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Does Voice Type Matter? An Examination of the Influence of Voice Behavior Over Leadership Competencies of SME Owner-Managers In Uganda

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Abstract

This study contributes to current research on voice behaviour and leadership competencies by investigating the influence of follower voice behaviour over leadership competencies of owner-managers in Ugandan SMEs. It draws from Social Constructivism theory, Hirschman's exit, voice and loyalty framework and Leader member exchange (LMX) theory to examine the role follower voice behaviour plays in sharpening the leadership competencies of SME owner-manager. Using a cross-sectional design, surveys were administered to 54 SME owner-managers from Mbale, Tororo and Busia districts. Regression analysis was used to test the study hypotheses. The results indicate that followers are more likely to have influence over leadership competencies of SME owner-managers when they practiced promotive voice behaviour than when they practiced prohibitive voice behaviour. The finding further revealed that LMX quality moderated the relationship between prohibitive voice behaviour and leadership competencies but did not do so for promotive voice behaviour. The findings have significant implications for organizations most especially SMEs that seek to encourage voice behavior and sharpen leadership competencies.

Keywords: Follower Voice Behavior, Leadership Competencies, LMX, SMEs, Uganda

Introduction

The SME sector is regarded as crucial for economic transformation through employment and innovation (Beaver 2003, Fuller 2003) but their relevance is curtailed by the mere fact that many SMEs collapse too early. Rwakakamba (2011), Briggs (2009) and Tushabomwe-Kazooba (2006) report that SMEs in Uganda are bedeviled by poor leadership competencies, thus turning Uganda into a graveyard of SMEs (Rwakakamba (2011). As a matter of fact, many SMEs in Uganda do not survive beyond a year (Bruderl et al., 1992; Boden & Nucci, 2000; Walter et al., 2004; Rooks & Sserwanga, 2009) despite of governments' interventions in terms of access to finance, support for increasing export activity and reduced regulation for SME growth and survival (Mwangi et al, 2013). SME failure is very detrimental to developing economies such as Uganda and for this reason the importance of improving leadership competencies has to be addressed with great concern.

However, the acquisition and development of competencies in SMEs is a complex issue because SME owner-managers are generally less well educated and formally trained, with no formal qualifications in leadership/ management and do not value formal approaches (taught leadership programs and text book knowledge) to developing their competencies (Walker, Redmond, Webster, Le Clus, 2007). More so they are financially constrained and overwhelmed by the daily operational demands of keeping the firms running and therefore, development of leadership competencies is never a priority forcing them to sometimes rely on informal and accidental learning in action (Massey et al, 2005) where employees often play a key role as sources of learning (Lewis et al 2005). To date, not much research has tried to establish how to address the learning needs of such owner-managers. Yet, they continue to be reluctant to participate in conventional training and learning. Thus,

the question remains: how do we develop leadership competencies of owner-managers in ways that mitigate many of the reasons they often cite for not attending formal training and suits their learning preferences. Perhaps the answer to some extent lies in the promotion of Follower Voice Behaviour and as such, the expectation was that voice behaviour would provide an alternative to face-to-face training and would promote greater owner-manager learning. The purpose of this study was to encourage and support learning and development of leadership competencies of less trained and educated, busy and resource poor SME owner-managers.

This paper therefore provides proof of concept that follower voice behaviour is a viable approach to owner-manager learning. By suggesting that follower voice exertion behaviour as a viable alternative source of learning for owner-managers, it supports existing literature regarding follower role is leadership development besides bridging the gap in existing literature on the relationship between voice behaviour and leadership competencies. This study thus contributes to the Human Resources, Organizational Behavior and leadership literatures by demonstrating that followers play an important role in sharpening leadership competencies of SME owner-managers. The findings of this study are expected to have implications for practitioners, especially for owner /managers of SMEs, policy makers, government officers who support SME, banks, and educators facilitating owner-manager learning.

Literature Review

Exit, Voice, and Loyalty theory, Social Constructivism theory and Leader Member Exchange (LMX) theory are the two theories underpinning this study. According to Albert Hirschman's Exit, Voice, and Loyalty theory, there are two types of response to unsatisfactory situations; the first is "exit" or leaving without trying to fix things and the second is "voice," that is, speaking up and trying to improve things (poor leadership competencies in this study). The Exit, Voice and Loyalty theory has been proved in many other respects. For example, voice has been proved to have a direct impact on effective organizational functioning (Morrison& Milliken, 2000; Morrison & Rothman, 2009), improved performance by generating solutions and opportunities to make the workplace run better (Lind &Kulik, 2009; MacKenzie, Podsakoff, &Podsakoff, 2011) and enhances organizational learning and knowledge sharing (Ashford et al., 2009; Brinsfield et al., 2009; Milliken &Lam, 2009). By suggesting that followers can utilize their voices to keep leaders on their toes, Exit, Voice, and Loyalty theory potentially offers a broader understanding and explanation of how voice influences leadership competencies. While the theory provides an in-depth explanation of how followers can utilize voice to remedy or fix things, the context of this explanation may differ from sector to sector and from country to country. The "exit-voice" framework is therefore incomplete with respect to its application to the problems of leadership competencies in Ugandan SMEs.

