agency <sup>a</sup> | 0.35***                | 0.08      |
| F                                    | 16.64***               |           |
| Adj. R <sup>2</sup>                  | 0.19                   |           |

*Notes.*  $N = 270$ .<sup>a</sup> Communal voicing employee = 0; Agentic voicing employee = 1\*  $p < .05$ \*\*  $p < .01$ \*\*\*  $p < .001$

**PART II**

**WHEN LEADERS DON'T BELONG:**

**CONSEQUENCES OF DAILY EXCLUSION FROM FOLLOWERS**

**FOR LEADERS' IDENTITY AND WORK-LIFE INTERFERENCE**

**When leaders don't belong:**

**Consequences of daily exclusion from followers for leaders' identity and work-life  
interference**

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### **Abstract**

Leaders' formal position sets them apart from their followers, making it difficult for them to experience meaningful social connections in their day-to-day work life. Our research aims to understand how daily exclusion from followers affects leaders' daily identity and subsequent well-being beyond work. Drawing on Belongingness Theory and Leader Identity Theory, we argue that daily exclusion from followers threatens the identity of leaders who have a rather shared (vs. hierarchical) understanding of leadership (i.e., leadership structure schemas; LSS), because these leaders see exclusion as a signal of failed leadership. Leader identity threat will in turn interfere with their personal lives beyond work. In an experience sampling study across one work week ( $N = 140$  leaders, 506 data points), we found support for our overall model: For leaders with rather shared LSS, daily exclusion from followers resulted in a daily leader identity threat, and subsequently in perceived work-life interference. The current study advances our theoretical understanding of daily triggers of leader identity threat as well as its cognitive boundary conditions.

*Keywords:* exclusion, leader identity threat, leadership structure schemas, work-life interference, experience sampling

## Introduction

*“It’s a little lonely in the desert...”*

*“It is lonely when you’re among people, too.”*

– Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince* (1943)

People have a fundamental need to socially connect with meaningful others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). At the workplace, employees typically fulfill this need through building and maintaining meaningful connections with their co-workers on a daily basis, particularly those on peer level. For leaders, however, the opportunity to connect with peers is limited because leadership positions are scarce, and often competitive (Zumaeta, 2019). As such, one main source to form meaningful social interactions in leaders’ day-to-day work life are their followers (Bligh & Hess, 2007; Mintzberg, 1973).

While followers are a crucial source for leaders’ social connection at work, leaders’ formal position sets them apart from their followers, pointing to differences in status, power, and resources (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002; Zumaeta, 2019). Followers often treat their leaders differently, and meet them with restraint and caution (Zumaeta, 2019). This makes it difficult for leaders to feel connected with their followers. Thus, on some days, leaders may feel excluded from their followers, defined as an unfulfilled need for companionship with their followers (Gabriel et al., 2020; Zumaeta, 2019). In general, daily exclusion at work is a distressing experience with detrimental consequences, such as depression, withdrawal and reduced performance (Bedi, 2021; Bowers et al., 2022; Firoz & Chaudhary, 2022; Howard et al., 2019; Ozelik & Barsade, 2018). On workdays on which leaders feel excluded, they suffer from rumination, emotional exhaustion and sleeping problems (Gabriel et al., 2020; Lam et al., 2018).

Although scholars tapped into detrimental consequences of daily exclusion from followers for leaders’ well-being (e.g., Gabriel et al., 2020), less has been understood about

its underlying mechanism, and particularly how it might affect leaders' identity. The present experience sampling study therefore takes a closer look at the consequences of daily exclusion from followers for leaders' leader identity and their subsequent well-being at the work-home interface.

A leader identity describes individuals' self-definition as leaders, informing them about who they are ("I am a leader") and how they should behave ("I will lead") in a specific situation (Epitropaki et al., 2017; Lord et al., 2016). Leader identities are fluid states that fluctuate from day-to-day (Lanaj et al., 2019; Lanaj et al., 2021) and in response to leaders' momentary interactions (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Epitropaki et al., 2017). While leader identities are important to successfully enact leadership (e.g., showing high levels of work engagement and supportive behavior; Jennings et al., 2022; Lanaj et al., 2019; Lanaj et al., 2021), they can get threatened when leaders experience "potential harm to the value, meanings, or enactment" of their leader identity (Petriglieri, 2011, p. 644). Such threats can result from interactions with followers (e.g., transgression; Epitropaki et al., 2020), and have detrimental consequences for leaders' aspirations and performance (Davies et al., 2005; Petriglieri, 2011; Steele, 1997). Identity threats may even keep leaders mentally preoccupied when leaving the office, affecting their experiences at the work-life interface and being at home (Byron, 2005; Frone et al., 1992).

