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Fostering a Speak-Up Culture: Psychological Safety in Indonesia's Startup Ecosystem

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the effect of psychological safety on employee voice behavior in startup environments. A total of 351 startup employees in Indonesia participated in this quantitative research using survey methods. Voice behavior was measured using the Employee Voice Behavior Scale, while psychological safety was assessed using the Psychological Safety Scale. Data were analyzed using binary logistic regression. The results showed that psychological safety significantly influenced voice behavior, $\chi^2(349) = 6.940$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.132$. These findings indicate that employees who perceive a higher degree of psychological safety are more likely to engage in voice behavior, highlighting the importance of cultivating a psychologically safe climate in startup organizations.

Keywords : Psychological Safety, Voice Behavior, Startup Employees

Introduction

Startups are fast-paced, high-pressure work environments that rely heavily on employee contributions, innovation, and adaptability (Handayani & Hartijasti, 2021). One key factor that determines organizational adaptability is employee voice behavior—the discretionary expression of ideas, suggestions, concerns, or opinions intended to improve organizational effectiveness (Bain et al., 2021). Voice behavior is a central form of proactive work behavior that enables learning, problem-solving, and constructive change within organizations (Morrison, 2023)(Morrison, 2023).

However, expressing one's voice can be perceived as risky, especially in ambiguous or hierarchical organizational cultures (Burris, 2012). In such contexts, employees may fear negative consequences such as social rejection, reputational damage, or managerial retaliation (Sun et al., 2022). Therefore, it is essential to identify workplace factors that encourage employees to engage in voice behavior (Lee et al., 2023).

One such factor is psychological safety, defined by Edmondson (1999) as a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking. In psychologically safe environments, individuals feel accepted and respected, which increases their willingness to speak up (Subhakaran & Dyaram, 2018). Prior research has demonstrated that psychological safety is positively associated with learning behavior (Edmondson, 2002), innovative behavior (Javed et al., 2019), and voice behavior (Salman et al., 2020). In startup settings—where experimentation, rapid feedback, and innovation are necessary for survival—psychological safety may serve as a particularly critical antecedent to employee voice.

Despite the increasing prevalence of startups in Indonesia, limited research has investigated how psychological safety contributes to employee behavior in these emerging organizations. Most previous studies have focused on established corporations, with less attention paid to the flexible, informal structures of startups. The objective of this study is to examine the effect of psychological safety on employee voice behavior within Indonesian startups. Specifically, this research

investigates whether employees who perceive greater psychological safety are more likely to engage in voice behavior.

Based on the theoretical framework and prior empirical findings, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1: Psychological safety has a significant positive effect on employee voice behavior.

Method

This research employed a quantitative approach with a correlational research design aimed at examining the effect of psychological safety on employee voice behavior. The design used was cross-sectional, where data were collected at a single point in time using a structured survey.

The participants were startup employees from various companies across Indonesia. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling with inclusion criteria: (a) actively employed in a startup organization, and (b) a minimum of three months of work experience.

The survey was administered online and included informed consent, demographic questions, and the abovementioned scales. The items were translated and adapted to the Indonesian work context. Each item was rated using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree).

Voice behavior was measured using the employee voice behavior scale adapted from Liang et al. (2012), consisting of two subdimensions: promotive voice (items 1–5) and prohibitive voice (items 6–10). Prior to analysis, the psychometric properties of the scale were evaluated. One item (item 9) was removed due to low item-rest correlation (< 0.30). The final version consisted of 9 items with satisfactory internal consistency (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.866). The item-rest correlations ranged from 0.426 to 0.796, indicating moderate to strong item reliability

Psychological safety was measured using the psychological safety scale developed by Edmondson (1999), consisting of 7 items. Following psychometric analysis, two items (items 6 and 7) were removed due to low item-rest correlations (0.174 and 0.150, respectively). The final 5-item scale demonstrated strong internal consistency, with Cronbach's Alpha = 0.881. Remaining item-rest correlations ranged from 0.519 to 0.641, indicating acceptable levels of item reliability.

Results

This study employed a quantitative survey design with 351 startup employees across various industries in Indonesia as participants. Eligibility criteria included being currently employed in a startup company and having a minimum of three months' tenure.

Prior to hypothesis testing, normality tests were conducted to assess whether voice behavior met the assumption of normal distribution. The normality tests indicated a significant deviation from normality ($p < .05$), suggesting that linear regression would be inappropriate for this dataset. As a result, binary logistic regression was employed. To meet the requirement for dichotomous outcome variables, the total score of the voice behavior scale was split based on its empirical mean, which was 29.2. Respondents scoring above 29.2 were coded as "1" (high voice behavior), while those scoring below 29.2 were coded as "0" (low voice behavior).

Logistic regression was then used to examine whether psychological safety predicted the likelihood of high voice behavior. The results showed that psychological safety significantly increased the odds of engaging in voice behavior (Odds Ratio = 2.353, $\chi^2(349) = 6.940$, $p < .001$, McFadden $R^2 = 0.132$), indicating that employees with higher psychological safety were more than twice as likely to demonstrate voice behavior.

These values indicate that psychological safety contributes to explaining approximately 13.2% of the variance in the likelihood of employees engaging in voice behavior. The positive coefficient

implies that as psychological safety increases, so does the probability of employees for voice behavior.

Discussion

The findings align with existing literature reinforcing the critical role of psychological safety in fostering proactive communication. In startup settings, where formal structures may be minimal, psychological safety acts as a psychological cushion, enabling employees to share insights, raise concerns, and propose improvements without fear of negative repercussions.

Although the R^2 value suggests that psychological safety accounts for a moderate portion of variance, other factors—such as leadership style, organizational culture, or individual motivation—likely also influence voice behavior. Future research may explore these variables and consider longitudinal or experimental designs for causal inferences.

Conclusion

This study concludes that psychological safety significantly influences voice behavior among startup employees. Organizations aiming to harness employee creativity and critical thinking should foster a psychologically safe environment. Such efforts may include encouraging open dialogue, minimizing punitive responses to feedback, and modeling inclusive behavior through leadership practices.

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