Social Constructivism theory also underpins this study by suggesting that social interaction is necessary for learning (Krause et al., 2003; Woolfolk & Margetts, 2010). Social Constructivism according to Kim (2001) is premised on three assumptions about reality, knowledge and learning. First, reality is viewed as being constructed through human activity; it cannot be discovered, and it does not exist prior to its social invention. Second, knowing is a human product and Individuals can create meaning through interacting with each other and with the environment in which they live. lastly, learning is viewed as a social process and meaningful learning occurs when individuals are engaged in social activities. From this perspective, meaningful learning occurs through collaboration and discussion that learners are able to express their understanding, listen to the views of others and explore different ideas. By suggesting that followers can be a valuable source of knowledge, Social Constructivism theory potentially offers a broader understanding and explanation of how follower voice behaviour is an alternative source of Knowledge for the development of leadership competencies of owner-managers. For social constructivists, follower's voice behaviour is an important tool because it enables interactivity, discussion, dialogue and debate, which are essential to the social construction of meaning (Chen, n.d).

Another important theory which underpins this study is the Leader member exchange (LMX) theory because of its conceptualized linkage between leaders and followers. Originally called Vertical Dyad Linkage (VDL) theory by Dansereau, Graen & Haga in 1975, LMX is the only leadership theory that focuses on the dyadic relationship between leaders and followers', instead of the traits or behaviors of leaders or situational characteristics. It asserts that leaders do not interact with followers uniformly because of limited time and resources but establish close relationships with some (the in-group) while remaining aloof from others (the out-group) and

the high-quality relationships will lead to positive outcomes-specifically leadership competencies in this study. Conversely, those in the out-group are excluded from important activities and decisions.

The review of literature shows that the quality of leader-follower relationships affects voice outcome especially when the voice targets are the leaders. Despite the fact that voice behaviour may be promotive/prohibitive, the relationship between the followers and leaders may determine its influence over leadership competencies. Though available literature seems to portray that a low LMX follower might have challenges in voicing suggestions to leaders, there is no evidence to suggest that the perceived association between high LMX and low voice and vice visa has been empirically tested from a leadership angle. This study was therefore an attempt to prove whether the relational quality between voicers and their targets in the form of LMX does moderate the relationship between voice behaviour and leadership competencies in SMEs in Uganda.

Informal learning within SMEs has been identified as a more pragmatic means of developing leadership competencies. To some scholars such as Devins, Johnson, Gold and Holden (2005), informal, trusted networks, professional advisors and training providers are a good source of competence learning and development in SMEs. As such, Gold & Thorpe (2008) proposed learning by doing, interacting and talking with others as a solution. Other scholars such as Lewis, Ashby, Coetzer, Harris and Massey (2005) and Devins et al (2005a) believed networks developed with a group of close others provides an important source of advice and support for SME leaders as this is cheaper (usually free) and considered trustworthy (Gold et al 2008). Despite of this fact, little empirical research exists in the literature on whether followers within these informal learning environments precisely influence leadership competencies which demands further exploration which this study attempted to do.

A search for literature on voice behaviour and leadership competencies indicates that the two concepts have been examined separately which has left a void in management and leadership literature with specific regard to SMEs in developing countries where there is mounting concern over SME high mortality rates. More still, the few studies that have combined voice and leader outcomes have focused on other areas such as leader attention and decision-making (Morasso, 2011), leader reaction to voice (Huang, 2015), leader behavior and decision-making (MacMillan et al, 2013) in developed countries thus ignoring leadership competencies and relationships (LMX) aspects most especially in SMEs in emerging economies whose performance and growth are been held-back by poor Leadership Competencies. This shows that the debate on the relationship between voice and leadership outcome is incomplete and still a work in progress.

However in terms of promotive voice, most scholars agreed that there is a positive relationship between promotive voice and leader outcomes (Burris, 2012; Cheung and Songqi, 2014; Liang, Farh, and Farh, 2012; Burris, Detert & Romney, 2013), others reported no relationship (Morrison and Milliken, 2000; Menon et al., 2006; Ashford et al, 2009), and others reported mixed results (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998; Seibert et al., 2001). In terms of prohibitive voice, some studies reported a negative relationship between prohibitive voice and recipient outcomes (Belschak and Den Hartog ,2009) ;Burris, Detert, & Romney, 2013; Fast, Burris, and Bartel, 2014; Frese & Fay, 2001; Seibert et al., 2001; MacMillan, et al,2013; Liang, Farh, and Farh, 2012; Klaas et al., 2012) while some few reported a positive relationship (Cheung & Songqi ,2014; Burris, 2012). This means that the debate on the influence of voice on leadership/managerial outcomes of voice is inconclusive and this study furthers the debate besides validating these contradictions within the context of SMEs in Uganda..

In terms of LMX, a good number of studies found out that the relationship quality between subordinates and managers is an essential determinant of voice (Ashford et al., 1998; Detert & Burris, 2007; Kish-Gephart, Detert, Trevino & Edmondson, 2009; Liu, W., Tangirala, S., & Ramanujam, R. (2013). In particular, employees who maintain a positive relationship with the manager are less afraid to express voice, because they feel it is interpersonally safe to express ideas (Ashford et al., 1998; Edmondson, 1999; Detert & Burris, 2007). In contrast, poor relationship quality contributes to lower levels of psychological safety for expressing voice, resulting in a lower likelihood of voice (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Roberts & O'Reilly, 1974). Consistent with past research, it's therefore hypothesized that followers with high quality relationships with their leaders are more likely to speak up and influence the competencies of their leaders because their ideas are more likely to be endorsed.

