

# Perceived leader behavioral integrity and employee voice in SMEs travel agents: The mediating role of empowering leader behaviors



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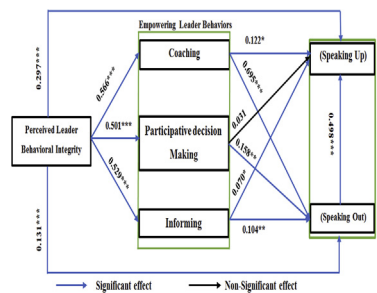
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## HIGHLIGHTS

- The paper aims to explore how perceived leader behavioral integrity is related to employee voice behavior.
- The sample of the study is SMEs travel agents.
- Perceived leader behavioral integrity promotes voice behavior of travel agents frontline employees.
- Empowering leader behaviors mediates the relationship between perceived leader behavioral integrity and employee voice behavior.
- Further analysis differentiates between family and non-family businesses.

## GRAPHICAL ABSTRACT



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## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how perceived leader behavioral integrity and empowering leader behaviors stimulate employee voice at SMEs travel agents in Egypt. Data were collected from 500 frontline employees. Partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS–SEM) was employed to test the hypotheses. The findings confirmed that perceived leader behavioral integrity significantly impacted empowering leader behaviors and employee voice. Empowering leader behaviors positively influenced employee voice. Moreover, the results showed that empowering leader behaviors mediated the relationship between perceived leader behavioral integrity and employee voice. Finally, there were no differences between family and non-family businesses in most of the relationships studied.

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## 1. Introduction

Keung (2000) acknowledged that, in recent years, the tourism industry has become more significant in terms of the global economy. In fact, the tourism industry is becoming progressively complex, dynamic and interdependent because it faces many crises that must be forecasted and handled carefully (Henderson, 2003). Mowbray, Wilkinson, and Tse (2015) declared that interest in exploring employee voice has increased exponentially in recent years, and several scholars across various disciplines have recognized essential factors related to employees engaging in employee voice. Moreover, Detert and Burris (2007) confirmed that employees have been regarded as a valuable source of expressing voice, providing suggestions and opinions for determining and solving critical problems and issues related to work because the tourism industry faces many crises, such as revolutions, economic and political crises, and terrorism, making it challenging for managers to perceive, understand and overcome these crises. Clearly, employee contributions can play a principal role in improving the tourism industry. However, Detert and Burris (2007) stated that employees regularly feel anxious about expressing their voice because they believe that offering comments and recommendations for change is a dangerous behavior that can challenge the current situation and upset their leader.

The academic importance of integrity is enforced by the regard in which integrity is held by employees in organizations, many of whom have reported that they consistently respect integrity in their leaders more than all other values (Posner & Schmidt, 1992). Leader integrity has been considered a fundamental component of effective leadership in general and should be considered as a pre-supposition in leadership studies (Palanski & Yammarino, 2009; Simons, 2002). In addition, integrity has been recognized as a significant component of ethical leadership (Kalshoven, Hartog, & De Hoogh, 2011) and transformational leadership (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). Furthermore, Krylova, Jolly, and Phillips (2017) presumed that integrity is associated with numerous values-related constructs, including morality, honesty, ethics, and sincerity. Significantly, Boğan and Dedeoğlu (2017) agreed that behavioral integrity is significant for creating positive individual and organizational outcomes in the tourism sector.

According to Kusluvan, Kusluvan, Ilhan, and Buyruk (2010), managing frontline employees plays a major role in organizational success in the tourism and hospitality industry. Furthermore, Boğan and Dedeoğlu (2017) confirmed that maintaining consistency between the values and behaviors of leaders is of essential importance for employee-leader relationships. They revealed that, when employees perceive integrity in their leaders' behaviors, it positively affects trust in their leaders and motivates them to express their voice behaviors freely and to perform their jobs well. In this manner, qualified persons in the tourism field remain in it, contributing to tourism's development nationally. Additionally, Koyuncu, Burke, Fixenbaum, and Tekin (2013) confirmed that the concept of employee voice is matched with the emphasis on employee empowerment, which has been evolving in several fields, such as the hospitality and tourism industries. Moreover, Raub and Robert (2013) declared that the positive relationship between empowerment and voice behavior is of crucial relevance for the hospitality industry. Empowered frontline employees may be faster to notice problems that occur beyond their responsibility and are more motivated to take initiative by assisting their colleagues or voicing ideas for beneficial developments.

However, a number of research gaps persist. Previous studies have discussed the effects of leadership styles on employee voice, such as transformational leadership (Liu, Zhu, & Yang, 2010), authentic leadership (Hsiung, 2012), and ethical leadership

(Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009). In addition, previous studies have explained the effects of empowering behaviors on employee voice (Gao, Janssen, & Shi, 2011). Additionally, Srivastava, Bartol, and Locke (2006) stated that, among leadership behaviors, empowering leader behaviors has crucial significance. Empowering leadership is described as a team-level motivator, indicating that leader behaviors are oriented toward the team as a whole (Chen, Kirkman, Kanfer, Allen, & Rosen, 2007) because highly empowering leaders share power with their employees by holding them accountable and responsible, delegating authority to them, engaging them in decision making, and fostering self-work management (Konczak, Stelly, & Trusty, 2000). In addition, Özarallı (2015) acknowledged that leaders can manage their organizations successfully by empowering their employees, giving them the freedom to produce new solutions to problems and invigorating them to work toward the organization's vision.

However, previous studies have analyzed the effects of leadership styles on empowering behaviors, such as ethical leadership (Zhu, May, & Avolio, 2004), authentic leadership (Wong & Laschinger, 2013), and transformational leadership (Avolio, Zhu, Koh, & Bhatia, 2004b). No previous studies have examined the direct and indirect impacts of perceived leader behavioral integrity and the dimensions of empowering leader behaviors (coaching, participative decision making, informing) on employee voice (speaking up and speaking out). Therefore, regarding the importance of employee voice and the possibility of risky feelings being associated with it, the key aim of the present study was to investigate how perceived leader behavioral integrity and empowering leader behaviors are related to employee voice behavior.

Hence, the questions that arise in this study are the following.

- (1) What are the direct effects of perceived leader behavioral integrity and empowering leader behaviors on employee voice (speaking up and speaking out)?
- (2) To what extent does empowering leader behaviors (coaching, participative decision making, informing) mediate the relationship between perceived leader behavioral integrity and employee voice (speaking up and speaking out) in tourism SMEs?

Therefore, the present research attempts to answer these questions by investigating:

- (1) The direct effects of perceived leader behavioral integrity and empowering leader behaviors on employee voice;
- (2) The direct effect of perceived leader behavioral integrity on empowering leader behaviors;
- (3) The direct effect of employee speaking out on employee speaking up; and
- (4) The indirect effect of perceived leader behavioral integrity on employee voice (speaking up and speaking out) by empowering leader behaviors.

This study explores this issue in Egyptian travel agents because they are important components of the travel and tourism industry, in which they link tourists and travel suppliers, such as hotels and airlines. Travel agents traditionally work on a commission basis. In addition, because of the increasing competitive pressure on the travel and tourism industry, it is recognized that travel agents are essential for business development, in which frontline employees can play a significant role by expressing their voice (speaking up and speaking out) about the problems they face in their jobs. Furthermore, management of travel agents is intended to develop practices and policies to motivate and encourage employees to voice their concerns and suggestions by acting with integrity and

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