

What Does it Take for Voice Behavior to Lead to Creative Performance? Supervisor Listening as a Boundary Condition

As voice and creativity have become critical as vital means for organizations to thrive in dynamic environments, it is an important topic of research to investigate how supervisors can identify the raw materials of creativity (i.e., voice behavior) and help employees develop them into creative processes (i.e., creative process engagement) and outcomes (i.e., creative performance) that drive constructive changes at workplace. Impressive bodies of work have accumulated in regards to voice and creativity, but these works have mostly evolved separately. Unique insight into the creative process may be gained, however, by examining why and when employee suggestions for change can result in creative outcomes (Morrison, 2014; Zhou & Hoever, 2014).

While some studies have examined how employees' propensities to make suggestions (e.g., proactivity, positive affect, and openness to experience) may relate to managerial ratings of creative performance, the extant literature has shown conflicting findings that include positive (e.g., Gong, Cheung, Wang, & Huang, 2012), negative (e.g., George & Zhou, 2002), and null relationships (e.g., George & Zhou, 2001). Moreover, empirical studies have demonstrated that managers do not always look favorably upon employees who speak up (e.g., Burris, Detert, & Romney, 2013). Therefore, identifying what factors may interact with employee suggestions for change to engender creative outcomes is a fruitful avenue of research. Such research also has practical significance because although employees may offer suggestions for change, voice behavior "can reap the benefits of that input only if it is listened to and acted upon" (Morrison, 2014, p. 191) so as to be creative and add value to the organization (Zhou, Wang, Song, & Wu, in press). In particular, understanding the role of supervisors in translating voice inputs into creative outcomes is an important topic of research as they are the organizational leaders who have a responsibility and an authority to determine which employee work outcomes should be creative and have considerable influence over the context within which voice and creativity occur (Zhang & Bartol, 2010).

Although a number of studies have investigated the impact of leaders on employee voice behavior and creative performance, these investigations have not only been conducted separately for voice and creativity, but also largely focused on issues of broad forms of leadership styles such as transformational leadership (e.g., Shin & Zhou, 2003), empowering leadership (e.g., Zhang & Bartol, 2010), and overall leader support (e.g., Amabile, Schatzel, Moneta, & Kramer, 2004) and leader-member exchange (e.g., Tierney, Farmer, & Graen, 1999). Notably missing from research attention has been a more specific, contextualized approach to leadership that addresses how voice behavior can contribute to creative performance. Understanding the context-specific leader behavior has advantages over broad forms of leadership because multiple dimensions of leader behaviors are confounded with one another and it is theoretically difficult to tell why an intended effect exists in the latter case. Moreover, such confounded findings are less useful for practitioners who seek the straightforward, specific knowledge of what to do in the context for the successful transition of voice into creativity.

Importantly, employees make suggestions for change to be heard, not to be ignored (Burris et al., 2013), and supervisor listening may be a relevant, impactful, and context-specific leader behavior that facilitates the transition of voice into creative performance. Compared to other types of leader styles or behaviors (e.g., LMX, transformational leadership, empowering leadership, etc.), supervisor listening can be more proximal and powerful driver for moving employee suggestions for change forward because whether supervisors listen or not is the very

first response employees receive after they speak up. Employees use this information to form their attitudes toward change and to guide their behaviors. This is consistent with the recommendations by the literatures on voice, creativity, and organizational change regarding employee sensitivity to leader reactions to voice (e.g., Morrison, 2014; Zhou, 2003).

The purpose of the study is to increase our knowledge of why and when voice inputs turn into creative processes and outcomes. To do so, we suggest that supervisor listening is an important boundary condition for the successful transformation of voice into creativity. Supervisors have an influence over a social context where creativity occurs and can foster creative growth of the voiced ideas by attentively listening to employee suggestions. Although voice behaviors provide the raw materials for creativity, whether or not the suggested ideas are acted on depends on how they are received by supervisors (Morrison, 2014). If supervisors are attentive and listen, then this cue serves as positive feedback that encourages employees to pursue the idea further as part of the creative process. Lack of listening serves as negative feedback that discourages pursuit of the voiced idea.