A quasi-experimental field study by MacMillan etal (2013) which explored how follower voice, leader regulatory focus and leader-member exchange (LMX) affect leader attention and decision-making found out that the quality of the relationship between the leader and the follower influenced leader interest and decision-making directly and moderates the path between follower voice type and leader decision-making. Prior studies have shown, in general, a positive relationship between LMX and Prosocial behaviors such as organizational citizenship behaviors (Graen & Uhl Bien, 1995; Zhu, 2012) thus suggesting that the higher the relationship, the more likely that followers are motivated to speak up with the intention of helping the leaders identify the issues. In contrast, employees with low-quality LMX relationships often receive less support and have fewer chances to exchange opinions with their leaders (Graen& Cashman, 1975).

Similarly, Baer (2012) looked at how employees get their ideas implemented in the workplace and concluded that implementation was more likely when there were strong 'buy-in' relationships. Whiting, et al. (2012) further demonstrated the significant roles of several communication factors such as the characteristics of the message content, voice provider, and voicing context in evaluations of voice behavior and found out that voice-provider trustworthiness and solution-incorporating voice messages were the strongest communication factors that elicit positive reactions. These findings mostly support the argument that follower voice behaviour plays a key role in sharpening leadership competencies of owner-managers and that followers who practice promotive voice behaviour are likely to sharpen leadership competencies of their SME leaders than those who practice prohibitive voice behaviour.

For purposes of this study, Follower Voice Behaviour is conceptualised as an independent variable and leadership competencies as the dependent variable. This conceptualisation has strong backing from several commentators. For example, Shamir (2007) argued that followers hold information and expertise needed by the leaders and thus called for a greater appreciation for the influence of followers' voice on leader-related outcomes. This is consistent with Howell and Shamir (2005) who argued that Followers are a main source of feedback in addition to providing validation of the actions of the leader (Howell & Shamir, 2005). Similarly, Axtell et al., (2000) argued that followers are often in an ideal position to help leaders due to their knowledge of the work situation, a view supported by Obolensky (2010) who maintained that followers have faster access to information and know what is going on around them, possibly better than their leaders.

Therefore by looking beyond Van Dyne, Ang, & Botero, (2003) conceptualization of voice as a means by which employees help their organizations to innovate and succeed through the expression of constructive opinions, concerns, or ideas, this study seeks to broaden the common conceptualization of voice as something that can elicit leadership outcomes. This broadened perspective draws broadly from evidence contained in many studies that have recognized the critical role of voice in achieving positive outcomes such as team learning (Edmondson, 1999), improved work processes and innovation (Argyris & Schon, 1978), crisis prevention (Schwartz & Wald, 2003), influencing the actions of leaders (Hirschman, 1970; Folger, 1977) and leader behavior and decision-making (Morasso, 2011; Liang, Fahr, and Fahr 2012).

On the other hand, the conceptualization of leadership competencies as an outcome of Follower Voice draws from the works of Mwangi et al. (2013), who in their study of leadership competencies associated with successful SMEs in Uganda and Kenya recommended eight (8) essential competencies closely linked to SMEs' success namely; visioning, building commitment, social capital, personal values, anticipation and resilience, resourcefulness, responsiveness, and entrepreneurial orientation.

This study sought to integrate the two concepts of Follower Voice and Leadership Competencies to find answers to problems of poor leadership competence in SMEs. However, it's conceptualised that leader-follower relationships could have an effect on the interface between Follower Voice Behaviour and Leadership Competencies in SMEs. Despite the fact that voice may be promotive and supportive, the relationship between the follower and leader may have the opposite effect on the leader. On the other hand, followers who demonstrate prohibitive voice behaviour could elicit positive response from the leader because of the moderating factor. For this study, it is conceptualized that the dyadic relationship between leaders and followers shall play a moderating role because the relationship between the two variables seems to be indirect. This moderating variable will be characterized by the highness and lowness of the relationship as theorized in the Leader-Member exchange theory.

Conceptual Model for Development of Leadership Competencies in SMEs

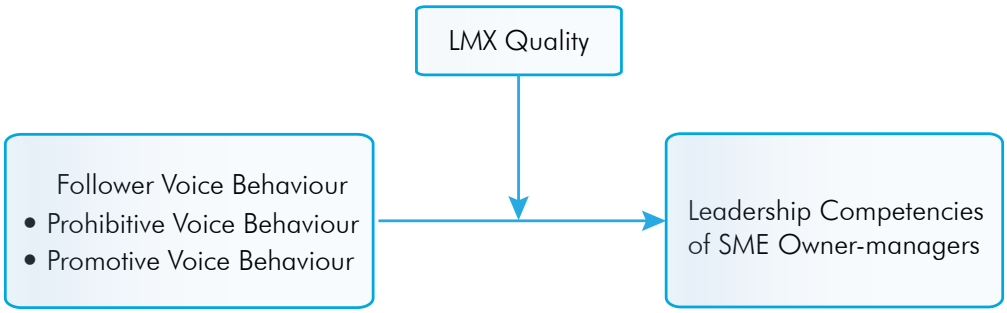


Figure 1: *Conceptual Model (adapted from Liang et.al, 2012 Dansereau et al, 1975 and Mwangi et al 2013)*