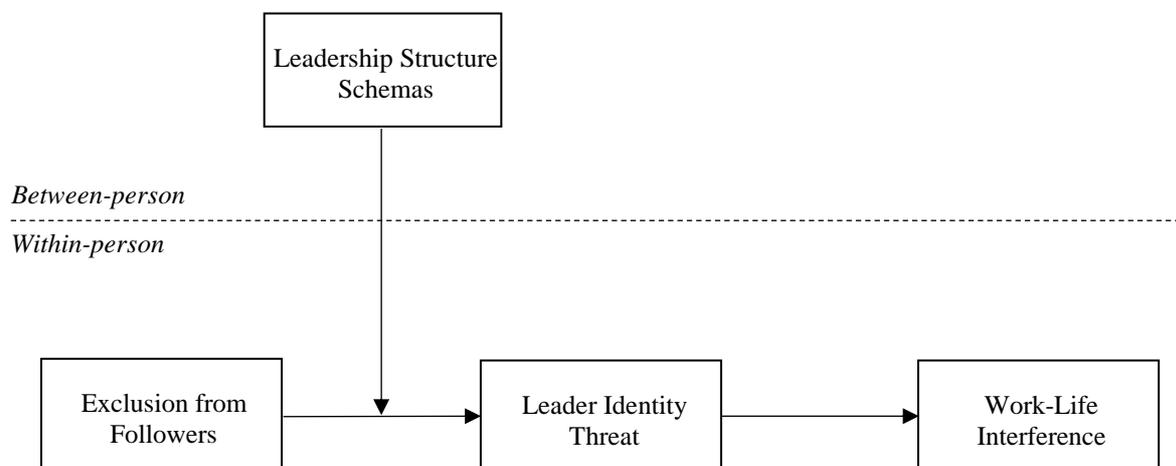
But will the daily perception of exclusion from follower inevitably threaten a leader's identity or will some leaders suffer more? We postulate that only for leaders with more shared (vs. hierarchical) leadership structure schemas (i.e., LSS; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Wellman et al., 2022) daily exclusion from followers has detrimental consequences in that it threatens their leader identity on the given day, which further provokes leaders to experience work-life interference. Leaders with a shared LSS tend to see leadership within their team as being shared (Cook et al., 2021) and expect their followers to openly interact with them and

collectively engage in leadership (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; DeRue et al., 2015; Wellman et al., 2022). While leaders with shared LSS feel validated when being included by followers, they will feel that their leadership is disapproved on days on which they are excluded from followers. This results in leader identity threat, which ultimately interferes with their personal lives beyond work. This will not be the case for leaders with hierarchical LSS as for those the daily exclusion from followers confirms the distinctiveness they associate with their leadership role. Our conceptual model is depicted in Figure 1.

Our research provides several contributions. First, we advance our understanding of daily triggers for leader identity threat by showing that depending on leaders' cognitive schema (i.e., LSS), daily exclusion from followers can be a trigger for momentary leader identity threat. Scholars argued that threats hamper the sustainment of identities within leader-follower relationships (Epitropaki et al., 2017), and initial evidence suggests that follower behaviors (i.e., negative feedback) can elicit leader identity threat on a between-person level (Nielsen et al., 2020). However, the empirical understanding of what triggers leader identity threat still remains scarce, particularly on a day-to-day basis. A within-person

**Figure 1**

*Conceptual Model*



approach is thus needed to appropriately capture the daily triggers and fluctuations of leader identity threat. By examining exclusion from followers as a daily trigger, and by considering it in interplay with leaders' LSS, we add to newer findings that boundary conditions can influence the impact of exclusion (Bernstein et al., 2010; Sacco et al., 2014) and inform a better understanding of what drives momentary leader identity threat.

Second, we contribute to the understanding of how leadership schemas inform leaders' identity sustainment. Prior research has primarily focused on person-based leadership attributes (i.e., implicit leadership theories; ILTs) for recognizing self and others as leaders (Lord et al., 2020). This research argued that possessing attributes that match those of a prototypical leader are a key facilitator for leader-identity and motivation (Epitropaki et al., 2017; Schyns et al., 2020). LSS differ from person-based schemas in that they focus on the enactment of leadership *within teams*. While scholars pointed to the relevance of LSS for leader identity construction (DeRue & Ashford, 2010), empirical evidence is scarce. These findings suggest that individuals judge the leadership in their team based on their LSS (Cook et al., 2021), and that leaders with shared rather than hierarchical LSS show less leadership behaviors (Wellman et al., 2022). LSS therefore seem to shape how we expect others and ourselves to interact with each other regarding leadership, which may ultimately affect leader identities. By shifting the focus from person-based schemas to LSS, we show that leaders' schemas regarding the distribution of leadership in teams informs their identity such that a shared (hierarchical) LSS makes them more (less) vulnerable to daily exclusion from followers.

Third, we contribute to the literature on leader identity across life domains (Hammond et al., 2017). In line with our leader-centric focus we aim to inform about short-term spillover effects from work identities to the home domain by applying a within-person approach. Leader identities extend beyond work (Hammond et al., 2017; Palanski et al., 2021;

Vogelgesang Lester et al., 2017) and affect leaders' well-being at home (Lanaj et al., 2021). Similarly, threats to leader identities can also vary from day to day. Our study therefore helps to better understand the potential detrimental effects daily leader identity threats have for leaders' experiences at home.

## **Theoretical Background and Hypotheses**

### **Leaders' Daily Exclusion from Followers**

According to Belongingness Theory (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) humans have a fundamental need to belong. They seek social connections with others, especially positive and meaningful ones that are stable and long-lasting. Consequently, leaders have a fundamental need to be included and accepted by their followers on a day-to-day basis. That is, leaders strive for positive social ties with their followers that go beyond mere functional exchanges (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Although leaders frequently interact with their followers during their work day (Bligh & Hess, 2007; Mintzberg, 1973), on some days they may find it difficult to genuinely connect with their followers due to the social distance that results from their formal position. That is, leaders have a heightened status, formal personnel responsibilities, and further job demands such as the obligation to make difficult decisions, all of which sets them apart from their followers (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002; Silard & Wright, 2020; Zumaeta, 2019). On some days, their need to belong may thus remain unmet, eliciting feelings of exclusion from followers (Silard & Wright, 2020; Zumaeta, 2019).

