

Will Coming Out of the Closet Help Me as a Leader? Interplay between Leader's Sexual Orientation, Employee Voice and Trust

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ABSTRACT

From workplaces being heterosexist in nature to making room for diversity, there has been a paradigm shift in recent years. Nevertheless, how will the employees react if their leaders come out of the closet tomorrow? This perspective in the field of research largely remains unexplored. To fill this gap in the present study, a conceptual model is developed to establish the missing link between the disclosure of a leader's sexual orientation and its impact on employee voice practices. The leader-follower relationship heavily relies on trust, and hence trust in the leader mediates the relationship between the constructs in this model. Using Goffman's stigma theory and Leader categorization theory, different areas of leadership, diversity, employee voice, and trust are integrated together. More precisely, this model suggests that when leaders disclose their membership to a stigmatized community, it builds subordinates' trust in the leader. This trust in the leader, in turn, promotes employee voice practices in the organizations. This article contributes to the literature in three ways. Firstly, it integrates three significant areas of research that have not been connected. Secondly, it presents a conceptual model bringing theories from different domains into the management research area. And thirdly, it provides three testable propositions that are derived from the conceptual model. Future research can test this conceptual model and follow the other future agendas stated toward the end of this paper.

Keywords: Disclosure, Sexual orientation, Trust in leader, Employee voice, Goffman's stigma theory, Leader categorization theory, G20 Presidency, Conceptual model

INTRODUCTION

Women-led development holds key spot in the vision of the present government and in multiple occasions they have called out the need for inclusion of gender concerns in the core policy agendas. Now when India has taken over G20 Presidency from Indonesia it aims at bridging the gender gap to foster digital gender inclusion by addressing grass root causes of such divides across the G20 countries. To carry forward the aim of G20 Presidency Women 20 also known as W20, acts as an official engagement group to ensure that gender related consideration remain in the mainstream (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2023). One such hidden issue which needs attention is to understand the changing nature of the workplaces.

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From workplaces being heterosexist in nature to making room for diversity (Bowring, 2017) workplaces in recent times have evolved a lot. As more people are coming out of the closet it is important to understand the consequence it has on people around them in a work environment. Indeed, today the field of research concerning the sexual minorities like LGBTQI+ is increasing (Zhou & Wang, 2022) but the research field of understanding the impact of the stigma of belonging to a sexual minority from a leader's perspective remains unexplored (Wang et al., 2021) and the current G20 Presidency by India gives an opportunity to explore the phenomenon of inclusion concerns.

The leader follower relationship has received less attention from a standpoint where the leader discloses their sexual orientation. This relationship heavily relies on trust between both the parties (Bowring, 2017). This research gap is especially true for voluntary employee outcomes like employee voice practices. Can a leader's decision to come out of the closet impact an employee's voice practices? How is disclosure related to employee voice? What is the role of trust in a leader in the whole equation? Disclosure of sexual orientation is often referred to as coming out of the closet (Zhou & Wang, 2022). The decision of coming out is an important life event in that person's life (Achar & Gopal, 2021). This life changing event is not just crucial for a leader but also holds its influence on the follower's life (Fassinger et al., 2010). Therefore, this study establishes the missing link between disclosure of a leader's sexual orientation and employee voice practices.

Thus, an important question becomes: Is there actually any relationship between disclosure of a leader's sexual orientation, trust in the leader, and employee voice practices? While the literature has focused on all these three constructs individually or in different lights this is the first time all the three constructs are clubbed together, and an attempt is being made to explore the relationship dynamics between them. I aim to build a conceptual model to understand the phenomenon of disclosing a leader's sexual orientation on employee voice practices by establishing a relationship between both constructs through the mediating role of trust in the leader. More precisely, I focus on how the disclosure of a leader's sexual orientation affects the trust followers have in their leaders. I also explore how this trust in leaders further impacts employee outcomes like employee voice practices.

Through this paper I contribute to the literature in three ways. Firstly, I integrate three significant areas of research that have not been connected. Secondly, I present a conceptual model bringing theories from different domains into this research area. And thirdly, I provide three testable propositions that are derived from the conceptual model. These further address integration of four elements from different research

standpoints. These regard research areas of leadership, diversity, employee voice and trust.

