

Making employees satisfied by giving them voice through leadership and organisational justice

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Abstract

This study explores how employee voice affects job satisfaction, focusing on the indirect effects of leadership and organisational justice based on Social Exchange Theory. The empirical data analysis from 196 workers in manufacturing organisations adopts a path model to test the direct and mediation effects.

The findings show that employee voice positively and significantly affects overall job satisfaction. Moreover, the analysis reveals the mediation effects of the leader-member exchange relationship and distributive justice. Interestingly, distributive justice acts as a mediator in the relationship as long as it involves the leadership variable. The study illuminates the relationship between employee voice and overall job satisfaction and the influence of the leadership dimension and organisational justice. The positive association between the variables examined from an employee-centred perspective complements existing knowledge on the relationship between leadership and justice perceptions in influencing employees' attitudes. The consequent implications, therefore, are discussed.

Keywords: employee voice, job satisfaction, mediation model.

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Arrivato: 3 maggio 2022; approvato 21 luglio 2022
DOI: 10.15167/1824-3576/IPEJM2022.2.1479.

1. Introduction

The recent dynamicity of national and global markets has profoundly affected Italian organisations' economic, social, and productive capacity, undermining their competitiveness and, in some cases, their possibility of survival. This uncertainty of daily context has strongly highlighted that people are central in organisations, with their attitudes towards, viewpoints and knowledge on many aspects of their job and organisation. It follows that allowing employees' expression within the organisation can bring relevant issues to light (Morrison, 2011), thus contributing to organisational development and improvement. Organisational scholars refer to employee voice for embracing any opportunity to express ideas, suggestions, or dissatisfaction about work-related issues to influence work decisions (Maynes & Podsakoff, 2014; Wilkinson et al., 2020) and organisational improvement (Morrison, 2011; Van Dyne & LePine, 1998).

Previous research has demonstrated that allowing employees to voice their opinions enhances their satisfaction through individual involvement and participation (Rees et al., 2013). Amongst employees' attitudes and behaviours, job satisfaction, which results from the judgement that an individual infers from the favour or disfavour assessed at work (Judge et al., 2017), is particularly critical for organisations. Indeed, studies indicate that satisfied employees exhibit higher job-related outcomes than unsatisfied employees (Bowling, 2007), such as organizational citizenship behaviours (Foote & Li-Ping Tang, 2008) and individual performance (Foote & Li-Ping Tang, 2008; Saari & Judge, 2004; Woznyj et al., 2022). Moreover, satisfaction affects the overall organisational performance (Bowling, 2007; Kessler et al., 2020) and is the dominant job attitude affecting turnover intentions (Woznyj et al., 2022).

Generally speaking, the relationship between employee voice and job satisfaction needs more research. Organisations need to consider employee voices to obtain a broader picture of the workplace, make decisions that enhance performance, and increase employees' job satisfaction. Most research studies have demonstrated a direct effect of employee voice on satisfaction at work, highlighting the relevance of employee voice in benefiting employees at work. In this way, previous studies (e. g., Holland et al., 2011; Nawakitphaitoon & Zhang, 2020) open the interest in deepening how employee voice affects job satisfaction. To do this, we ground our research within the Social Exchange Theory (SET), arguing that individuals at work react according to what they receive. Consequently, individuals infer their perceptions from the work context, evaluate their job situation and reciprocate the organisation accordingly (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2016). Including employee voice in this perspective, expressing opinions and concerns about work leads individuals to perceive that the organisation considers their contributions; as a result, employees positively evaluate their job situation, increasing their satisfaction at work (Holland et al., 2011).

The present study aims to explore the relationship between employee voice and job satisfaction in detail. More specifically, based on the SET, we offer a deeper understanding of the general exchange relationships between individuals at work (Rees et al., 2013), considering that tangible and intangible organisational resources

are exchanged between individuals through reciprocity (Blau, 1964). Proposing that employee voice alone is not enough to motivate employees' satisfaction at work, the essential contribution of our research provides a novel explanation of how employee voice affects satisfaction by involving the dimensions of leadership and organisational justice. Specifically, we involved the leader–follower exchange relationship and organisational justice employees' perceptions, which studies suggest as closely related in influencing employees at work (Dulebohn et al., 2012; Pillai et al., 1999; Scandura, 1999).

Our findings suggest that employee voice has more influence on job satisfaction when employees directly experience a high-quality relationship with their leader, which, in turn, increases the perceptions of fairness about resource allocation in the workplace. Therefore, leaders can reinforce the positive effects of employee voice on satisfaction by establishing social exchange relationships with their followers and enhancing their perceptions of the fair attribution of outcomes.