While a moderate amount of distance might be functional for leaders as it facilitates their detachment and signals legitimation (Hornsey & Jetten, 2004; Zumaeta, 2019), feeling included by their followers on a daily basis is still pivotal for leaders (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Epitropaki et al., 2017; Lord & Hall, 2005; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Leadership is highly relational (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014) and leaders depend on followers

to enact leadership and to accomplish their day-to-day leadership goals (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Lord & Hall, 2005). As such, leaders carefully monitor their daily relationships with followers (Gabriel et al., 2020; Lanaj et al., 2021; Lord & Hall, 2005; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014) as these may inform them about their identity and effectiveness. Daily inclusion by followers may signal leaders that they are socially valued and accepted (Chiu et al., 2016; McClean et al., 2018), which legitimizes their leader identity (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). In contrast, daily exclusion from followers may reveal a lack of meaningful connections with followers (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), which may jeopardizes their positive self-view as leaders.

### **Leadership Structure Schemas**

LSS capture individuals' different beliefs on how leadership should ideally be distributed across people. As such, it essentially captures beliefs on how social interactions within a group should take place in order to achieve effective leadership (Wellman et al., 2022). Whereas some see leadership as a rather exclusive position for a single person (i.e., hierarchical LSS), others define leadership more as a social process that should be shared among multiple individuals (i.e., shared LSS; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; DeRue et al., 2015). Similar to other leadership schemas (e.g., implicit leadership schemas; Epitropaki et al., 2013; Lord et al., 2020; Offermann & Coats, 2018) LSS consolidate over longer periods of time through repeated experiences with leadership, and people typically tend towards either shared or hierarchical beliefs about effective leadership structures (Wellman et al., 2022).

According to Leader Identity Theory (DeRue & Ashford, 2010), LSS play a crucial role in the construction of leader identities. LSS allow conclusions about which behavior is expected from others in the leadership process and *how* behaviors from others are interpreted (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). A study by Cook et al. (2021) has shown that people with shared (hierarchical) LSS perceive leadership interactions within their team as more distributed (centralized). That is, people prefer behaviors that align with their LSS and expect others to

behave in a way that fits their understanding of leadership. Leaders who see leadership as rather hierarchical are therefore likely to expect their followers to behave submissively since there can only be one single leader. Importantly for these leaders, the leader role is unique within a team and leadership is ideally enacted *alone*. By contrast, leaders with a more shared understanding of leadership believe in more flexible leader-follower roles as characterized by mutual exchange and relational influence. As such, they expect their followers to openly interact and actively engage with them for leadership (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; DeRue et al., 2015; Wellman et al., 2022). Indeed, research indicates that a formal leadership position lessens leadership intentions in individuals with shared LSS (Wellman et al., 2022). That is, leaders with shared LSS deliberately grant their followers leadership.

### **Leadership Structure Schemas, Daily Exclusion from Followers and Leader Identity Threat**

Due to their formalized leadership role, a leader identity is usually highly central to leaders' self-concept (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Epitropaki et al., 2017), making them motivated to enact and maintain their identities on a daily level "in order to achieve a sense of stability and continuity over time, as well as to maintain a high level of self-regard" (Petriglieri, 2011, p. 644). As leader identities are socially constructed based on cognitive schemas about leadership (Epitropaki et al., 2017), we propose that leaders' LSS shapes how aversive daily exclusion from followers will be for leaders' identity. Specifically, we assume that for leaders with a shared rather than hierarchical understanding of leadership, daily exclusion from followers will provoke a leader identity threat. This is because leaders with rather shared LSS see unity and inclusion with their followers as a premise for effective leadership (Wellman, 2017), they actively seek their followers' opinion and are keen on closely interacting with them on a daily basis (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Evans et al., 2021; Mathieu et al., 2000). That is, these leaders aspire to be mentors, genuinely wanting to create

a positive team climate to help their followers grow (Cook et al., 2021). On days with higher exclusion from followers when leaders lack a feeling of close interactions with their followers, leaders with rather shared LSS may feel like they did not effectively enact leadership. However, for leaders with more hierarchical LSS, exclusion from followers is congruent to their understanding of leadership. They expect to be distinct and it is less important for them to be included with their followers (Evans et al., 2021) as they feel responsible for enacting leadership by themselves. That is, for leaders with rather hierarchical LSS, daily exclusion from followers is less of a sign of failure but more a signal that confirms their distinctiveness. Therefore, we assume:

*Hypothesis 1: LSS moderates the relation between daily exclusion from followers and leader identity threat. There will be a positive relation for leaders with rather shared LSS. There will be no relation for leaders with rather hierarchical LSS.*

### **Consequences of Leader Identity Threat at Home**

Leader identities need to be considered across life domains (Hammond et al., 2017), as leaders fully integrate it into their sense of who they are both within and outside of work (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Epitropaki et al., 2017; Hammond et al., 2017; Lord & Hall, 2005).