Based on the framework, it can be hypothesized that:

H1: Followers practicing Promotive voice behaviour have significant influence over leadership competencies of SME owner-managers in Uganda

H2: Followers practicing Prohibitive voice behaviour have no significant influence over leadership competencies of SME owner-managers in Uganda

H3: LMX Quality moderates the relationship between Promotive voice behaviour and leadership competencies of SME owner-managers in Uganda

H4: LMX Quality moderates the relationship between Prohibitive voice behaviour and leadership competencies of SME owner-managers in Uganda

The methodology

The study was conducted using a descriptive cross-sectional survey design and a quantitative approach. This design was preferred because it enabled the researcher to obtain detailed information from a number of respondents within the most appropriate and generally acceptable time period coupled with the fact that its results could be generalized to a larger population within defined boundaries (Amin, 2005).The researcher designed a questionnaire divided into three parts in relation to Follower Voice behaviour, LMX quality and Leadership competencies. The first part was designed to measure the degree to which SME owner-managers practiced promotive and prohibitive follower voice behavior based on a modified version of Liang et al's (2012) voice scale anchored on a five-point Likert scale . The second part was designed to measure how frequently owner-managers practiced exemplary leadership behaviors as stipulated in the self version of the Leadership Practices Inventory® anchored on a five-point Likert scale. The third part was designed to measure the quality of leader–member relationships based on the LMX-7 scale developed by Graen, G. B., & Uhl-Bien, M. (1995) which was also anchored on a five-point Likert scale.

Follower voice behaviour was measured using a validated scale of voice behavior developed by Liang et al. (2012). The instrument includes 10-item scale of voice behavior which was modified to suit the study. Liang et al's (2012) scale consists of two dimensions of voice behavior – promotive (making suggestions) and prohibitive (reporting problems) – using 5 items to measure each dimension. This instrument has been used by a number of studies: (Xie et al, 2015; Jung, 2014; Hassan et al, 2015; Ward, 2013; Shin 2013). Leadership competencies were measured using Kouzes and Posner's (1998a) Leadership Practices Inventory® (Self) which has been used with over 250,000 leaders and more than a million of their constituents. More than 120 scientific studies have consistently confirmed the reliability and validity of the LPI and the Kouzes-Posner leadership framework on which it is based. The moderator variable was measured using a validated LMX-7 scale developed by Graen, G. B., & Uhl-Bien, M. (1995). Gender, education, and tenure were included as demographic control variables because prior research suggests that they are related to voice behavior (LePine and Van Dyne, 1998; Van Dyne and LePine, 1998).

The target population (population to which a researcher would like to generalize results) consists of all Ugandan SME owner-managers whose SMEs have been in business for over five years. Considering that

the target population is large and scattered over a wide geographical scope thus requiring time, money and human resource, Mugenda and Mugenda (1999), recommended drawing of samples from the accessible (the population from which a researcher draws a sample from) which in this case are the SME owner-managers from Mbale ,Tororo and Busia Districts. The choice of the three districts considered the fact that the SMEs are so scattered throughout the country and therefore collection of data from all of them was bound to be difficult, expensive and time consuming. More so, the Census of Business Establishments, by Uganda Bureau of Statistics in 2011 found out that the region had only 14.6% of the surviving businesses yet it had not been subjected to any research. Further still there is homogeneity in the SME sector and the challenges faced by SMEs are similar across geographical boundaries (Watkins 1983), and therefore the finding from the three districts could still be used to draw generalizations.

After failing to obtain credible and up to date registers of data from the respective district commercial offices, the researcher through the use of SME networks identified 510 owner-managers. This approach is backed by Rooks & Sserwanga's (2009) who warned that a robust population is difficult to ascertain in studies involving SMEs in Uganda because most of them are not registered. On the basis of this information obtained through the networks,the investigator chose a sample size of 13% (66) from the accessible population of 510 whose responses were properly analysed to produce valid and reliable research findings. The choice of the sample size of 66 respondents (calculated as: $13/100 \times 510 = 66$) has backings of Gay (1981) who suggested that for descriptive studies, 10% of the accessible population was enough (Gay, 1981 in Mugenda and Mugenda, 1999). The choice of 66 respondents is equally backed by Roscoe's (1975) rule of thumb that a sample larger than 30 and less than 510 are recommended for most research and Sekaran's (2003) rule of thumb that the sample size should be several times (preferably 10 times or more) as large as the number of variables in the study.

Purposive sampling procedure was used to identify the 66 owner-managers given that they are key players who are knowledgeable and capable of providing accurate and in-depth views about the Voice behaviour, LMX relationship quality, leadership competencies in an SME context. Another key reason for using purposive sampling was the lack of resources (time and money) which dictated limiting respondents to manageable but representative numbers. In identifying the respondents due consideration was given to the age, experience, gender, and level of education. Most of all, the choice of the sampling technique was guided by the purpose of the study as informed by (Yin, 1997).