In the following section, we start by describing our research's theoretical background and discussing the mechanisms through which employee voice may impact overall job satisfaction. Section 3 presents the research methodology, and section 4 then describes the sample involved in the study and the hypotheses tested. Section 6 illustrates the research findings, paving the way for conceptual and practical implications, as discussed in Section 6. Finally, in section 7, we reflect on the limitations of this study, proposing avenues for further research.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1. *Social Exchange Theory*

The research model of the present study develops from Blau's SET (1964), which represents a unitary framework for many organisational behaviours studies (Chernyak-Hai & Rabenu, 2018). This theory assumes that multiple sequential transactions between parties occur within the organisation based on a reciprocity process (Cropanzano et al., 2017). According to the norm of reciprocity, an individual receiving an action feels the need to reciprocate by responding to or returning favourable (or unfavourable) treatment (Ng et al., 2014; Park & Nawakitphaitoon, 2018). Therefore, the SET theory implies reciprocal interdependence of the actions of individual transactions. These intangible and tangible resource transactions involve socioemotional and economic needs under different interdependent exchange rules (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2016).

Within the SET, the norm of reciprocity and the related Organisational Support concept (Eisenberger et al., 2001) make it possible to assess the implications that the expression of employee voice has on individual satisfaction (Bashshur & Oc, 2015; Brykman & Raver, 2021). Perceptions of Organisational Support (POS) give employees a feeling of reciprocity. Specifically, when the organisation supports employees' socioemotional needs, it creates their reciprocal responses, including the

judgments of their situation at work (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Pohler & Luchak, 2014). The literature indicates that leaders are crucial for perceptions of organisational support, as they represent one of the primary sources of social exchange relationships within the workplace. Acting as organisational representatives in the eye of employees, leaders contribute to followers' POS their attitudes and behaviours (Cropanzano et al., 2017).

The chance to express voice at work thus sends clear signals to employees that the organisation, through its leader, considers and values their contributions (Holland et al., 2017; Pohler & Luchak, 2014). Consequently, employees assume more positive attitudes towards the organisation (Croucher et al., 2012), including their satisfaction at work. Consistently, the following section details the rationale of our research model and the phenomena explored in understanding this relationship.

2.2. *Employee voice-job satisfaction conceptual model*

Generally speaking, employee voice is any communication of ideas, suggestions, concerns, or opinions about work-related issues (Kwon & Farndale, 2020; Nawakitphaitoon & Zhang, 2020). The ultimate aims of employee voice are organisational improvement in OB and increased decision-making participation in HRM research (Mowbray et al., 2015; Wilkinson et al., 2020). Organisational justice researchers refer to the procedural justice component of employee voice (De Cremer, 2006), and view it as a way for employees to influence decision-making. Our study considers employee voice as the opportunity for employees to participate in decision-making and support organisational improvements (Kwon & Farndale, 2020; Wilkinson et al., 2020).

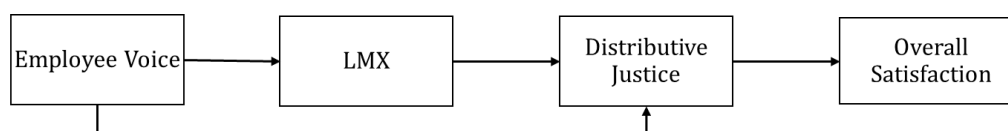
According to SET, employees' workplace treatment influences their reactions (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2016). The reciprocity norm of SET is associated with perceived organisational support (POS, Eisenberger et al., 2001): employees who perceive their organisation as supportive react by reciprocating. Employee voice represents a form of social exchange because it sends clear signals that individual contributions are being considered (Holland et al., 2017). As a result, employees positively evaluate their job situation since they feel valued and supported by the organisation. We thus argue that voice opportunity stimulates positive attitudes and behaviours and leads to higher levels of job satisfaction (Farndale et al., 2011). Consistently, studies have demonstrated a positive impact of employee voice on job satisfaction (Colquitt et al., 2001; Holland et al., 2011; Nawakitphaitoon & Zhang, 2020). By contrast, the absence of support for voice in the workplace determines negative consequences for employees' attitudes and behaviours and, in turn, it worsens their satisfaction at work (Holland et al., 2017).