OVERVIEW OF CONSTRUCTS

Disclosure of Leader's Sexual Orientation

Sexual orientation is a word which is highlighted mistaken with sex or gender of a person (Bowring & Brewis, 2009). Hence from this study's standpoint sexual orientation is defined as the romantically/sexually attraction felt towards others (Achar & Gopal, 2021). The primary urge to come out of the closet is a common phrase used for disclosing one's sexual orientation roots in the heteronormative social setting from which an individual belongs (Achar & Gopal, 2021). It ranges from LGBTQI+ communities to sexual fluidity. In the study by Chang and Bowring (2017) they found how queer leaders perceive their sexual orientation to closely impact their leader-follower relationship. This primarily focused on their abilities to engage with their followers. This study reflected on the importance of developing a work identity in congruence with a leader's identity outside work. This perception by leaders holds true because of an infamous practice of concealment. This conscious concealment rooted from the anticipated discrimination one may face if they disclosed their sexual orientation.

Why is it important to come out of the closet? Many employees who lack mentorship and connections suffer in their career advancement. This especially becomes true for sexual minorities like gay and lesbians who are under constant pressure to lose their jobs or face ostracism. From an organization's perspective it may lead to loss of productivity due to the emotional trauma and poor communication one experiences at work. It becomes difficult for people in the closet to share information about family, romantic relationships, and other details about personal life at work. This situation worsens for a leader within a closet is in a situation when their follower shares information about themselves and the leader decides not to disclose their information to them making the followers perceive that the leader is unfriendly and might be seen as unapproachable. Ultimately after a proper risk and reward analyses the decision to disclose one's sexual orientation withholds with the leader themselves. Many work environments have started welcoming this disclosure and promote diversity at the workplace making it a safe space for those who want to come out (Bowring, 2017).

Trust In Leader

Subordinates trust in a leader also known as TIL refers to a psychological state where a follower accepts vulnerability for a positive expectation of the leader's future behaviours. Trust is formed based on inferences the followers make from a leader's action and character. Although trust takes time to build but one's established it strengthens the emotional bond between the leader and follower. The study by Islam et al. (2021) found that trust is highly influenced by an employee's perception of their leader's competency, care for others, and integrity.

What is the importance of trust in a leader? None of the party will engage in risky behaviours or be vulnerable if there isn't ample amount of confidence between the parties. Hence, before showing risky behaviours employees first investigate the strength on TIL. This holds true for organization members to accept time of change also. Major light surrounds a leader's character that shapes their behaviour. This will have a profound impact on both organizational as well as employee outcomes (Hendriks et al., 2020). As leaders are central in the process of building TIL it is important for one to understand how leaders treat their subordinates. TIL is a crucial element for an organization to be successful and has a strong influence on employee outcomes. Therefore, I argue that it is important to explore TIL within the disclosure and employee voice context (Bowring, 2017).

Employee's Voice Practices

The term voice widely refers to an employee's ability to have a say in their work activities and decision-making matters (Syed, 2014). In this present study employees from all communities are collectively represented under the umbrella of employee voice practices. Here the focal point is to understand employee voice as a voluntary, constructive, and upward channelled communication by employees (Arain et al., 2021). There is a flow of work-related ideas and suggestions done through the voice practices. Voice may be of two types. Promotive or prohibited. In promotive voice employees offer improvement suggestions while in prohibited voice raise their concerns of ongoing issues (Arain et al., 2021). In this study both forms of voice are collectively grouped together for a bird's eye view under the header of employee voice practices. In future researchers can explore both the forms of voice in detail.

What is the importance of employee voice practices? In times when the organizational environment is becoming complex, employees play a vital role in providing valuable feedback to their managers to detect and interpret challenges. Managers often alone cannot handle all the challenges and rely on employee input to enhance the organization's functioning (Gao et al., 2011). From a standpoint of LGBT employees McFadden and Crowley-Henry (2018) found that employee networks played a key

role in voice mechanisms. Prior employees of minority groups did not use their voice due to the fear of mistreatment. Even many LGBTQI movements have facilitated the visibility of the missing voices. Whether an employee belongs to a certain sexual minority or not the managers/leaders act as the strategic players who are responsible for maintaining a balance between the management and the employees (Dundon et al., 2004). When employee voices remain missing an organization tends to suffer largely. This is because voice mechanisms are an integral part of high-performance human resource management systems (Syed, 2014). Often voice is treated as a universal concept, and it applied largely to all the employees of an organization. Therefore, providing education and strategically including all the organizations stakeholders in the mechanism can promote the visibility of employee voice.