Since leaders are motivated to uphold their positive self-view (Heine et al., 1999; Leary, 2007; Petriglieri, 2011), leader identity threats trigger leaders to actively try to maintain and restore their leader identity – even when at home. Accordingly, research on working parents show that experiences of parental identity threats can result in cross-domain outcomes (i.e., reduced work productivity; Greenbaum et al., 2021). Moreover, during work time leaders often lack sufficient time to self-reflect and cope with their daily experiences so that they transfer it to a protected setting after work (Ashford & DeRue, 2012; Gabriel et al., 2020; Lanaj et al., 2021; Lanaj et al., 2018). Yet, personal resources spent on work-related

issues can compete with other life demands like family time or attention (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000) resulting in work-life interferences. As leader identity threat are aversive and stressful experiences, leaders may be prone to stay emotionally and mentally occupied with it even when at home. This is intensified by the importance leaders usually attach to their leader identities, which reinforces their devotion to their leadership role and hinders them from distancing from work (Frone et al., 1992). However, preoccupation with work-related problems makes it difficult for leaders to fulfill other roles and responsibilities beyond work potentially resulting in conflicts (Byron, 2005; Frone et al., 1992). Initial results indicate that loneliness at work is positively related to conflicts at home (Firoz & Chaudhary, 2022). Moreover, prior studies showed that daily leader identity has consequences for leaders' experiences at home (Lanaj et al., 2021), and that daily isolation from followers results in rumination after work (Gabriel et al., 2020). However, a stable work identity (i.e., organization-based self-esteem) has shown to be negatively related to work-life interferences (Gordon & Hood, 2020) and to be positively related to work-life enrichment (Wayne et al., 2020), indicating that threats to work identities may interfere negatively with leaders' lives at home.

In line with our previous arguments, it may be especially difficult for leaders with shared LSS to escape the aversive experiences of followers' exclusion and their leader identity threat at home. This is because leaders with more shared LSS strongly base their leader identity upon open and inclusive relationships with their followers (Cook et al., 2021; Evans et al., 2021; Wellman, 2017). Identity threats caused by exclusion from their followers will signal them that they are not worthy of their leadership position, which will keep them occupied even when at home. In sum, we propose that on days on which leaders experience threat due to exclusion from their followers, they will experience negative interference

between their work and their personal lives after work. This will be the case for leaders with more shared LSS but not for leaders with more hierarchical LSS.

*Hypothesis 2:* For leaders with rather shared LSS but not those with rather hierarchical LSS, leaders' daily exclusion from followers will indirectly relate to work-life interference via leader identity threat.

## Method

### Sample and Procedure

We recruited leaders in Germany via the personal and professional networks of the researchers, and with the help of two graduate students (e.g., LinkedIn; Demerouti & Rispen, 2014). To take part in our study, participants had to be minimum 18 years, work at least 20 hours per week, and hold formal leadership responsibility for a minimum of two followers. Participants completed one baseline survey, followed by one work week of daily surveys (Monday to Friday). For each of the five days we conducted two daily surveys: One after-work survey (open from 12 p.m. to 8 p.m., average starting time at 5:20 p.m.), and one bedtime survey (open from 9 p.m. to 4 a.m., average starting time at 9:30 p.m.).

In total, 201 participants fulfilled the criteria and completed the baseline questionnaire. We retained 140 leaders (70.15% retained) that completed at least two full days (i.e., after-work and bedtime surveys) in order to apply within-person centering. Leaders provided 506 out of 700 days of complete data (72.29% completion rate; 7.23 surveys per person). Participants were mostly male (67.1%) and their age ranged from 25 to 65 years ( $M = 45.74$ ,  $SD = 10.84$ ). They supervised an average of 17.57 followers ( $SD = 28.49$ ) and worked an average of 46.45 hours ( $SD = 12.24$ ) per week. Our leaders had been in their jobs for an average of 3.24 years ( $SD = 18.75$ ) and had worked for their organization for an average of 12.64 years ( $SD = 9.92$ ). The majority of participants (64.29 %) worked in the service sector, the remainder (35.71 %) were from the industrial sector.

## Measures

The baseline survey assessed demographics and the between-person moderator leaders' LSS. The daily surveys assessed exclusion from followers and leader identity threat (after-work survey), and work-life interference (bedtime survey). All questionnaires were in German and either taken from previous studies or translated via an independent back-translation procedure (Brislin, 1970). Following recommendations for experience sampling research, we applied adapted and shortened versions of validated scales for our daily surveys (Fisher & To, 2012; Gabriel et al., 2019). Items were selected based on factor loadings and content-related meaningfulness (Ohly et al., 2010).

### ***Between-Person Measure: Leadership Structure Schemas***

Leaders' LSS ( $\alpha = .75$ ) were measured with five items by Wellman et al. (2022), rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). Higher values indicated a rather shared view on leadership. Sample items are: "Groups work best when leadership is shared among multiple group members."; "Groups perform best when all members of the group take responsibility for leading the group."

### ***Within-Person Measures***

***Exclusion from Followers.*** We adapted three items from the belongingness scale by Godard (2001) to measure the extent to which leaders felt excluded from their followers. Items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). We recoded the items so that high values equaled high levels of exclusion. Leaders were instructed to think about the interactions they had with their followers during the day. Items were: "Today, I really felt like I belong." (reverse coded); "Today, I felt quite isolated."; "Today, I didn't seem to 'connect' with others." The average Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was .70 (ranging from .65 to .74).