In this regard, carrying out their roles, leaders reflect the organisation and thus personally represent it to employees (Tourish, 2014). Therefore, leaders are foremost in supporting employees and taking care of employees' needs; their attitudes and behaviours also influence subordinates' behaviours and perceptions, thus entailing several implications (Detert & Burris, 2007; McClean et al., 2012; Mowbray et al.,

2015). First, leaders establish different exchange relationships with their followers, involving various tangible and intangible resources, including physical and mental effort, provision of information, and resource attribution (Hooper & Martin, 2008; Martin et al., 2016). Consequently, leaders' exchanges relationships with followers, resulting from everyday activities, influence employees' perceptions of resource allocation, economic or socioemotional, tangible or intangible.

Based on the above, the purpose of the present study is to go beyond this direct relationship and explore how employee voice affects overall job satisfaction, focusing on the indirect effects of leadership and organisational justice. Figure 1 provides an overview of our conceptual model.

Figure n. 1 - Conceptual model



Source: our elaboration

2.3. The role of the leader–member exchange relationship

Organisational scholars recognise leaders as the principal architects of an organisation's success (Dinh et al., 2014; Tourish, 2014). Leaders implement organisational goals, guide employees, and set the direction of everyday processes and activities. Therefore, leaders reflect the organisation and thus personally represent it to their employees (Tourish, 2014). Employee voice studies acknowledge the centrality of leadership in terms of styles and behaviours for employees' attitudes and perceptions about the essence of their organisation (Detert & Burris, 2007; Sun et al., 2019). According to SET, in carrying out their functions, leaders establish different exchange relationships with their followers, involving physical and mental effort, resource attribution, provision of information, and emotional support. Organisational scholars refer to LMX to explain the quality of this exchange relationship (Liden et al., 1997), proposing that it results from the exchange of different tangible and intangible resources and generally affects job attitudes and job performance (Hooper & Martin, 2008; Martin et al., 2016).

Under a follower-based perspective, the reciprocity norm of SET complements POS (Caesens et al., 2020; Eisenberger et al., 2001), arguing that employees who perceive their organisation as supportive react by reciprocating. POS affects employees' reactions by relying on their work experiences and social relationships (Stinglhamber et al., 2020). Accordingly, our research involves the quality of LMX as a relational aspect that explains the underlying linkage between employee voice and overall job satisfaction.

Relational elements, such as openness to inputs, respect, trust, and mutual support, are essential elements of a good quality LMX (Dulebohn et al., 2012; Farndale et al., 2011; Rees et al., 2013). Scholars have recognised LMX as a significant element that vehicles positive individual attitudes and behaviours (Farndale et al., 2011; Richard et al., 2002) toward increased job satisfaction (Dulebohn et al., 2012; Hooper & Martin, 2008). Keeping in mind that leaders are the primary actors of the organisation (Tourish, 2014), this study assumes that employees perceive organisational support for voice through behaviours and interactions with their leaders, involving openness to input, trust and respect for ideas. These behaviours are essential elements of exchange relationships leader-follower and increase LMX quality, thereby increasing employee work satisfaction. Accordingly, we posited that:

H1. LMX mediates the employee voice–overall job satisfaction relationship.

2.4. The role of distributive justice

Perceptions of organisational justice, that is, the evaluations that individuals make of their work, are based on subjective criteria of fairness (Fortin et al., 2019). Regarding the relationship between employee voice and organisational justice, the literature indicates that employee voice generally allows employees to have some control over decision-making, ensuring the fairness of processes and practices implemented by their organisations (De Cremer, 2006). In addition to fairness in decision making, employee voice influences the fairness of outcomes (Folger, 1977), as Korsgaard and Roberson (1995) have suggested. Accordingly, voice indirectly supports the fairness of decisions concerning concrete and tangible outcomes, such as pay, bonuses, job assignments, and time off, which are closely connected with work input (Cobb & Lau, 2015; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2016). In this way, employees' perceptions involve distributive justice literature referring to the expectations of the balance between employees' job input, namely, their contributions at work and the outcomes rendered. According to Adams's (1963) equity theory, individuals evaluate their input/outcome ratio in a fair allocation of resources (Colquitt & Rodell, 2011; Leventhal, 1976). Studies have shown that perceptions of distributive justice are essential for the individual outcomes of commitment (Zhao et al., 2020), job performance (Arab & Atan, 2018), and intent to stay (Loi et al., 2006). Considering all of the above, we assume that employee voice creates a shared sense of distributive justice, affecting thus work satisfaction. It enables employees to affect resource distribution and related assignment decisions, thus improving their perceptions of the fairness of input/outcomes. As a result, employees judge their situation at work positively and feel more satisfied. This is in line with the literature demonstrating that employee voice is associated with satisfaction indirectly through distributive justice (e.g. Richard et al., 2002). Moreover, Arab and Atan (2018) examined the main and interactive effects of organisational justice components on job performance and job satisfaction and found that distributive justice component positively and significantly contributes to job satisfaction. Accordingly, we posited that:

H2. Distributive justice mediates the employee voice–overall job satisfaction relationship.