Our research provides significant contributions to the literature. To begin, we make an important contribution to the literature by bringing the previously separated fields of voice behavior and creative performance closer together. Our study draws on a stage model of creativity (Amabile, 1988) and an input-process-outcome model of understanding the relationship between voice behavior and creative performance (George, 2007). Our suggestion of supervisor listening behaviors as a boundary condition of the voice – creativity relationship is also an important contribution to the literatures on creativity and leadership. Theory and research on contingency models of creativity has emphasized the importance of creating generally favorable work environments to stimulate individual creativity such as an innovative climate and organizational support (e.g., Somech & Drach-Zahavy, 2013; Zhou, 2003). Our research complements previous studies by introducing a more context-specific, proximal leader behavior for the successful utilization of voice behaviors for creativity: supervisor listening.

We tested our theoretical model using multisource, multiwave survey data from 347 employees and 91 supervisors in a large electrical company in China. We used two-level analysis techniques and ran the analyses clustering around supervisor using multilevel path procedures in Mplus 7. Our conceptual model received support (see Figure 1). Although results showed that voice behavior was not significantly related to creative process engagement, we found that it was when supervisors were attentive and listened to their subordinates. Creative process engagement, in turn, predicted creative performance. Results demonstrated a significant interaction between voice behavior and supervisor listening ($b = .08, p < .05$). Figure 2 illustrates the form of the interaction ($\pm 1 SD$) and shows that the relationship between voice behavior and creative process engagement is positive and significant when supervisor listening is high (vs. low).

FIGURE 1. Results for the Proposed Model

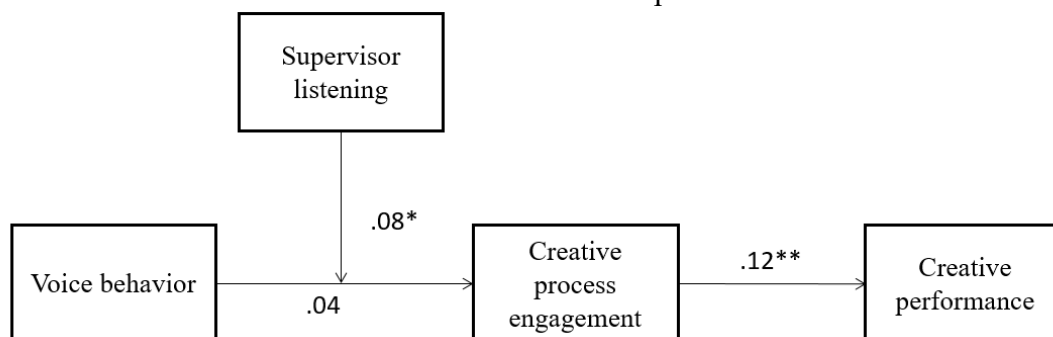
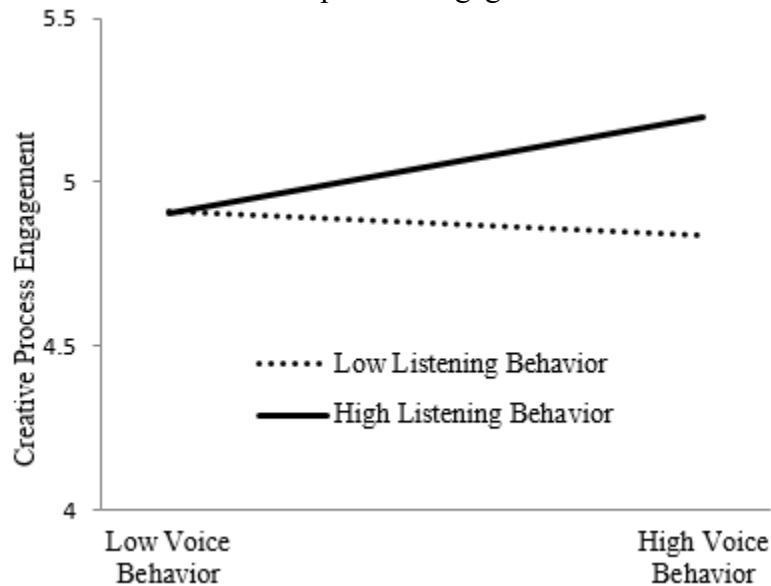


FIGURE 2. Moderating effect of supervisor listening on the relationship of voice behavior with creative process engagement



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“Say It as It Is” or “Beat Around the Bush”? Consequences of Voice Directness, Voice Politeness, and Credibility on Managerial Endorsement of Creative Ideas

