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# Positive feedback, feedback seeking and performance: Feedback orientation as a moderator

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**Purpose:** Based on the feedback intervention theory, the main objective of this study was to explore the association of supervisor positive feedback with employee performance and the roles of feedback seeking and feedback orientation.

**Design/methodology/approach:** Hierarchical regression and bootstrap analyses are used to test the above hypotheses and theoretical model on 368 dyad data obtained from Chinese employees and their direct supervisors at three different times.

**Findings/results:** The results show that positive supervisor feedback has a positive effect on employee performance. Feedback seeking partially mediates the effect of positive feedback on employee performance. Feedback orientation positively moderates the influence of positive supervisor feedback on employee feedback seeking and performance, that is, for employees with high feedback orientation, the above two reinforcing effects are more obvious.

**Practical implications:** The findings of this study demonstrate that supervisors should provide feedback to their employees in a positive manner in their daily work, so as to motivate employees to actively seek feedback and ultimately achieve the purpose of improving employee performance. Also, it is equally important for organisations and supervisors to actively cultivate the feedback orientation traits of employees.

**Originality/value:** This study provides new insights into the impact mechanism and boundary conditions of positive feedback impact on employee performance and helps to complement the existing literature on feedback theory and performance management. In addition, applying feedback intervention theory to the research on the association between supervisor feedback and employee performance has made some contributions to the related research of feedback intervention theory.

**Keywords:** positive supervisor feedback; employee performance; feedback seeking; feedback orientation; feedback intervention theory.

## Introduction

In enterprise management practice, the supervisors constitute the most influential group in the organisation (Damanpour & Schneider, 2006; Lin et al., 2022), just like the helmsman on the ship (Sampaio et al., 2021). What they say and do in daily work usually has a significant impact on the working attitude, behaviour and performance of employees (Ambrose & Schminke, 2003; Lee et al., 2019). Especially in the context of high-power distance in China (Guo et al., 2022; Hempel, 2008; Hofstede, 1984), supervisors are more authoritative, powerful and intimidating (Chen et al., 2002; Liang et al., 2018), so their influence on their employees is generally more obvious. Under such circumstances, how to choose effective leadership behaviours, make employees more actively involved in their daily work and continuously improve the overall performance of the organisation has become a problem that supervisors in every organisation must face (Su & Zhang, 2022). As a significant behaviour modification tool and incentive strategy in practice (Ilgen et al., 1979), feedback has become a common intervention and management tool for managers (Chun et al., 2018; Goltz et al., 1990). Moreover, previous research has confirmed that a supervisor's positive feedback, as a kind of supportive and encouraging behaviour from supervisors perceived by employees (Hamzah et al., 2021), tends to have an accelerated influence on their employees' attitude, behaviour and performance (e.g. Evans & Dobrosielska, 2021; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Su & Xiao, 2022; Wondim et al., 2021). In line with these studies, it is reasonable for this study to speculate that employees' perceptions of positive supervisor feedback can effectively boost their performance.

In terms of the process by which supervisor feedback affects their employees, feedback intervention theory (Alder, 2007; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996) emphasises that purposefully and consciously providing feedback on task operations or past behavioural-information activities to individuals in external situations can induce individuals' motivation to actively seek valuable information in the organisational environment (Armitage & Christian, 2003; King, 2016), thereby affecting individual performance. Feedback-seeking as a self-regulatory strategy for individuals to actively seek feedback from others to gain value for themselves (Ashford, 1986; Sherf & Morrison, 2020), can establish a favouarble situation between environmental requirements and their own capabilities (Parker & Collins, 2010; Qian et al., 2022; Sully De Luque & Sommer, 2000), so as to promote the development of individual and organisational performance (Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Qian et al., 2019). In other words, supervisor's positive feedback perceived by employees can motivate them to seek feedback more actively and proactively, thereby improving their performance. Furthermore, many previous studies have established the fact that the recipient's own interpretation of the perceived feedback information has the most direct and pronounced influence on the actual utility of these feedbacks (e.g. Herold et al., 1987; Lechermeier & Fassnacht, 2018; Steelman et al., 2004). Feedback orientation (London & Smither, 2002), as a personality characteristic that describes the degree to which an individual accepts feedback from others in the organisation (Gabriel et al., 2014; Linderbaum & Levy, 2010), can more stably reflect the differences in employees' perceptions of feedback information (Steelman & Wolfeld, 2018; Wang et al., 2015). That is to say, employees with different levels of feedback orientation have different perceptions and interpretations of positive feedback from their supervisors, resulting in different feedback responses. Hence, this study further suggests that feedback orientation may play a moderating role in the effect of positive supervisor feedback on feedback seeking and employee performance.