2.5. The sequential mediation of LMX and distributive justice

The present study also contends a sequential mediation of LMX and distributive justice. The literature suggests a close relationship between the leader–follower exchange relationship and organisational justice (Dulebohn et al., 2012; Pillai et al., 1999; Scandura, 1999); nevertheless, there is still no definitive agreement on the nature and form of the relationship. For instance, due to the relational nature of LMX, its quality can influence perceptions of interactional justice, which refers to the human aspect of organisational processes, namely the interpersonal behaviour of the leader towards employees (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001). Furthermore, Dulebohn et al. (2012) demonstrate that, since LMX is dynamic, employees' perceptions of procedural and distributive justice occur later in the relationship. Hence, in assessing the role of leaders as proximate representatives of the organisation (Tourish, 2014), LMX acts as a determinant of employees' perceptions of distributive justice, and the quality of the relational exchange between leaders and employees explicates the resource allocation process (Cobb & Lau, 2015). In this perspective, since employees perceive different levels of treatment in the exchange relationship with their leaders - including tangible outcomes connected to work contributions, they also assess the level of distributive justice when evaluating their input/outcome ratio according to the fair allocation of resources (Adams, 1963; Colquitt & Rodell, 2011; Leventhal, 1976). As a result, perceptions of distributive justice contribute to employees' evaluation of their situation at work and their satisfaction.

Therefore, following previous studies about the relationship between LMX and distributive justice (Dulebohn et al., 2012), and their impact on job satisfaction (Scandura, 1999), employee voice strengthens the relationship with leaders, and the quality of LMX influences perceptions of fairness in treatment (Masterson & Lensges, 2015). As a result, and in the context of SET, employees reciprocate with better job performance and increased satisfaction (Arab & Atan, 2018). We therefore propose:

H3. LMX and distributive justice mediate the employee voice–overall job satisfaction relationship.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Data collection and sample

The present study involves 196 employees from two medium-sized manufacturing companies in Italy. Most Italian manufacturing organisations employ more than a third of Italian workers (Di Bernardino et al., 2020). Moreover, the Italian context is

somewhat particular for voice investigation: firstly, small and medium-sized organisations (from 10 to 249 employees) rank first in creating Italian value-added (Istat, 2019); second, although the Italian experience is relevant in the trade union movement and indirect employee voice, other forms of voice in the workplace enhance employee participation in a traditional sector, such as manufacturing (Armaroli, 2020). In this way, individual voice represents a key element to improving the performance of these kinds of producing organisations. Therefore, the present study presents a case of how employee voice works in Italian manufacturing organisations and how it influences job satisfaction. Finally, managers' presence is significant only in Italian medium-sized and large companies (Istat, 2020), so the sample allows considering the study focus on the LMX effects in this context.

Data collection was through a structured questionnaire with closed-ended questions. To avoid common method variance—a limitation of self-report—we carried out the following procedures (Podsakoff et al., 2012). The items examined were part of a broader questionnaire on other constructs and measurements associated with employee voice. We translated these measures into Italian using simple, specific, and concise statements to reduce ambiguity in interpretation. We randomly presented all the items to participants and separated the dependent and independent variables. Finally, we addressed the potential social desirability effect by ensuring the anonymity of responses.

Shop-floor and front-line workers completed the survey during their working hours; they dedicated 20 minutes to complete the paper questionnaire. The sample included 46.9% women and 52.6% men. Age-wise, 32.1% were between 19 and 32, 43.4% were between 33 and 42, 21.4% were between 43 and 52, and 3.1% were between 53 and 61.

3.2. Measures

Self-perception scales measured the variables included in the survey (Spector, 2019) based on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*).

Overall job satisfaction. The study used three items from Fast et al. (2014) and 1 item from Saks (2006). This measure indicated the global satisfaction commonly used to assess overall employee attitude (Holland et al., 2011).

Employee voice. The study used two items from Fast et al. (2014) and two from Lam et al. (2016). This scale measures the regularity of employee voice behaviours by using a response scale from *never* (=1) to *ever* (=5).

LMX. The study used Wayne et al.'s (1997) scale.

Distributive justice. The study used five items from Niehoff and Moorman (1993).

Control variables. Five control variables allowed the power of alternative explanations that reduced the present results. Previous studies have illustrated an influence on how members speak up acted by variables such as age, gender, organisation, education, and seniority in the current organisation (Cooper et al., 2021; Detert & Burris, 2007; Fast et al., 2014). We thus involved these variables in the analysis.