In this study, the researcher used both primary and secondary methods of data collection. For the case of primary methods of data collection, field data was collected with the help of questionnaires which were self administered to the owners-managers of the SMEs. The questionnaires were carefully designed to solicit information on areas of Follower Voice behaviour, LMX quality and Leadership competencies in the SME context. Self administered Questionnaires as recommended for use in descriptive studies by Cooper and Schindler (2006) was used to collect data because of been cost friendly, less biased and in position to reach several respondents at the same time which made it ideal to explore the correlation between the variables in an academic setting. In case of secondary data, the study begun with a review of relevant literature sources that had been published on the subject area such as research reports, journals, internet and other relevant library materials.

To guarantee validity and reliability of the research instrument ,a pilot test was done by using ten owner-managers with similar characteristics of those described in the study within the selected districts. The results obtained showed that the instrument was internally consistent/reliable because the Cronbach's alpha value in each variable was greater than the recommended 0.70. Despite using validated scales, Validity of the instrument was again established by obtaining expert judgement from two experts in the field (as indicated below) and their recommendations were used to make adjustments to some of the research questions.

$$\textbf{CVI} = \frac{\text{No. of items rated as relevant (43)}}{\text{All items in the questionnaire (47)}}$$

The **CVI** for the questionnaire was 0.914 against the 0.7 recommended validity measure by Amin (2005), hence the questionnaire was considered valid for data collection.

The Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 16.0 was used to analyze the data from the questionnaire. First, a reliability test was performed on each variable to determine the degree of consistency in scores due to random errors. Cronbach's coefficient Alpha was used to test the reliability of data. Secondly, descriptive statistics in form of frequencies and percentages were computed to summarize the information of the respondents and to describe the distribution of respondents on the variables of the study (Amin, 2005). Pearson product moment correlation coefficient (r) was used to determine the strength of the relationship between the variables. The significance of the coefficient (p) was used to test the relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable by comparing it to the critical significance level at 0.05. To test the study hypothesis, linear regression analysis were conducted and the regression coefficient (R) was used to determine the linearity of the relationship ,the regression coefficient was squared to obtain "R Squared" and the adjusted R Squared was used to determine the amount of variation. The coefficients of the regression (beta, t-value, and significance) were used to test the significance of the contribution of the independent variables on the dependent variable (Sekaran, 2003; Amin, 2005). Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was employed to determine the fitness of the regression model. Finally, hierarchical multiple regression shall be used to assess the effects of a moderating variable. The moderation effect was tested by looking at the interaction effect between the promotive and prohibitive voice behaviour and LMX quality and whether or not it significantly predicted leadership competencies.

Results and Discussion

In this section, the results of the quantitative analysis are presented and discussed within the context of the research objective.

Response Rate

The response rate was 82% which according to Punch (2003) is very good (above the 70%) for mail/self-completed questionnaire surveys.

Reliability Test

This study used Cronbach's alpha value as a tool for internal consistency/reliability analysis. As shown in Table 1 below, the results of the reliability test showed Cronbach's alpha values above the 0.7 limit hence the results are acceptable.

Table 1: Results of the reliability analysis

Variable	Total Constructs	Cronbach's alpha value
1. Voice behaviour	10	.757
2. LMX	7	.761
3. Leadership Competencies	30	.945

Factor Analysis

Findings from the factor analysis indicates that the factor loadings were good and above the required level 0.4 (promotive voice .878, prohibitive Voice 0.816, Leadership Competencies 0.712 and LMX 0.782). This findings are therefore acceptable given that they concur with MacCallum et al. (1999) who advocated that all items in a factor model should have communalities of over 0.60 or an average communality of 0.7 to justify performing a factor analysis with small sample sizes.

Descriptive Statistics

Background Characteristics of Respondents

Results from the study indicate that majority of the respondents (70.4%) were males while the females only comprised 29.6% implying that more males are involved in leadership of SMEs in Mbale, Tororo and Busia than females. Based upon LePine and Van Dyne's (1998) findings that men engaged in voice behavior more than women, this imply that voice behaviour in these seemily male dominated SMEs could be high. Also, results show that majority of the respondents (40.7%) were within the age bracket of 20-30 years of age

followed by those within the bracket of 31-40 and between 41-50 tying at 29.6% and non above 51 years. This implies that most SMEs have young and energetic leaders who are capable of doing the hectic work that is characteristic of the SME sector. It was also observed that majority of the respondents were degree holders (29.6%) followed by certificate holders (25.9%) with 22.2% having diplomas and only one respondent with a PhD (1.9%). This revelation may imply that majority of the respondents (48.1%) have low qualification (Certificates and Diplomas) which might affect their leadership competencies. Consequently, Hashanah's (2015) recommendation that entrepreneurs should be encouraged to improve their education levels and more highly educated individuals should be encouraged to set up firms as they are likely to have better performing firms needs to be accorded due consideration. Majority of the leaders (51.9%) were observed to have spent between 5-10 years at their SMEs and 35.2% had spent less than 5 years at their SMEs while 13.0% exceeded 10 years at their SMEs. Much as this may be explained by the short life span of most SMEs, it may imply that most leaders may lack the experience required to manoeuvre through turbulent times.