Theoretical Motivations. If an employee has a creative idea that might challenge his or her manager’s authority and status but could also benefit the organization, should this employee “say it as it is” with explicit suggestions, or should the employee “beat around the bush” with questions and ambiguous statements to gain managerial endorsement of creative ideas (defined as the extent to which managers endorse, accept, or positively receive a subordinate’s creative suggestion; Burris, 2012)? On the one hand, a threat perspective (Burris, 2012) suggests that expressing one’s creative idea in a direct manner makes managers feel more vulnerable and defensive, because it challenges their status and authority. As a result, managers are likely to reject the employee’s creative idea. On the other hand, a communication clarity perspective (Weingart, Behfar, Bendersky, Todorova, & Jehn, 2015) suggests that using direct voice improves message clarity, helps managers focus on the proposed idea, and facilitates exchange of conversation. As a result, managers are more likely to endorse the creative ideas. The first purpose of this study, therefore, is to examine the two perspectives on the relationship between voice directness and managerial endorsement of creative ideas.

The second purpose of this study is to deepen knowledge of when the association between voice directness and managerial endorsement of creative ideas is stronger. According to research on social judgment, people’s behaviors toward a target are governed by two judgments: the target’s warmth and competence (Cuddy, Glick, & Beninger, 2011; Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953; Rosenberg, Nelson, & Vivekananthan, 1968; Wojciszke, 1994). We thus propose that voice politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987), or the extent to which voice is expressed in a respectful manner and represents social judgment of warmth, and credibility (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007; Hovland & Weiss, 1952), or the extent to which individuals have the ability to

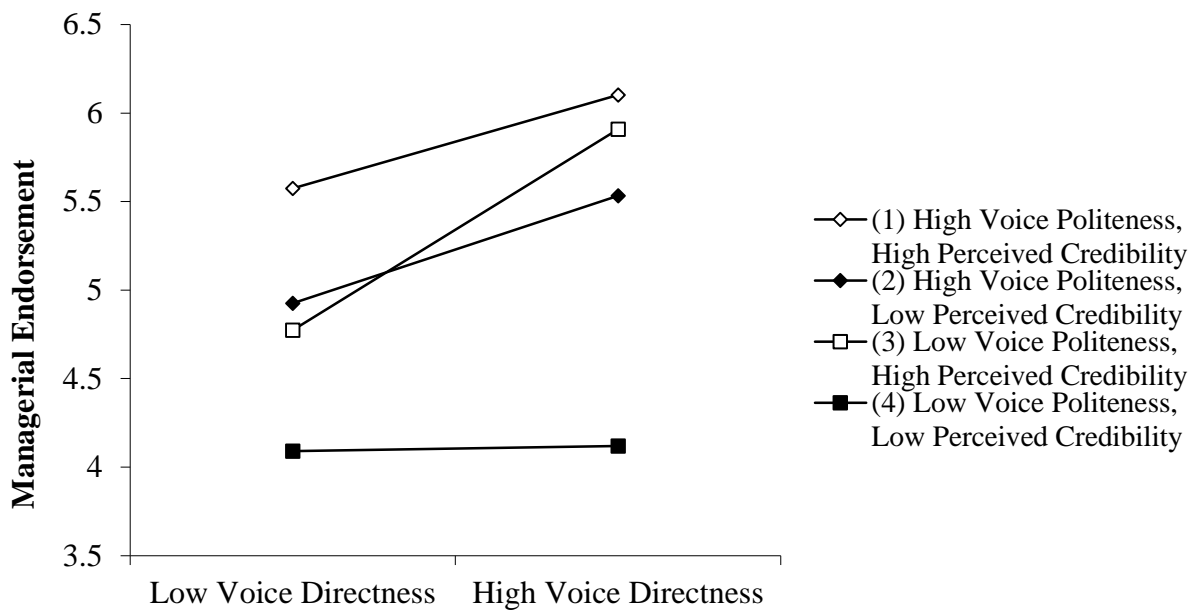
successfully pursue and perform specific tasks successfully and represent social judgment of competence, would will modify the relationship between voice directness and managerial endorsement of creative ideas. Specifically, when a creative idea is voiced in a polite manner, the association between voice directness and managerial endorsement of the creative idea should be stronger. Furthermore, research on social judgement suggests that, within an organizational context, managers are willing to excuse those who lack warmth but exhibit competence. Extending this insight to the current context, we theorize that voice directness is associated with higher levels of endorsement of creative ideas when the sources are credible, even if they lack politeness, compared with sources who lack both politeness and credibility.