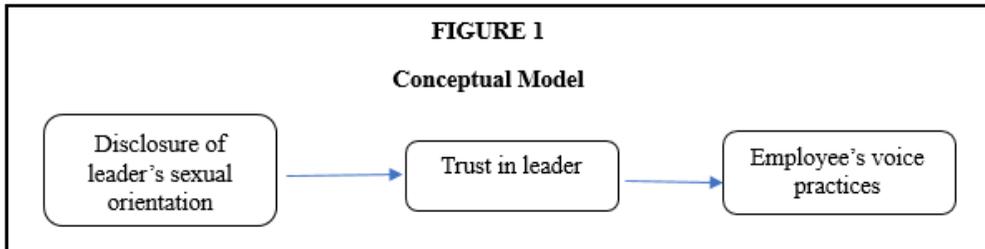
CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Based on the in-depth literature review a conceptual model was formulated showcasing the relations between disclosure of a leader's sexual orientation, trust in the leader, and employee voice practices. The conceptual model, illustrated in Figure 1, reflects the linkage between the study variables. Together the conceptual model suggests ways in which disclosure of a leader's sexual orientation affects trust in leader, and that trust in the leader can mediate the relationship between disclosure and employee voice.

The primary objective of this study is to contribute to the literature of stigmatized leadership and the role played by trust in the leader to promote employee voice. Hence, I have used the most prominent theoretical underpinning to understand the role played by stigma in influencing employee voice practices. The stigma theory given by Goffman refers to stigma as a sign to expose something unusual. According to him the society categorizes people based on several normative expectations. This causes segregation of normals and deviants. People with stigmatic qualities like membership of marginal social groups, physical deformities and others are socially discounted in this process. Stigmatized person often is under the radar of information control and is under constant scrutiny to reveal stigmatic quality or not (Carnevale, 2007). This is also true for leader's who are in jeopardy of disclosing their sexual orientation in their workplace. Due to the stigma labelled on sexual orientation many leaders just like other people hesitate to come out of the closet.

In line with the stigma theory, Leader's categorization theory also known as LCT argues that good leadership lies in the eyes of the beholder. As per the Implicit leadership theories a leader's effectiveness largely depends on how they are received

by the subordinates. It is prominently different from followership which is enforced through coercion and force (Van Quaquebeke & Van Knippenberg, 2012). Here the subordinates voluntarily are open to accept the leadership which makes it long lasting. As per Van Quaquebeke et al. (2011) for a follower the more similar characteristics a leader displays to their idea of a good leader the more favourable followers will respond to the leadership. The argument is based into the cognitive image of an ideal leader in a follower's mind (Van Quaquebeke & Van Knippenberg, 2012).



Disclosure of Leader's Sexual Orientation and Trust in Leader

My argument in this present study is that when a leader decides to come out, trust plays a vital role in sharing this sensitive information (Bowring, 2017). Using the stigma theory by Goffman I present the view that coming out could be seen as a critical incident and can change the trust between a leader and follower. Hence establishing the premise of an existing relationship between disclosure of a leader's sexual orientation and trust in the leader (Bowring, 2017). For people belonging to the LGBTQI+ community their own perception of themselves as a leader can alter the way others form judgment about them. Stigma theory supports the premise that for a leader of a sexual minority the conscious decision to come out in public is a complicated issue in their workplace (Fassinger et al., 2010). As per Goffman, passing off as normals would not necessarily protect such stigmatized individuals from public scrutiny (Almack, 2007). Hence, the shared experiences and bond shared by followers and leader may increase or decrease the level of trust one has in their leader (Bowring, 2017).

For example, the prostate cancer patients needed to feel safe around their specialist to come out and disclose their sexual orientation. One of the key aids to facilitate this relationship was trust between both the parties. It was also observed that disclosing sexual orientation had an unpredictable consequence depending on the physician's response. Therefore, although the outcome of disclosure is not certain, but the process of coming out of the closet can be eased through building trust between the parties. Further a higher degree of openness about one's sexual orientation is associated with

overall improved mental health. Here concealing or passing off as normals as per Goffman's stigma theory is viewed in negative light by the Almack (2007) study. She discussed that concealing identity is linked to reduced task efficacy and other employee outcomes. It is negatively associated with group activities and also holds a negative perception by others. The decision to disclose a leader's sexual orientation is a complicated stigmatized judgement by self and others. There is a positive space suggesting acceptance of LGBT individuals in the workplace with trust playing a key role in the whole process of coming out and this in turn will influence the subordinates' trust in the leader.

Proposition 1: Disclosure of a leader's sexual orientation is positively related to trust in the leader.