**Leader Identity Threat.** We measured daily leader identity threat with three adapted items from the German translation (Neff et al., 2012) of the state self-esteem measure by Heatherton and Polivy (1991), which has previously been used to measure leadership self-esteem threat (Yu et al., 2018). Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). We recoded the items so that high values equaled high levels of leader identity threat. Items were: “Today at work, I felt confident about my abilities as a leader.”; “Today at work, I as a leader felt as smart as others.”; “Today at work, I felt that I as a leader have the same or more professional ability than others.” The average Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was .73 (ranging from .69 to .77).

**Work-Life-Interference.** We adapted three items from the work interference with personal life subscale by Fisher et al. (2009) to measure daily work-life-interference before bedtime. Leaders were instructed to think about their free time after work. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). Items were: “Today, my job made it difficult to maintain the kind of personal life I would like to have.”; “Today, I had to neglect my personal needs because of the demands of my work.”; “Today, my personal life suffered because of my work.” The average Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was .92 (ranging from .91 to .93).

### **Control Variables**

We controlled for leaders' daily interaction time with followers to rule out alternative explanations due to the mere frequency of daily interactions (Becker et al., 2016). Leaders were asked in the after-work survey to rate their daily interaction time with followers on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = 0-5 min; 2 = 6-15 min; 3 = 16-30 min; 4 = 31-60 min; 5 = 1-2 hours; 6 = more than 2 hours; item: “How much time did you spent in direct interaction with your followers today?”). To account for temporal trends in our data, we further included the day of the week as a control variable (i.e., Days 1 through 5; Beal & Weiss, 2003; Ohly et al., 2010).

## Data Analysis

We applied multilevel modeling in RStudio (version 4.1.2) to analyze our data. More specifically, we used linear mixed models (LMM) with the packages *lme4* (Bates et al., 2015) and *lmerTest* (Kuznetsova et al., 2017) to test for the moderating effect of leaders' LSS in the relationship between daily exclusion from followers and leader identity threat. We used the PROCESS function of the package *bruceR* (Bao, 2022) with Monte Carlo simulation (1000 samples) to test for a moderated indirect effect between exclusion from followers and work-life interference via leader identity threat. Following recommendations (i.e., Enders & Tofghi, 2007; Gabriel et al., 2019), our predictor and control variables were within-person centered in order to examine the true within-person variance (i.e., leaders' daily variance from their personal means; Enders & Tofghi, 2007). Our between-person moderator LSS was grand-mean centered to facilitate interpretation. To examine within-person variability, we calculated intraclass correlations with a series of null models. Results supported multi-level analyses as the within-person variability ranged from 50.9% to 68.3% (exclusion from followers: 68.3%; leader identity threat: 50.9%; work-life-interference: 58.51%).

We conducted multilevel confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to ensure that our constructs were empirically distinct. Our proposed model (within-person: exclusion from followers, leader identity threat, work-life-interference; between-person: LSS) showed good fit:  $\chi^2(26) = 46.61, p = .008$ ; CFI = .99; TLI = .98; RMSEA = .04; SRMR<sub>within</sub> = .04; SRMR<sub>between</sub> = .03. It also yielded a better fit than the alternative model (a) combining the two within-person constructs exclusion from followers and leader identity threat to one factor ( $\chi^2(28) = 324.79, p < .001$ ; CFI = .86; TLI = .78; RMSEA = .15; SRMR<sub>within</sub> = .10; SRMR<sub>between</sub> = .03;  $\Delta\chi^2(2) = 278.18, p < .001$ ) or (b) combining all within-person measures (exclusion from followers, leader identity threat, work-life-interference) to one factor with

LSS loading on another factor ( $\chi^2(29) = 794.82, p < .01$ ; CFI = .63; TLI = .46; RMSEA = .23; SRMR<sub>within</sub> = .19; SRMR<sub>between</sub> = .03;  $\Delta\chi^2(3) = 748.21, p < .001$ ).

## Results

Means, standard deviations and correlations among study variables are presented in Table 1. Hypothesis 1 predicted that the relationship between daily exclusion from followers and leader identity threat is positive for leaders with more shared LSS but there is no relation for leaders with more hierarchical LSS. Supporting Hypothesis 1, the cross-level moderating effect of LSS was significant ( $\gamma = .05, p = .02$ ; see Table 2). Results of simple slope analysis are illustrated in Figure 2 and show that the positive relationship between daily exclusion from followers and leader identity threat was significant for leaders with shared LSS (+1 *SD*,  $\gamma = .18, t = 4.19, p < .001$ ) but not for leaders with hierarchical LSS (-1 *SD*,  $\gamma = .04, t = 0.96, p = .35$ ).

Hypothesis 2 predicted that for leaders with rather shared LSS but not those with rather hierarchical LSS, leaders' daily exclusion from followers will indirectly relate to work-life interference via leader identity threat. Supporting Hypothesis 2, the indirect effect of leaders' exclusion from followers on perceived work-life interference via leader identity threat was significant for leaders with shared LSS (estimate = .05, 95% CI [.01, .09]) but not for leaders with hierarchical LSS (estimate = .02, 95% CI [-.01, .03])<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> As recommended by Becker et al. (2016), we also conducted our analyses without control variables, which yielded the same pattern of results.