Findings. Across two field studies and one experimental study, we find converging evidence that being direct and explicit about a creative idea is associated with more frequent endorsement of the creative idea. Moreover, consistent with research on social judgment, the association between voice directness and managerial endorsement of creative ideas is stronger when sources are polite and credible, polite and noncredible, or impolite but credible. In contrast, voice directness is not related to managerial endorsement of creative ideas when the sources are both impolite and noncredible. (See p. 3 for a 3-way interaction found in Study 3)

Theoretical Contributions. By developing a theoretical model that examines the interaction between characteristics of the message (voice directness) and the source (politeness and credibility), we make several noteworthy contributions to the voice and creativity literature. First, as Morrison (2011, p. 399) notes, “voice literature has conceptualized voice as a dichotomous choice and has not focused very much on employees’ choices about how to voice their views or concerns.” We address this concern by examining the association between voice directness and a critical voice outcome, managerial endorsement. In doing so, we complement

existing literature (Burris, 2012; Burris, Rockmann, & Kimmons, in press) and lay the groundwork for future research on how best to express voice to people in positions of authority. Second, we explore two competing perspectives with respect to the relationship between voice directness and managerial endorsement of creative ideas and advance understanding of when managers endorse voice by integrating social judgement research. Whereas previous research tends to focus on either communication tactics or individual characteristics (Whiting, Maynes, Podsakoff, & Podsakoff, 2012), we take an integrative view of their influences on managerial endorsement of creative ideas. Finally, we contribute to literature on creativity, which has focused primarily on what motivates individuals to be creative but less about the communication aspect of the creativity process (Zhou & George, 2001) This study represents a step toward understanding how people express creative ideas and why individual characteristics in the form of directness and politeness matter to the endorsement of a creative idea.

Figure 1. Interactive effect of voice directness, voice politeness, and credibility on managerial endorsement of creative ideas



Exit and failure in technology start-ups: The effect of women entrepreneurs and managers

Investors face a problem of information asymmetry – they possess less information than the firm’s managers, but still have to make investment decisions based on this limited information. This information asymmetry problem is even more pronounced for start-up firms, where performance indicators are scarce or completely missing. As a result, investors face considerable difficulty when choosing the right firms in which to invest (Cohen and Dean, 2005). Indeed, the literature suggests that information asymmetry drives potential investors to use cues to help them decide in which start-up to invest. Such cues may involve the characteristics of the entrepreneurs and managers of the start-up. For example, potential investors employ cues such as the entrepreneurs’ prior experience as entrepreneurs and their prior experience in the industry (Gompers et al., 2010; Hoenig and Henkel, 2015), the entrepreneurs’ level of education (Cohen and Dean, 2005; Gimmon and Levie, 2010), etc.

One prominent cue that investors can use is the gender of entrepreneurs and managers of a start-up, which is easy and inexpensive to identify. Yet, investors may be hesitant to use gender as a cue for investment decisions, because the media provide conflicting information regarding women’s performance in the business arena in general, and in the technology start-up arena in particular. On the one hand, media reports ascribe high performance to firms led by women. For example, *Forbes Magazine* reported that firms at the top quartile in terms of financial performance have more women in management positions (27%) than firms in the bottom quartile (19%) (Adams, 2014).

On the other hand, compared with men, women entrepreneurs tend to receive less funding for their start-ups (Coleman and Robb, 2012; Lowrey, 2006). They also tend to receive smaller loans than men (Agier and Szafarz, 2013). In addition, men tend to invest more in men's start-ups than in women’s start-ups (Harrison and Mason, 2007; Marom et al., 2014). The fact that there are more men investors than women investors (Primack, 2016) may further portray entrepreneurial endeavors led by women as less attractive for new investors than those led by men.

This paper examines the involvement of women entrepreneurs and managers in technology start-ups, and their effect on the start-up's performance. We examine two very specific types of performance outcomes – exits and failures. The literature treats an exit as an indicator of firm performance through return on investment (ROI), stock price, sales, or

market share after exit (e.g. DeTienne, 2010). Accordingly, the literature specifically defines *exits* as mergers, acquisitions, or initial public offerings (e.g. Hochberg et al., 2007; Nahata, 2008). We therefore treat an exit as a measure of successful performance for a firm in terms of the firm being purchased or going public. We define *failure* as a firm that fails and closes its operations down.