The descriptive analysis is presented in table 2 below. For promotive voice behaviour, the general mean scores (3.31) anchored on a five-point Likert scale indicates an agreements among respondents that their followers practiced leader-targeted promotive voice behaviors to influence their owner-managers leadership competencies. For prohibitive voice behaviour, the general mean scores (3.17) anchored on a five-point Likert scale also indicate an agreement among respondents that their followers practiced leader-targeted prohibitive voice behaviors to influence their owner-managers leadership competencies. In the case of LMX, the general mean score of 3.56 indicates stronger higher-quality leader–member exchanges (in-groups). In terms of Leadership Competencies, the mean score of 3.37 indicates an agreement among respondents that SME owner-managers practiced exemplary leadership.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of Voice behaviour, LMX and leadership competencies

No	Variable	Mean	Standard deviation
1	Promotive Voice	3.31	0.757
2	Prohibitive Voice	3.17	0.749
3	LMX	3.56	0.799
4	Leadership Competencies	3.37	0.731

Voice behaviour and leadership competencies

Pearson product moment correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between voice behaviour and leadership competencies. To rule out the possibility of multicollinearity, Variance Inflation Factors (VIFs) were calculated and none of the VIFs were greater than 10 as the guided by Dielman, (1996) and therefore multicollinearity was ruled out.

The results showed a significant positive relationship between promotive voice behaviour and leadership competencies, ($r = 0.52$, $p < .05$) which implies that promotive voice behaviour is a very significant factor in the sharpening of leadership competencies and that followers who practice promotive voice behaviour may have significant influence over the leadership competencies of their owner-managers. These findings are supported by Burris, (2012); Cheung and Songqi, (2014); Liang, Farh, and Farh, (2012); Burris, Detert & Romney, (2013) who asserted that promotive voice has more significant influence on leadership behaviors than prohibitive voice. The findings further revealed a moderately positive correlation between prohibitive voice behaviour and leadership competencies ($r = .31$, $p < .05$), an implication that followers who practice prohibitive voice behaviour may moderately influence the leadership competencies of their owner-managers. This is in line Belschak and Den Hartog ,(2009) ;Burris, Detert, & Romney, (2013); Fast, Burris, and Bartel, (2014); Frese & Fay, (2001); Seibert et al., (2001); MacMillan, et al, (2013); Liang, Farh, and Farh, (2012); Klaas et al., (2012) who suggested a negative relationship between prohibitive voice and recipient outcomes. From table 3 below, it can be seen that LMX quality was significantly positively correlated with leadership competencies ($r = .51$, $p < .05$) which implies that high quality LMX relationships could be associated with significant follower influence over leadership competencies and vice versa.
This is consistent with LMX theory which proposes that the relationship quality between subordinates and managers is an essential determinant of voice outcomes (Ashford et al., 1998; Detert &

Burris, 2007; Detert & Edmondson, 2009; Liu, W., Tangirala, S., & Ramanujam, R. (2013). In sum, the relationship between variables in this study shows a positive correlation as shown below.

Table 3: Correlation Analysis Result for voice behaviour and leadership competencies

	1	2	3	4
4. Promotive Voice	1.000			
5. Prohibitive Voice	0.75*	1.000		
6. LMX	0.50*	0.51*	1.000	
7. Leadership Competencies	0.52*	0.31*	0.51*	1.000

**Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level*

Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis One

H1: Followers practicing Promotive voice behaviour have a significantly positive influence over leadership competencies of owner-managers in SMEs in Uganda.

To test the above hypothesis, Regression analysis was conducted and the results of the analysis are shown in the table 4 below. From the results ,Promotive voice behaviour was found to be a significant predictors of leadership competencies of owner-managers (R^2= 0.266 , ß=0.515, p<0.05). The R2 value of 0.266 shows that 26.6% of the variation in the leadership competencies of SMEs owner-managers is explained/accounted for by variation in promotive voice behaviour and 63.4% of the variation is explained by other factors not in the model or by chance. The results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicates that the model is significant (p value 0.000 < 0.05) and good for prediction. Furthermore, the computed F value of 18.811 is greater than the F-critical 4.03 implying that the model is significant and therefore good for prediction. The regression co-efficient (B) is positive (0.544) and significant (p-value <0.05) suggesting that a one unit increase in Promotive voice can significantly predict a (0.544) increase in leadership competencies. Lastly, the T computed (4.337) is more than the T-critical (2.00) which implies that the predictor variable (Promotive voice behaviour) is significant. This therefore means that the null hypothesis rejected in favour of the alternative hypothesis H1. This therefore implies that promotive voice behaviour is a good predictor and has a positive and significant influence over the leadership competencies of SMEs owner-managers.

Table 4: Regression Analysis Result of the influence of Promotive voice behaviour on leadership competencies

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Regression co-efficient (B)	t value	p value
Promotive voice behaviour	Leadership competencies	0.544	4.337	0.000
$R = 0.515$ $R^2 = 0.266$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.252$; $F = 18.811$; $T = 4.337$; $p = 0.000$				

Hypothesis Two

H2: Followers practicing Prohibitive voice behaviour have no significant influence over leadership competencies of owner-managers in SMEs in Uganda.