**Table 1***Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations of Study Variables*

| Variable                                      | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | 1     | 2     | 3     | 4     | 5      |
|---|----------|-----------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|
| Within-person variables                       |          |           |       |       |       |       |        |
| 1 Weekday <sup>a</sup>                        | 2.98     | 1.39      |       |       |       |       |        |
| 2 Interaction time with follower <sup>b</sup> | 4.45     | 5.30      | .00   |       |       |       |        |
| 3 Exclusion from followers                    | 2.04     | 1.08      | .02   | -.11* |       |       |        |
| 4 Leader identity threat                      | 1.95     | 0.64      | .02   | -.02  | .20** |       |        |
| 5 Work-life-interference                      | 2.19     | 1.14      | -.11* | -.04  | .05   | .18** |        |
| Between-person variable                       |          |           |       |       |       |       |        |
| 6 Leadership structure schemes                | 3.16     | 1.44      | .00   | .08   | -.02  | .09*  | -.14** |

*Note.* Correlations on within-person level are among within-person centered variables (N = 506). The means of within-person variables across days are used for correlations with the between-person variable. <sup>a</sup>1 = Monday to 5 = Friday, <sup>b</sup>1 = 0-5 min; 2 = 6-15 min; 3 = 16-30 min; 4 = 31-60 min; 5 = 1-2 hours; 6 = more than 2 hours

\* p < .05

\*\* p < .01

**Table 2**

*Results of LMMs Testing the Relationship between Leaders' Exclusion from Followers, Leader Identity Threat and the Cross-Level Interaction of LSS*

| Variable                              | <i>estimate</i> | <i>SE</i> | <i>t-value</i> |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------|-----------|----------------|
| (Intercept)                           | 1.95            | 0.06      | 31.63***       |
| Interaction time with follower        | 0.00            | 0.00      | 0.06           |
| Weekday                               | 0.00            | 0.01      | -0.08          |
| Exclusion from followers              | 0.11            | 0.03      | 3.84***        |
| LSS                                   | -0.04           | 0.03      | -1.18          |
| Social exclusion from followers x LSS | 0.05            | 0.02      | 2.39*          |

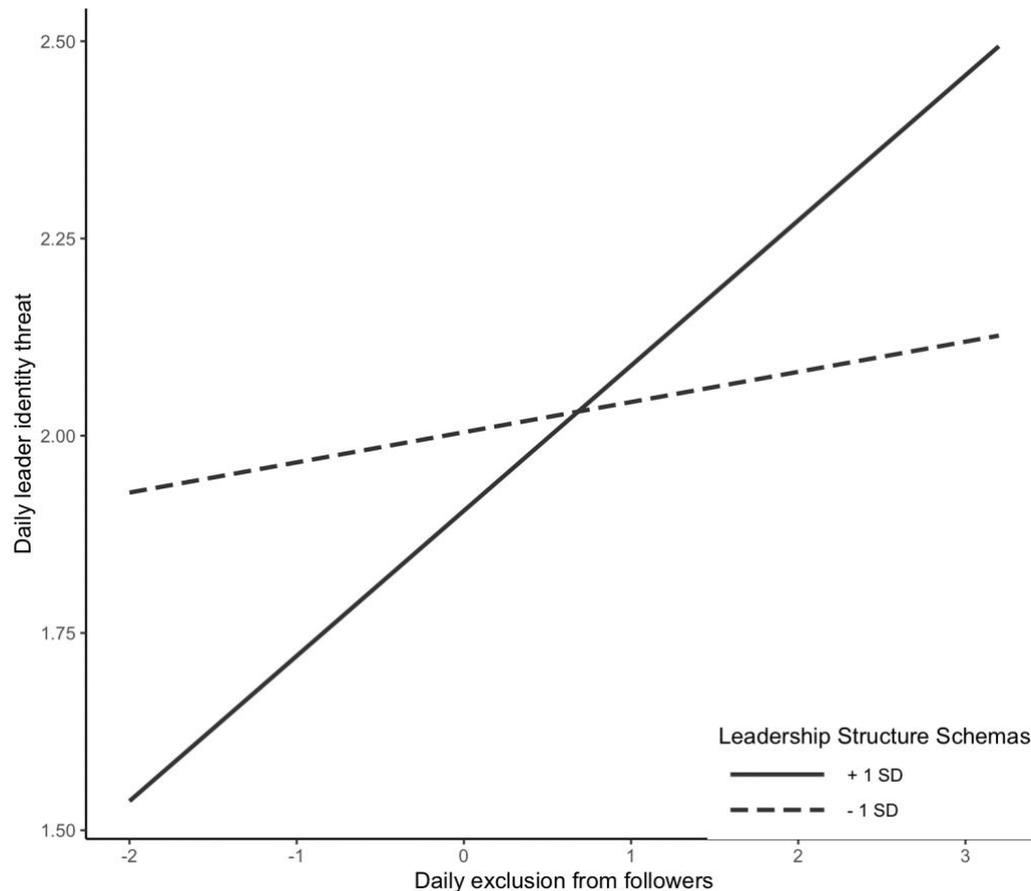
*Note.*  $N = 506$  observations nested in 140 leaders.