We aim to answer the following research questions: (1) Do women entrepreneurs and managers in technology start-ups incline toward exits or failures more than men entrepreneurs and managers? And if so, (2) What is the mechanism that explains this contingency in performing an exit or failure?

We suggest that because women tend not to push for changes themselves and to resist organizational change and because selling the firm or going public is likely to lead to organizational change, women entrepreneurs and managers in technology start-ups will be negatively associated with performing an exit. But at the same time, because women have a sense of ownership and commitment to the firm and to its employees - yet another aspect of resistance to organizational changes - we predict that women in senior positions in firms will commit themselves to keeping their firm active, do everything in their power to avoid failure, and succeed in sustaining their firm.

To test our hypotheses we used the Israel Venture Capital (IVC) database, a comprehensive database on the Israeli VC industry that represents the entire population of technological start-ups in Israel. We used data from January 1990 to December 2013 that include 9,235 start-up firms in seven high-tech industries, with 1,031 women entrepreneurs and 16,487 men entrepreneurs in addition to 1,977 women managers and 8,383 men managers.

We used multinomial logistic regression models to test our hypotheses. Controlling for the number of financing rounds, the number of investors, and additional firm variables, we found that both the percent of women entrepreneurs and the percent of women managers are negatively and significantly associated with the probability of exit ($\beta=-.724$ and $\beta=-1.130$, respectively, $p<.001$) compared with the probability of the firm remaining active. We also found that both the percent of women entrepreneurs and the percent of women managers are negatively associated with the probability of failure ($\beta=-.939$ and $\beta=-1.069$, respectively, $p<.001$) compared with the probability of the firm remaining active.

The present study has the following implications. First, prior research has investigated behavioral differences between women and men managers. For example, prior studies have examined such differences as participative style (Eagly and Johnson, 1990), and communication and cooperation, affiliation and attachment, and intimacy and nurturing amongst women managers (Grant, 1988). The findings of the present study show that the presence of women entrepreneurs and managers significantly affects start-ups' probability of exit and failure. These could incentivize the decrease of gender inequality within the workforce in start-up firms, especially at management levels, by suggesting that women in such positions are strongly associated with the firms' sustainability.

Second, one of the negative consequences of psychological ownership is entrenchment in the status quo and resistance to organizational change. We contribute to the psychological ownership literature by revealing a potential positive side of psychological ownership: the fact that it may decrease the probability of failure.

Third, our findings suggest that investors interested in short-term profits through an exit may want to invest in a firm with fewer women entrepreneurs and women managers. Conversely, long-term investors interested in investing in a sustainable firm should invest in those firms with a higher presence of women entrepreneurs and managers. Moreover, women entrepreneurs interested in developing a sustainable firm can increase the probability of their firm remaining independent and active by recruiting more women as managers, as we find that the interaction between women entrepreneurs and women managers is negatively associated with the probability of failure ($\beta=-1.269, p<.05$).

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Taking women seriously: The effect of humor expression and gender on social influence

Social influence is crucial for successful management and leadership (Rao, Schmidt, & Murray, 1995). Women are typically less influential than men (Carli, 2001), most likely because they tend to be perceived as less competent compared to men in many work domains (Heilman, 2001). When women express competence, they are often socially penalized for violating prescriptive norms for feminine behavior, such as expressing warmth and communality (Eagly & Karau, 2002). However, these penalties have been shown to be mitigated when women display competence and warmth simultaneously (Carli, 2001; Schnurr, 2008). In this study, we investigate whether humor expression can be an effective tool to resolve this double-bind for women by simultaneously expressing warmth and competence, thereby increasing women's social influence.

Humor expression, a communication that is intended to be amusing (Cooper, 2005; Romero & Cruthirds, 2006) is known to impact relationships positively when used in interpersonal interactions (Cooper, 2005; Cooper, 2008). The mechanism through which humor increases liking is twofold: First, effective humor induces positive affect in the audience (Robert & Wilbanks, 2012). Second, humor is a unique form of communication, in which a message is delivered in an incongruous and surprising way. It is often used to legitimize an unconventional message or to offer an alternative perspective (Meyer, 2000). Thus, humor expressers are typically well-liked and perceived as confident and intelligent (Boxer, & Cortés-Conde, 1997; Masten, 1986).