Table 5: Regression Analysis Result of the influence of Prohibitive voice behaviour on leadership competencies

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Regression co-efficient (B)	t value	p value
Prohibitive voice behaviour	Leadership competencies	0.310	2.351	0.023
R^2= 0.096 ; Adjusted R^2= 0.079 ; F= 5.529 ; T =2.351 ; p= 0.023				

From the test results of the Regression analysis shown above , Prohibitive voice behaviour was found to be a significant predictors of leadership competencies of owner-managers in SMEs in Uganda (R^2= 0.096; Adjusted R^2= 0.079, ß=0.310, $p<0.05$) thus accounting for 8 percent of the variance in leadership competencies. The results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicates that the model is significant (p value 0.023 < 0.05). On the other hand, the regression co-efficient (B) is positive (0.331) and significant (p-value <0.23) suggesting that a one unit increase in prohibitive voice can significantly predict a (0.331) increase in leadership competencies. The analysis of variance (ANOVA) of the fitted regression equation is significant with F value of (5.529) an indication that the model is a good one. Given that the p-value is less than (0.05), it shows a statistically significant relationship between the variables at (0.95) confidence level. Thus, Prohibitive voice has a significant positive effect over leadership competencies of owner-managers in SMEs in Uganda but the strength of its relationship with leadership competencies was decreased compared to promotive voice. Statistically, this result sends a signal that compared to promotive voice, prohibitive voice behaviour has lesser influence over leadership competencies of owner-managers in SMEs in Uganda. Thus, Hypothesis two was rejected.

Hypothesis Three and Four

H3: LMX Quality positively moderates the relationship between Promotive voice behaviour and leadership competencies of SME owner-managers in Uganda

H4: LMX Quality positively moderates the relationship between Prohibitive voice behaviour and leadership competencies of SME owner-managers in Uganda

To test these hypothesis, a moderated multiple regression analysis was conducted to identify the variation in case of the entrance moderator variable. The independent variables were mean-centred to avoid multicollinearity (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). Table 6 presents the regression results.

Table 6: Summary of multiple regression results

Dependent Variable	Variable	Regression co-efficient (ß)	t value	p value
Leadership competencies	Promotive Voice behaviour	0.515	4.337	0.000
	Promotive Voice behaviour X LMX	0.157	1.314	0.195
	Prohibitive Voice behaviour	0.318	2.537	0.014
	Prohibitive Voice behaviour X LMX	0.320	2.548	0.014
Model 1: Adjusted R^2 =0.262 R^2 change= 0.024; F change= 1.727; p= 0.195 Model 2: Adjusted R^2 =0.167; R^2 change= 0.102; F change= 6.490 ; p= 0.014				

In terms of **H3**, the regression results showed that the interaction between Promotive voice and LMX quality was not significantly correlated with Leadership competencies (R^2= 0.290 ; Adjusted R^2= 0.262 ß=0.157 ,$p>0.05$). More so, the interaction changed the R^2 by 2.4% meaning that a predictive power of 2.4% was added to the model by the addition of LMX quality which is not statistically significant ($p > .005$). From the results, the conclusion is that LMX quality does not moderate the relationship between Promotive voice and leadership competencies and therefore H3 was not supported.

In terms of H4, the regression results showed that the interaction between Prohibitive voice and LMX quality was

significantly correlated with Leadership competencies (R^2= 0.198 ; Adjusted R^2= 0.167 ß=0.320 ,p<0.05). More so, the interaction changed the R^2 by 10.2% implying that a predictive power of 10.2% was added to the model by the addition of LMX quality which is statistically significant (p <.005). Statistically, this result sends a signal that LMX quality moderates the relationship between Prohibitive voice and leadership competencies and therefore H4 was supported.

Conclusions

The findings from this study led the researcher to conclude that voice type matters and on a comparative basis, Promotive voice behaviour voice has a more significant positive effect over leadership competencies than prohibitive voice behaviour These findings are supported by Burris, (2012); Cheung and Songqi, (2014); Liang, Farh, and Farh, (2012); Burris, Detert & Romney, (2013) who asserted that promotive voice has more significant influence on leadership behaviors than prohibitive voice. In broader terms, the findings are consistent with predictions of social constructivism theory, Exit, Voice, and Loyalty theory which presumes that followers are a rich source of leaning and those who are dissatisfied with leadership competencies will use their voice to improve things through communication via complaint, grievance or proposal for change (Hirschman, 1970), so they will seek to actively champion important causes from below before decline and failure (Ashford, Rothbard, Piderit, & Dutton, 1998; Dutton &Ashford, 1993; Dutton, Ashford, Lawrence, & Miner-Rubino, 2002; Dutton, Ashford, O'Neill, & Lawrence, 2001). It is further concluded that LMX quality does moderate the relationship between voice behaviour and leadership competencies to the extent that voice behaviour is prohibitive.This is consistent with LMX theory which proposes that the relationship quality between subordinates and managers is an essential determinant of voice outcomes (Ashford et al., 1998; Detert & Burris, 2007; Detert & Edmondson, 2009; Liu, W., Tangirala, S., & Ramanujam, R. (2013). Therefore follower voice behaviour have a significant influence over leadership competencies of owner-managers in Ugandan SMEs and LMX quality moderates the relationship.