4. Results

4.1. Preliminary analyses

Table 1 shows the descriptive and Pearson correlation results and provides an initial overview of the relationships between the different variables assessed.

Table n. 1 - Descriptive statistics and Pearson's correlations

	Mean	SD	Pearson's Correlation									
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
1 Overall Satisfaction	3.30	0.77	1									
2 Employee Voice	2.80	0.55	.254**	1								
3 LMX	3.13	0.87	.487**	.287**	1							
4 Distributive Justice	2.80	0.80	.572**	.129	.586**	1						
5 Age	36.96	8.38	.090	.093	0.10	.172*	1					
6 Gender	-	-	-.054	-.215**	-.109	-.033	.248**	1				
7 Education	2.69	1.37	-.051	.080	.070	0.029	-.051	0.027	1			
8 Seniority	7.19	5.45	-.029	.038	-.19**	-.142*	.438**	0.136	-.259**	1		
9 Organisation	-	-	-.035	-.081	-.049	0.037	.188**	0.059	.500**	0.072	1	

N = 196

*Significance level of 0.05

**Significance level of 0.01

***Significance level of 0.001

4.2. Validity and reliability

We conducted confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using IBM AMOS vers 23 to evaluate the measurement model. Table 2 shows the results of the model fit comparisons. The four-factor model that we hypothesised shows a satisfactory fit (Hair, 2009; Kline, 2015), $\chi^2/df = 1.775$, CFI = 0.936, TLI = 0.923, RMSEA = 0.068, SRMR = 0.06.

Table n. 2 - Model fit comparison

<i>Models</i>	χ^2/df	<i>CFI</i>	<i>TLI</i>	<i>RMSEA</i>	<i>SRMR</i>
<i>4-factor model</i>	1.775	0.936	0.923	0.068	0.06
<i>3-factor model: both mediators (LMX and distributive justice) into the same latent variable (named "MED")</i>	3.337	0.832	0.804	0.109	0.126
<i>1-factor model</i>	6.86	0.568	0.507	0.173	0.13

Table n. 3 - Construct validity, AVEs, CRs and intercorrelations

Construct	Item	Unstandardized Coefficient Estimate (SE)	Standard Coefficient Estimate	AVE	CR	MSV	Max R(H)
Employee Voice	Q1a	1	0.601	0,402	0.729	0.058	0.73
	Q1b	1.023 (0.166)	0.663				
	Q1c	0.999 (0.169)	0,609				
	Q1d	1.113 (0.181)	0,661				
Overall Satisfaction	Q12a	1	0.817	0.746	0.915	0.267	0.92
	Q12b	1.174 (0.077)	0.905				
	Q12c	1.098 (0.083)	0.818				
	Q12d	1.084 (0.075)	0.872				
LMX	Q8a	1	0.781	0,622	0.891	0.277	0.896
	Q8b	1.041 (0.09)	0.789				
	Q8c	1.072 (0.085)	0.851				
	Q8d	1.115 (0.096)	0.794				
	Q8e	0.978 (0.094)	0.721				
Distributive Justice	Q10a	1	0.774	0.475	0.812	0.277	0.861
	Q10b	0.795 (0.104)	0.568				
	Q10c	0.634 (0.108)	0.443				
	Q10d	0.981 (0,1)	0.715				
	Q10e	1.157 (0.1)	0.865				

Notes:

CR = composite reliability; **AVE** = average variance extracted; **MSV** = maximum shared variance; **MaxR(H)** = maximum reliability;

We further assessed the validity of each construct by calculating both convergent and discriminant validity. For convergent validity (Table 3), the average variance extracted (AVE) had to be above 0.50. To confirm the validity of those constructs below the threshold, we controlled for composite reliability (CR) values (Fornell &

Larcker, 2018). All were higher than 0.70 (Nunnally, 1994). We used previous literature regarding the degree of AVE and CR required to establish reliability (Malhotra & Dash, 2016); if AVE is less than 0.50, but CR is higher than 0.60, the convergent validity of the construct can be considered adequate. To evaluate the constructs' discriminant validity, we compared the square root of the AVE of each construct (on the diagonal in Table 4) with the inter-construct correlation coefficients. We found that the former was more significant than the latter (Campbell, 1960). Overall, these checks confirmed the validity of the measures used.

Table n. 4 - Intercorrelations

<i>Construct</i>	<i>Voice</i>	<i>Overall Satisfaction</i>	<i>LMX</i>	<i>Distributive Justice</i>
<i>Employee Voice</i>	0.634			
<i>Overall Satisfaction</i>	0.240**	0.864		
<i>LMX</i>	0.240*	0.458***	0.789	
<i>Distributive Justice</i>	0.1	0.517***	0.527***	0.69

Notes:

*Significance level of 0.05; **Significance level of 0.01; ***Significance level of 0.001

On the diagonal = square root of AVE.