\*  $p < .05$

\*\*  $p < .01$

**Figure 2**

*Cross-Level Moderating Effect of Leaders' Leadership Structure Schemas on the Relationship between Leaders' Daily Exclusion from Followers and Leaders' Daily Leader Identity Threat.*



## Discussion

Feeling excluded despite being among followers is a known experience for leaders' daily work and can shape their momentarily self-views as leaders. Although researchers' interest in studying leader identities has substantially grown (Epitropaki et al., 2017), research on leaders' experiences of daily exclusion in regard to their leader identities has been missing. Our research demonstrates that for leaders with more shared LSS – who see effective leadership as being distributed among multiple individuals rather than centered around themselves – daily exclusion from followers is a trigger for leaders' leader identity

threat. Also, for these leaders, threats to their leader identities further extend beyond work and interfere with their personal lives on that days.

### **Theoretical Contributions**

The current study makes several theoretical contributions. First, by applying a within-person design our work contributes to a better understanding of leader identity threat and its triggers at work. Although it has been theorized that followers may influence leaders' identity experiences on a daily basis (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Epitropaki et al., 2017) and therefore may serve as a day-to-day source of leader identity threat, empirical evidence has remained missing. This is critical, because although leader identities develop in an ongoing process between leaders and followers, they are subjected to daily fluctuations (Lanaj et al., 2021) and threats to leader identities are momentary. Prior research has begun to focus on specific follower behavior (e.g., negative feedback; Nielsen et al., 2020) that can lead to leader identity threat on a between-person level. These results point to assertive (i.e., leader-like) follower behavior that may be perceived as followers' disapproval of leaders (i.e., non-grants of leadership) ultimately disrupting the construction of a leader identity. We broaden these findings by highlighting exclusion from followers as a subtler everyday source of leader identity threat. Further, we add a more differentiated view and extend belongingness theory (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) by showing that leaders – depending on their cognitive schemas – vary with regard to how threatening daily exclusion from followers is experienced. Rather than exclusion being aversive per se, our findings support prior studies (Bernstein et al., 2010; Sacco et al., 2014) that have shown that exclusion is most detrimental when it stems from members of highly important groups. That is, for leaders with more shared LSS, followers are seen as an essential group that they want to belong to and that can affect their self-regard.

Second, our findings inform the theoretical understanding of leadership schemas for leader identity construction. Leadership schemas have been theorized to be essential for the development and maintenance of leader identities (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Epitropaki et al., 2017). Our results help to expand the focus towards LSS as relevant components for individuals' leader identity sustainment (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). More specifically, our results indicate that exclusion from followers is a highly identity-relevant information for leaders with shared LSS. Prior evidence has shown that individuals usually prefer to pay attention to schema-consistent information in order to make sense of their everyday life (Lord & Maher, 2002). Accordingly, people with more shared LSS evaluate others engaging in leadership as positively (i.e., higher warmth; Wellman et al., 2022) and also tend to see leadership within their team as more decentralized (Cook et al., 2021). Our results highlight that exclusion from followers is a striking schema-inconsistent stimulus for leaders with shared LSS (Lee & Fiske, 2008), which they try to make sense of by attributing it internally and questioning their own leader identity. As such not only leaders' expectations about their personal attributes inform their leader identity construction (i.e., self-to-prototype comparison; Lord et al., 2020), but also their understanding about how leadership should be structured within the team.

Lastly, we extend findings on consequences of leader identity threat beyond work. Our finding supports theoretical assumptions that leader identity maintenance concerns multiple life domains (Hammond et al., 2017) and that threats to leaders' identity impair the functioning at home. This reinforces that formal leaders have leader identities that are strongly integrated into their global self-concept (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Epitropaki et al., 2017; Hammond et al., 2017; Lord & Hall, 2005), and that leader identity threats are therefore not only detrimental for leaders' followers and organization (Davies et al., 2005; Tepper et al., 2017) but cross over to affect leaders' personal lives.

### **Practical Implications**

To buffer negative outcomes of leaders' experiences of exclusion from followers, organizations need to be aware that the daily experience of exclusion from followers is particularly detrimental for leaders with more shared LSS. This is critical as leaders that strive to enable shared leadership have been proven to be beneficial for team performance, creativity and satisfaction (Zhu et al., 2018). As such, leaders with more shared LSS should be taught strategies on how to obtain inclusive relationships with their followers despite their hierarchical differences. Trainings on empowering leadership could for example help to diminish leaders' feelings of exclusion as empowerment has shown to promote followers' positive attitudes towards leaders, which in turn enables trusting and open leader-follower relationships (Cheong et al., 2019).

Second, it is important that leaders can rely on an external social support system like partner, family, friends or peers (Lindorff, 2001; Zumaeta, 2019). At the organizational level it would thus be helpful to form opportunities for leaders to socially connect with others at work besides their followers. This could be realized by establishing a leadership mentoring program, which gives leaders the chance to either learn from experiences of senior leaders or simply participate in exchange with other leaders who are going through the same experiences. Mentoring programs have shown to be effective to reduce effects of loneliness in school leaders (Barnett, 1989; Dussault & Barnett, 1996) – these findings are easily transferable to organizational leaders.