Although research has demonstrated the benefits of humor, researchers have paid scant attention to failed humor and to the potential detriments of ineffective humor attempts (for an exception, see Wood, Beckman, & Rossiter, 2011). Furthermore, the benefits of effective humor have been mostly demonstrated with male humor expressers (e.g. Avolio, Howell, & Sosik, 1999), and thus little is known about the effectiveness of humor expression for women. Moreover, humor expression has been traditionally perceived as a masculine behavior (Kotthoff, 2006). Specifically, women are less likely to express humor in work meetings when men are present, and when they do, they are more likely to receive unfavorable reactions (Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 2001). Thus, humor expression may entail greater risks for women compared to men.

The perspective on women in organizations has shifted from a “glass ceiling” metaphor, focusing on barriers and obstacles (what women cannot achieve), to the “labyrinth” metaphor, suggesting that "... paths to the top exist and some women find them" though the paths remain laborious (Eagly & Carli, 2007: 6). As women increasingly occupy influential positions in science, culture, economy and politics, it is crucial to understand whether they can use humor effectively to increase their influence and what contextual conditions can help them reap the benefits of humor. Thus, we investigated whether gender of humor expresser moderates the effect of humor expression on social influence.

We examined our research questions in the context of TED talks, which are organized by a nonprofit “devoted to spreading ideas, usually in the form of short, powerful talks” (TED.com). TED provides a unique context for studying humor expression among high status men and women, given that the speakers are invited for their already-proven expertise, innovation or leadership. The success of a talk is measured according to the extent to which it has been shared and viewed online. We also examined gender typicality of the talk topic, meaning to what extent the topic is masculine or feminine, as a contextual factor that may affect successful humor expression. When audience members perceive a misfit between new ideas and the person presenting the ideas, they tend to mistrust the presenter (Mueller, 2017), look for inauthenticity cues and are less likely to be persuaded. Similarly, people tend to express more humor when they feel safe and comfortable with the situation. Therefore, we hypothesized that gender typicality of the talk will also moderate the degree and success of humor expression.

Method

We examined humor expression and the concomitant outcomes using archival data from TED talks. The dataset included 100 frequently viewed TED talks from the TED website (50% by women). We analyzed the videos and written transcripts of each talk and measured actual humor expression during the talk, the audience’s immediate response, which was our operationalization of humor success or failure, and the number of views for each talk, reflecting the talk popularity. In addition, three raters viewed the talks and evaluated the speakers in terms of warmth, competence, charisma and physical appearance. In addition, we investigated whether gender typicality of the talk topic was related to humor frequency and effectiveness. Four independent raters who were blind to the speaker’s gender read the talk titles and

descriptions and rated the extent to which the talks were prototypically masculine and feminine.

Results

We found only marginally significant gender differences in the frequency of effective and ineffective humor attempts and in humor success rate, with a minor advantage to male speakers. A regression analysis, controlling for year and duration of the talk, revealed a significant positive effect of effective humor expression (measured as number of all-audience laughter instances) on talk popularity ($b = .01$; $SE = .004$; $p < 0.05$). In addition, the interaction between humor and gender of speaker on talk popularity was significant ($b = -.02$; $SE = .01$; $p = .05$). A simple slope analysis revealed that humor expression positively affected talk popularity only for female speakers ($b = .02$; $SE = .01$; $p < .01$). Ineffective humor attempts (which were received with either sporadic or no laughter) did not have a significant effect on talk popularity for either male or female speakers ($b = .02$; $SE = .01$; $p = .1$). Warmth ratings ($ICC(2,3) = .84$) partially mediated the effect of effective humor on talk popularity ($b = .003$; $SE = .001$; $[.001, .007]$). Gender did not moderate either the humor-warmth link or the warmth-views link. Interestingly, while perceived competence did affect talk popularity ($b = .01$; $SE = .004$; $p < 0.05$), effective humor did not affect perceived competence and thus could not explain the effect of humor on talk popularity.

Our hypothesis regarding the fit between the gender typicality of the talk topic and the speaker gender was not supported. Talks with such a fit (a woman speaking about a feminine topic or a man talking about a masculine topic) were neither more humorous nor more popular. However, we found that talks rated as *both* feminine and masculine were the most popular ($F_{1,94} = 5.06$; $p < .05$), compared to all other talks for both male and female speakers.

Discussion

The results demonstrate that successful humor expression is related to talk popularity, particularly for women. Perceived warmth partially mediated the main effect of humor expression on talk popularity. Failed humor expression occurred in men's and women's talks at an equivalent rate. These results show that humor expression is an effective way to increase social influence for both high-status men and women.

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