4.3. Hypothesis testing

To test the hypotheses, in line with previous studies (Berdicchia, 2015; Liu et al., 2020; Stinglhamber et al., 2020), we used the SPSS macro PROCESS to test serial mediator models (Hayes, 2017). In Hayes' mediation approach, bootstrapping generates an empirically derived representation of the sampling distribution of the indirect effect, creating a confidence interval that respects the sampling distribution's irregularity, characterising most empirical studies. This method thus produces a more accurate inference and a test with a higher power (Hayes, 2017).

We calculated all path coefficients and controlled for age, gender, education, seniority, and organisation. As Table 5 shows, except for the seniority in the current organisation (which is essential in terms of LMX), none of the control variables was related significantly to the study variables. Tables 5 and 6 show the results of the regression analysis.

Table n. 5 - Regression results for serial multiple mediation model

	Model 1 M1			Model 2 M2			Model 3 Y		
	b	SE	p	b	SE	p	b	SE	p
X	<i>a1</i> 0.405	0.112	***	<i>a2</i> -0.045	0.092	n.s.	<i>c</i> 0.358	0.102	***
M1	-	-	-	<i>d12</i> 0.514	0.0576	***	<i>c'</i> 0.214	0.087	*
M2	-	-	-	-	-	-	<i>b1</i> 0.180	0.065	**
							<i>b2</i> 0.438	0.069	***
Age	0.024	0.008	**	0.014	0.006	*	-0.006	0.006	n.s.
Gender	-0.122	0.124	n.s.	-0.003	0.098	n.s.	0.038	0.093	n.s.
Education	0.012	0.053	n.s.	-0.041	0.042	n.s.	-0.048	0.039	n.s.
Seniority	-0.045	0.012	***	-0.018	0.010	n.s.	0.010	0.009	n.s.
Organisati on	-0.112	0.1634	n.s.	0.1419	0.129	n.s.	0.035	0.1228	n.s.
	R ² =0.16 F(6,189)=6.059 p<0.001			R ² =0.37 F(7,188)=15.89 p<0.001			R ² =0.39 F(8,187)=15.245 p<0.001		

Notes:

X = Employee voice; M1 = LMX; M2 = Distributive Justice; Y= Overall satisfaction

p*<0.05; ** *p*<0.01; * *p*<0.001

N=196

Table n. 6 - Indirect effect path analysis

Indirect effect	95% confidence interval*		
	Boot. SE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Employee Voice → LMX → Overall Satisfaction	0,0362	0,0144	0,1535
Employee Voice → Distributive justice → Overall Satisfaction	0,0429	-0,1055	0,0642
Employee Voice → LMX → Distributive justice → Overall Satisfaction	0,0261	0,0421	0,1451

Notes

LLCI, ULCI = lower and upper level of the 95% bootstrap confidence intervals

Source: own computations

Results first confirmed the basic premise on our study, showing a significant direct effect of employee voice on overall job satisfaction (*b* = 0.358; *SE* = 0.087; *t*(189) =

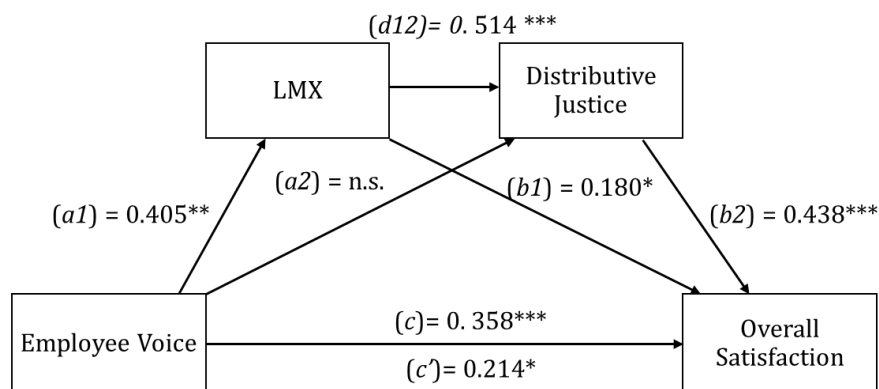
2.345; $p < 0.001$), then revealing a reduction in significance when the mediators were included in the regression ($b = 0.214$; $SE = 0.087$; $p < 0.05$), suggesting a early signal of mediating effects. As concerns the first mediator, LMX, the first regression model (Table 5) revealed that employee voice was associated with LMX ($a_1 = 0.405$; $SE = 0.112$; $t(189) = 3.615$; $p < 0.01$) and the third regression model revealed that LMX was associated with overall job satisfaction ($b_1 = 0.180$; $SE = 0.064$; $t(187) = 2.772$; $p < 0.01$). The results indicated that this indirect effect was significant ($a_1b_1 = 0.073$; $SE = 0.036$) and the bootstrap confidence interval showed a positive effect, since it was entirely above zero (Table 6). H1 was thus confirmed.