Lastly, leaders can use specific strategies to try to diminish interferences between work and personal life by actively detaching from work when at home (Hamilton Skurak et al., 2021). This can for example be done by shutting off all work-related communication channels (Boswell & Olson-Buchanan, 2007) or using tactics to focus on one's physical and psychological well-being (e.g., exercising or meditating). Indeed, studies have shown that

mindfulness trainings can help individuals to detach from work-related matters at home and reduce work-life interferences (Hülshager et al., 2014; Michel et al., 2014). A diary study has also shown that physical activities after work is positively related to positive affect in the evening via psychological detachment (Feuerhahn et al., 2014). Organizations should build on these findings and implement training programs for their leaders that help them to detach from work and minimize work-life interferences. Evidence showed that such interventions can improve recovery experiences at home and ultimately well-being (Hahn et al., 2011).

### **Limitations and Future Direction**

While our study made several contributions, it also contains limitations that open up avenues for future research. First, we have not delved deeper into the characteristics of followers from whom exclusion originates and future research could consider the characteristics of followers who were the source of leaders' exclusion. Exclusion stemming from followers with high social status might be perceived as more severe for leaders, because high status followers have the ability to easily influence their colleagues (Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Ravlin & Thomas, 2005) and their behavior can be seen as reflective for the whole team (Hogg, 2001; Weber et al., 2002). Similarly, exclusion from close followers (vs. distant followers) might be perceived as specifically threatening by leaders. High levels of leader-member exchange (LMX) for example has been proven be able to amplify negative social experiences. This is because high quality LMX relationships are based on mutual trust and reciprocity and therefore set high expectations regarding how the leader-follower relationship should be (Restubog et al., 2010). Exclusion from high LMX followers may therefore be a stronger violation of these expectations than exclusion from low LMX followers. Future work should thus take a closer look at the follower characteristics from which exclusion stem and their LMX relationship in differentiating between different types of exclusion and how threatening they are for leaders' identity.

Second, while we were interested more generally in leaders' daily exclusion from followers, future studies could specify the exact characteristics of social interactions that elicit a leader identity threat in leaders with shared (vs. hierarchical) LSS. That is, for leaders with shared LSS exclusion from only one follower might be sufficient to elicit an identity threat as this may already indicated a lack of follower trust or openness as trigger for leader identity threat. Contrary, leaders with hierarchical LSS might see interactions as threatening that are undermining their distinct leadership position – for example due to followers that are trying to take the lead by giving critical feedback or making proactive suggestions (Burriss, 2012; Urbach & Fay, 2018). Moreover, for leaders with more hierarchical LSS exclusion from fellow leaders may be perceived as threatening for their leader identities. This is because leaders with more hierarchical LSS might seek approval of their peers for their identities as this highlights their belongingness to the group of leaders and their distinctiveness from followers more strongly (Brewer, 1991).

Third, future studies could examine the fit between leaders' preference for how leadership should be distributed and their teams' LSS. It has been theorized that if leaders and followers share the same LSS, there will be less potential for conflicts when interacting and clear leader identities will emerge (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). More specifically, if leaders and followers both possess shared LSS, open and dynamic interactions will become behavioral standard within the team, which keeps followers encouraged to actively participate in the leadership process (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Wellman et al., 2022). Evidence also shows that teams with the same mental models on leadership distribution are more effective (McIntyre & Foti, 2013). Future study should empirically examine what consequences (mis)matches between leaders' and followers' LSS have on leader/follower identities and leadership distribution within the team.

Fourth, we recommend future studies to examine how leaders' experiences of momentarily identity threats affect daily leadership behavior (Kelemen et al., 2020; McClean et al., 2019). It has been theorized and shown that leader identity threat can lead to abusive leadership (Tepper et al., 2017) or leaders devaluing or discrediting their followers as sources of threat (Petriglieri, 2011; Popelnukha et al., 2022). This could potentially lead to negative downward spirals, as leaders engaging in such self-defensive behavior may even be more likely to experience exclusion from their followers and subsequent identity threats. Similarly, research by (Gabriel et al., 2020) indicated that leaders' felt isolation from their followers can lead to more isolation the next day via affective rumination and leaders' reduced helping behavior towards their followers. We recommend researchers to examine further self-defensive behaviors of leaders, which could give us a deeper understanding of how daily exclusion from followers and leader identity threat unfolds across time.

Lastly, our variables were all measured with leaders' self-reports, which may raise concerns about common-method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003; Podsakoff et al., 2012). We tried to address this issue by temporally separating our measures of leader identity threat and negative work-life interference. Ultimately, we felt that same-source data was appropriate for our study design (Gabriel et al., 2019; McClean et al., 2019) as we were interested in the subjective perspective of leaders. Yet, we still encourage scholars to include the perspective of leaders' partners/families in future research to capture work-life interferences from an additional angle.

### **Conclusion**

Although a strong leaders' identity requires meaningful daily interactions with followers, leaders' formal position may put them apart from feeling included in day-to-day activities of their followers and forming genuine connections. Our findings show that particularly for leaders with shared LSS, daily exclusion from followers poses a threat to their

leader identity, which in turn interferes with their personal lives beyond work. Thus, leaders that are motivated to foster shared leadership are especially prone to suffer from experiences of exclusion. To understand potential downstream consequences, we encourage fellow researchers to explore how leaders' momentarily leader identity threat affects leaders' prospective behavior and also mechanisms that may be able to buffer these adverse experiences.

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