Trust In Leader and Employee Voice Practices

Trust in leader (TIL) is seen as a tool to promote employee voice. Voice mechanisms have gone beyond the formal meetings and employees disseminate information by providing informal feedback to the managers (Syed, 2014). Such organizations gain from increased TIL which influences employee voices also. Only listening to voices is not the end goal but the focus is to create an inclusive culture within an organization for collective growth. Leader categorization theory (LCT) holds vital premise in today's times when the business environment has evolved, and diversity management has become a core in the whole process (Syed, 2014). The more a target leader represents the ideal prototype for a follower the more recognition the leader will get (Van Quaquebeke et al., 2011) in terms of work-related outcomes. It explains why some leaders may build better relationships with their followers.

Given the risky behaviour of raising voice employees highly depend on the level of TIL to decide whether to use employee voice or not. Due to the power that rests in a leader's hand the level of trust between both parties plays a vital role in accepting the vulnerability that comes with voicing (Gao et al., 2011). The relationship between two is understood as higher the level of TIL by an employee the more they will feel safe towards using voice practise in the workplace. This again relates to an ideal leader's prototype a follower holds in their cognitive mind. Trusts is seen to influence the mental model of an employee (Islam et al., 2021) and governs the premise that a follower will have higher level of TIL in an ideal categorized leader which will promote employee voice practices. In contrast if employees have a lower level of TIL they may not indulge in risky behaviours and remain silent which will hamper the organizations performance (Gao et al., 2011).

Proposition 2: Trust in leaders is positively related to employee's voice practices.

Disclosure Of Leader's Sexual Orientation, Trust In Leader, and Employee Voice

Theorizing based on LCT followers have prototypical images of their ideal leaders and they implicitly assume leadership of those who fit in those prototypes. Even queer leaders under Goffman's stigma theory find themselves under the burden attached to them because of the community they belong to (Bowring & Brewis, 2009). When the stigma label is reinforced the people, themselves feel ashamed of themselves because of the attributes associated to them by others (Almack, 2007). Contrary to disclosure under the passing concept in Goffman's theory individuals try to pass as normals and tend to live dual life because of the stigma attached to it (Carnevale, 2007). Disclosure is described to have a positive effect on the holistic life of an individual. Reportedly such individuals were seen to have better interpersonal communications, self-awareness and problem-solving skills because of the disclosure (Bowring & Brewis, 2009).

This disclosure alone doesn't facilitate the whole leader-follower relationship; in fact, trust is the cement between them which ensures that both parties understand each other (Bowring, 2017). More level of TIL leads to higher productivity and employee outcomes like employee voice practices. In this study I present the view that employees feel comfortable to communicate upwards using the voice mechanism due to lack of fear. This lack of fear is a result of higher levels of TIL. And this TIL is established because of the disclosure made by a leader regarding their sexual orientation which gives confidence to the employees to believe in their leader's abilities and see them as a prototype of an ideal leader for them.

Life of LGBTQI+ people is often defined as a conflicting position with a constant fight between coming out versus remaining behind the closet doors. This further gets intensified when a person is in a leadership position. The study by Gao et al. (2011) found that leaders are responsible for facilitating the effect of subordinates TIL. When this process is hampered, this further mitigates the positive relationship between TIL and employee voice. This suggests that trust allows vulnerability and TIL increases likelihood of employees overcoming the blurred prototype categorization due to presence of stigma and work collectively with the leader by practicing voice mechanisms. The certainty of both leader and follower belonging to the sexual minority express higher levels of perceived leader effectiveness (Wang et al., 2021).

Organizations realize that alone increasing demographic heterogeneity would not increase its effectiveness (Syed, 2014). Rather they have to focus on managing diverse

groups together through promoting inclusion in the workplace. For which it is vital to fill the gap in the literature concerning the topic of discussion: that how a leader's characteristic is the primary source of trust in a leader (Hendriks et al., 2020) and how this trust in a leader can promote employee voice practices.

Proposition 3: Trust in leaders will mediate the relationship between disclosure of the leader's sexual orientation and employee's voice practices.