As regards the second mediator, although distributive justice was associated with overall satisfaction (third model, $b_2 = 0.438$, $SE = 0.069$, $t(187) = 6.369$; $p < 0.001$), the relationship between employee voice and distributive justice was not significant (a_2). Therefore, the indirect effect of employee voice on overall satisfaction through distributive justice, estimated as $a_2b_2 = -0.0198$, could not be considered significant. The bootstrap confidence interval confirms the results as it includes zero (Table 5). H3 was not confirmed.

Interestingly, regarding the model as a whole, employee voice is a significant predictor of LMX that significantly predicts distributive justice, which, in turn, positively influences employee job satisfaction. The indirect effect of employee voice on overall job satisfaction via LMX and distributive justice was positive, as demonstrated in table 6 by confidence intervals above zero (0.0408 to 0.1466). H3 was thus confirmed.

Figure 2 shows the results of the mediation analyses.

Figure n. 2 - Results



Source: our elaboration, based on Hayes (2017)

5. Discussion

The present study explores the relationship between employee voice and job satisfaction. Consistent with previous research (Holland et al., 2011; Nawakitphaitoon & Zhang, 2020), this study reveals that employee voice positively and significantly affects overall job satisfaction. When employees can express their voice on work-related issues, they evaluate their situation more thoroughly and feel more satisfied. Furthermore, the results show the mediation effect of LMX and distributive justice. In particular, examining the mediation effect of each mediator, first, voice, indirectly affects overall job satisfaction via LMX. Per the second mediator, the literature suggests that distributive justice better relates to employees' attitudes toward personal outcomes (Zhao et al., 2020). Our findings are consistent with this, as long as the quality of LMX acts as the first mediator. Alternatively, perceptions of distributive justice did not mediate the employee voice–satisfaction relationship. These results lead us to reflect on theoretical and practical contributions.

6. Contributions

6.1. Theoretical contribution

In keeping with SET, the present study's findings show that the opportunity to voice ideas and opinions about work-related issues contributes to employee job satisfaction. The results suggest that employee voice instils staff the perception that the organisation is considering their views and needs (Farndale et al., 2011; Rees et al., 2013). Furthermore, since more favourable treatment generates a more positive attitude amongst employees (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2016), they subsequently engage more positively in the relationship with their leaders, who are, in their eyes, the principal actors in the organisation (Tourish, 2014). Indeed, the findings demonstrate the relevance of the leadership dimension and perceptions of organisational justice in the relationship between employee voice and job satisfaction. First, the results contribute to the literature about the central role of LMX in affecting employees' attitudes and behaviours (Dulebohn et al., 2012), such as employee voice (Kong et al., 2016). In addition, the most relevant contribution of this study is the significant indirect effect of distributive justice on the relationship between employee voice and overall job satisfaction as long as the leadership dimension intervenes in this main relationship. The present study indicates that employee voice is not sufficient to influence perceptions of fairness of outcome, which we found to play a role in influencing employee satisfaction. This evidence complements existing knowledge about the relationship between leadership and organisational justice (Cobb & Lau, 2015; Dulebohn et al., 2012; Pillai et al., 1999), suggesting that the opportunities for voice are not sufficient to foster employees' perceptions of fairness in resource allocation. The necessary condition is that followers perceive distributive justice due to their leader's high exchange relationship

quality. Indeed, this social exchange relationship also involves tangible resources that individuals can compare with others (Cobb & Lau, 2015); a high-quality LMX influences employee perceptions of fairness of treatment (Adams, 1963) and makes them feel more satisfied at work. Therefore, it is essential that employees, who express their views, perceive an evolution in the quality of the exchange relationship with their leaders, a trust-building process (Martin et al., 2016). This relationship involves both intangible resources, such as openness, respect and honesty, and the allocation of tangible resources related to pay, bonuses and work assignments (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2016; Hooper & Martin, 2008). The latter influences employees' perceptions of distributive justice (Cobb & Lau, 2015), affecting employee satisfaction.