Based on the study conclusions presented above, the main theoretical implication of this study in terms of voice behaviour is that followers in the current study did express upward suggestions or concerns about leadership issues to their leaders which validated exit, voice and loyalty theory. The study also showed that voice can have a positive effect on leadership competencies, depending on one's relationship with the leader. This means relationships positively predicted Leadership competencies when LMX-quality was high and negatively when it was low. A similar relationship was found in the current study as well, with LMX-quality moderating the relationship between voice and leadership competencies. In line with LMX theory, this supports the notion that one should first establish a solid relationship before attempting to provide upward suggestion or criticism. The study has bridged the gap in existing literature on the relationship between voice behaviour and leadership competencies. It also contributes to the Human Resources, Organizational Behaviour and leadership literature by demonstrating that follower play an important role in sharpening leadership competencies of SME owner-managers and that influence is more likely to occur when both parties build high-quality relationships with one another.

From a voice and voicer perspective, the first important implication of the study derives from the finding that promotive voice behaviour has more influence on leadership competencies than prohibitive voice behaviour. This means followers who desire to influence the leadership competencies of their owner-managers should frame their ideas promotively. This also implies that followers need to be careful before expressing prohibitive messages especially in cultures where negative speaking is discouraged and punished. The study also suggested that leaders dislike prohibitive voice behaviour unless when LMX-quality is high, this implies that leaders should be aware of their own biases towards certain followers who practice prohibitive voice behaviour, as they may be deaf to potentially useful input when coming from a disfavoured followers. With employee voice being cited in literature as a key enabler for change, SMEs also need to ensure that their employee's voice is informed.

From a relationship perspective, an important practical implication is that leaders who do not establish good relationships with their followers may not hear diverse and valuable arrays of competence enhancing ideas, insights, and opinions from their followers and they may miss on the opportunity to use this goldmine of ideas to sharpen their competencies. Therefore, leaders should build high-quality relationships with all followers where possible. Otherwise SME performance and growth shall continue to be constrained unless leaders give attention to followers views and introduce appropriate avenues to capture feedback from them given that

their proximity to suppliers, customers and colleagues gives them valuable intelligence. Also, followers should attempt to build high-quality relationships with their leaders if their suggestions or concerns aimed at polishing leadership competencies are to be heard.

In the same context but from a job satisfaction perspective, those who choose to express voice (in terms of both suggestions and concerns) could be those who are deeply frustrated and who no longer care about interpersonal harmony and under such circumstances it could be practical to identify the wider reasons behind their frustrations because this may not be sustainable in the long run.

Lastly, in terms of practical use, this study offers less costly and time sensitive solution to leadership learning in SMEs and responds to calls made by, among others, McGuire et al (2008); Walker et al (2007), Hoque & Bacon, (2006); Fuller-Love (2006) who highlighted owner-manager complaints that training programmes were irrelevant to their business or individual needs , never suited their specific needs and considered the modes of delivery to be inconvenient and disruptive to their business operations besides doubting the credibility and expertise of the providers.

Based on the data in this study and the conclusions drawn, it is recommended that business education and training providers could take note and consider follower or employee voice as a key resource in designing effective training and development programs tailored to sharpen leadership competencies of owner-managers. This will allow them to redesign their training approaches accordingly. Policy-makers, consultants and other interested parties could derive similar implications from these findings and also design initiatives and tools that integrate voice behaviour and leadership learning in SMEs. It is also recommended that SME owner-managers be guided into devising appropriate means of tapping diverse ideas, opinions or suggestions from employees which could be vital source of leaning for SME owner-managers. Likewise SME owner-managers should make an audit of their own leadership competencies and if necessary, consider ways to acquire and develop them. Lastly SME employees should be educated about their important roles as followers and the critical impact they have on their leaders in particular and the performance and growth of their SMEs in general.

Although the study provides some interesting findings and makes an important contribution in leadership and HR literature, there are some limitations worth noting. The study was cross – sectional in nature implying that results obtained may be subjected to the inherent weaknesses of cross – sectional studies. Data was collected from SME owner-managers and as such the possibility of Single Source Bias (SSB) cannot be ruled out. Similar studies needs to be replicated with followers as respondent to gauge a complete picture. Standard questionnaires were used as instruments to collect data which perhaps limited the ability to collect views about information outside the standardised question. This research used a small sample size centered on owner-managers in SMEs. Future researcher should employ a bigger sample involving followers and other stakeholders like the customers, local authorities among others. Further studies should be carried out in other parts of the country other than those in the current study. The research was also carried out amongst functional SMEs basing on the number of employees and years in operation. Future research should be carried out among collapsed SMEs based on similar variables. Additional research is needed to address group- and organization-level effects of voice and influence from a diverse population.

The highlighted limitations should not take away the fact that the research method that was adopted for this study ensured that quality was not compromised and that very strong and relevant evidence was gathered which satisfied the purpose and objective of the study. This study did not suggest causation, but instead suggested that including follower/employee voices is a good predictor of leadership competencies of SME owner-managers.

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