DISCUSSION

Conclusion

In this conceptual paper, I have integrated the literature of disclosure, leadership, trust, and employee voice to develop a model to establish a relationship between the previously unstudied constructs. This conceptual model collectively ideates the role of disclosure of sexual orientation specifically by an individual in power which in my case was a leader of an organization who is in a decision-making role. For contextual setting the focus here relies in understanding the relationship dynamics shared between a leader and their follower. A literature review of all the three study variables which are disclosure of a leader's sexual orientation, trust in the leader (TIL), and employee voice practices is undertaken to derive the bases of the proposed conceptual model. To theoretically bind the model together I have used two theories- Goffman's stigma theory and Leader categorization theory (LCT). Goffman's theory elaborates on the segregation created between normal and deviants in a society due to the stigma related to an individual, for the present model the stigma was referred in the sense of the sexual orientation of an individual. While the Leader categorization theory (LCT) focuses on the cognitive image of an ideal leader in a follower's mind, for the present model it is seen that trust in the leader will improve employee voice practices as they will see trust as a quality of an ideal leader. Both the theories together shed light on understanding how disclosure of leader's sexual orientation impacts subordinate's trust in leaders, and how this trust in the leaders in turn impacts employee voice. The focal point of the study was to establish a relationship to link between the three theoretically distinct constructs and the two theories which are not studied together in this context. The paper also gives three propositions to test the conceptual model in the future. These propositions are- Proposition 1: Disclosure of a leader's sexual orientation is positively related to trust in the leader; Proposition 2: Trust in leaders is positively related to employee's voice practices; Proposition 3: Trust in leaders will mediate the relationship between disclosure of the leader's sexual orientation and employee's

voice practices. The integrated conceptual model here emphasized that when a leader decided to disclose sexual orientation to their employees it would increase the trust between them and because of the increased levels of trust in the leader the employees would show better employee voice practices at the workplace.

Contributions

This present study contributes to the literature in a number of ways. Primarily it incorporates trust and employee voice in the research field of disclosure to establish a linkage between them. While there has been prior rich work undertaken in all these fields individually no study in my knowledge has combined all the three constructs together to provide a model. The research stream has not explored the role of trust in a leader when a leader discloses their sexual orientation to employees and how in turn it impacts their employee voice practices. This study also extends its contribution to the theoretical world by incorporating two fresh theories in the disclosure domain.

Role of India's G20 Presidency

In light with India's G20 Presidency vision it is an optimal time to bring this topic of inclusion on the table. Not only it is the right opportunity to start discussions on social upliftment of women and child, but it is also providing a ground to put forward the discussions on stigmatic topics such as sexual orientation of a person. This especially holds relevancy in workplace reality where the organizations are witnessing paradigm shift. With time as these structural stigmas will relax the global closet is accepted to reduce drastically. Although in Indian context we do not have the concrete numbers but seeing the global trend it can be commented that world's most populous country will also witness a similar situation. Under India's G20 Presidency we can proactively start considering implications of sexual minorities coming out of closet and the impact it could have on the workplace. This present study is a step in this direction and promote inclusion at a wider level.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

The idea presented in this study emphasises the need to integrate the research domain of leadership disclosures with other sub fields. This conceptual model presented in Figure 1 shows the potential of the decision of disclosure of sexual orientation of a person in leadership role on its employee's outcomes. The focus of this paper was to understand employee voice practices as an outcome. For example, this conceptual model can govern the premise of disclosure versus nondisclosure of a leader's sexual orientation on employee voice practices. This is especially vital to understand the leader follower relationship which holds true in presence of shared trust. Thus, the

model further incorporates trust in the leader as a mediating variable to link both disclosure and employee voice together in a relationship using two theories. Empirically the next step for this model is to convert the given proposition into hypothesis and test the model.

Coming to the theoretical implication it is very interesting to note that this paper confirms the need to dwell on building a theory in the management domain to explore this phenomenon. As in this study I had adapted a sociological theory of Goffman's stigma theory and linked it with Leader categorization theory to ground the conceptual model. Both these theories assume perception bases and govern the communication premise that takes place because of social exchanges between human beings.

Limitations and Future Directions

This present study is limited to the premise of the three study variables and the relationship shared between them. As mentioned above, in the future researchers can consider different aspects of trust and further enrich the model. Employee voice can also be studied as promotive and prohibitive voice forms to better understand the impact of disclosure of the leader's sexual orientation on them (Arain et al., 2021). This will provide clearer understanding of the disclosure decisions. Apart from these five other future agendas for researchers to explore are as follows.

1. Introducing a moderator like gender in the model to see if the employees' gender had any role to play in the relationship.
2. Introducing other mediators like experience, leader follower relationship into the model.
3. Using the model for specific sexual minorities like queer, transgender and others to understand their impact on employee outcomes.
4. Testing the same model with different employee outcomes like work engagement, work commitment, and job performance.
5. Testing the conceptual model in a real-life scenario by converting the propositions to hypotheses.

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