Thus, to advance the existing knowledge about organisational justice, scholars should keep in mind that the influence of leadership goes beyond the well-known effects on perceptions of interactional justice, thus focusing on distributive justice. In doing so, they should adopt a social exchange perspective that explains leaders' resource allocation in terms of relational exchanges with employees (Cobb & Lau, 2015), who tend to compare their treatment with peers when judging the fairness of outcomes.

6.2. Practical implications

This study demonstrates that it is essential that everyday organisational activities support open communication of ideas and opinions, encouraging thus employee voice behaviours, which is critical for overall job satisfaction. Practices such as direct and individual channels that allow face-to-face discussions; informal feedback systems; and consultation processes enable the staff to voice opinions and ideas and establish high-quality relationships with the leader based on support, trust and respect. However, implementing such practices alone is insufficient (Edmondson, 2003); organisations need to re-orientate themselves by placing social relationships at the centre of their core values and principles. Consequently, organisations need to re-orientate their culture and acknowledge open communication and people's ideas and input as central and widespread organisational values.

Since leaders implement the organisational objectives in guiding employees' everyday work activities, organisations need to invest in their leaders to reinforce cultural values and diffuse them across individuals. Therefore, organisations need to have a good leader who is competent and ethical to develop the strategies necessary to achieve the company's aims and, at the same time, reinforce organisational values and open communication principles (Allio, 2005). As a starting point, the first implication involves selecting and recruiting leaders who best exhibit competence and relational skills. Leaders motivate employee job satisfaction by providing support, being open, and showing respect (Dulebohn et al., 2012; Hooper & Martin, 2008). Based on the LMX relationship, employees infer the fairness of treatment by evaluating the allocation of intangible and tangible resources, thus developing judgements of organisational justice (Cobb & Lau, 2015). Although leaders have

limited distributive resources to exchange, including their own time, the present study suggests that an equal distribution of resources such as pay, promotions, and job assignments is critical to motivating employees through satisfaction.

Consequently, it is essential to reinforce leadership behaviours to listen to and understand employees' ideas, suggestions, requests, and concerns about resource allocation and the fair attribution of outcomes. Accordingly, a second practical implication involves implementing training programs that make leaders aware of the importance of empathy, trust, support and value appreciation of followers' input. As the literature suggests, leaders' training cannot regard conceptual and theoretical lessons; leaders develop their competencies and characteristics by performing deliberate acts (Allio, 2005; Ingrassia, 2016). In this regard, incentives and rewards might be critical to fostering relations-oriented behaviours, improving leader empathy and ethical competencies, and enhancing thus the positive relationship with employees (Mahsud et al., 2010). Moreover, these systems could improve leaders' open and supportive behaviours and fair social exchange relationships. The resulting high quality of the relations between the leader and follower is critical to conveying employees' behaviours, including voice, toward increased levels of job satisfaction (Dulebohn et al., 2012; Hooper & Martin, 2008).

7. Limitations and future research

Despite the promising findings, our research is not without limitations. First, the study is cross-sectional: due to the data collection at a single moment, this study cannot establish the definitive direction of the relationship between the variables investigated (Wang et al., 2016). Therefore, further research is needed to clarify the nature and form of this relationship. Moreover, different social mediators might intervene between employee voice and job satisfaction; for instance, contextual factors such as cultural norms and voice mechanisms and systems might impact the models (Kwon & Farndale, 2020). Future studies might also deepen the present findings by considering different orientations of employees' voice behaviours, such as promotive or prohibitive (Liang et al., 2012).

Moreover, future studies might consider other leaders' elements. First, leaders' trust might significantly affect how LMX mediates the relationship between the phenomenon investigated (Martin et al., 2016); second, the mutual fit in terms of personality or values might determine a different quality of the exchange relationships between the leader and follower. Also, managerial, humanistic, political and symbolic elements of the leader (Ingrassia, 2016) might be considered in future research to explore more in detail the influence of the leadership dimension of the phenomena investigated. Finally, other aspects, such as the leaders' levels of authority and hierarchy (Detert & Treviño, 2010), might intervene and affect the relationship with individuals and their attitudes and perceptions at work.

Finally, this study found a significant relationship between the control variable of seniority with LMX. It could be a reasonable result since LMX evolves over time (Martin et al., 2018). Employees who have spent more time working with the same

leader develop a more significant exchange relationship. Interestingly, we found a negative relationship, suggesting the exact contrary. Future research is needed to deepen this result, considering the reflections above. Also, future studies might investigate the substantive topic longitudinally and examine more closely the long-term impact of LMX (which is necessarily evolutionary) on employee attitudes and perceptions (Caesens et al., 2020).

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