In summary, this study constructs and validates a theoretical model to address how and when positive supervisor feedback affects employee performance based on the feedback intervention theory. The findings of the current study make some contribution to the existing literature on feedback theory and performance management as follows. Firstly, the discussion on the influence of positive feedback on feedback seeking and employee performance in this study responds to previous scholars' call for strengthening the research on the relationship between supervisor feedback giving and employee feedback response, which also offers supporting evidence for research related to the factors affecting feedback seeking and employee performance. Secondly, by discussing the roles of feedback seeking and feedback orientation in detail, this study provides a possible internal mechanism and boundary conditions for the effect of positive supervisor feedback on employee performance. This also corroborates to some extent how and when positive feedback from supervisors affects employee performance in the Chinese context.

Thirdly, this study applies the feedback intervention theory to the research field related to the relationship between supervisor feedback and employee performance, which not only verifies the explanatory power and applicability of the feedback intervention theory, but also further expands the breadth and depth of the feedback intervention theory.

# Literature and theoretical background
## Positive supervisor feedback and employee performance

Compared with feedback from other sources in the organisation, feedback from supervisors has higher perceived value and meaning to employees (London, 2014; Thacker & Stoner, 2012), and its influence on employees is also the most obvious (Ilgen et al., 1979; Varma et al., 2020; Zheng et al., 2015). In practical management situations, positive feedback emphasises positive evaluations by supervisors in organisations of their employees' workplace behaviours, attributes or outcomes (Wondim et al., 2021). For employees, they are more willing to accept positive supervisor feedback than negative feedback (Layous et al., 2017; Noefer et al., 2009). When they receive a positive feedback from their supervisor, they often respond more positively to this feedback (Fedor et al., 1989; Lee et al., 2019), which in turn leads to subsequent positive changes in their motivation, attitude, behaviour and performance at work (e.g. Hamzah et al., 2021; Harackiewicz & Larson, 1986; Holroyd et al., 2008; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Su & Xiao, 2022).

As far as its specific impact on employee performance is concerned, positive supervisor feedback is essentially a kind of reinforcing feedback information or form (Balcazar et al., 1985; Jaworski & Kohli, 1991), which comes from the supervisor's recognition, encouragement or support (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Zheng et al., 2015). From this point of view, managers can create an atmosphere of respect, relaxation and freedom via positive feedbacks (Steelman et al., 2004). On the one hand, it can bring greater satisfaction and happiness to employees, maintain and enhance their self-esteem and self-confidence (Dahling et al., 2012), so that they can complete the work tasks stipulated by the organisation more seriously (Wondim et al., 2021), and their performance level will be improved naturally. On the other hand, it can also encourage employees to have a more positive and optimistic mood (Bandura & Jourden, 1991; Sherf & Morrison, 2020), make them more proactive in their daily work and participate more actively in extra-role activities (Su & Zhang, 2022). In the long run, this can also enhance employee performance. In addition, from the perspective of the principle of reciprocity in the social exchange theory (Bagger & Li, 2014; Ramaswami et al., 1997), when employees perceive that their supervisor provides them with beneficial resources through a positive feedback (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Goltz et al., 1990; Holroyd et al., 2008), they usually have the idea and behaviour of giving back, that is, repaying the trust of their supervisor and organisation through hard

work (Fan et al., 2019; Kacmar et al., 2009), which also contributes to the improvement of employee performance to some extent. Therefore, this study proposes:

**Hypothesis 1:** Positive supervisor feedback is positively related to employee performance.

## The mediating role of feedback seeking

Feedback seeking means that individuals consciously seek answers to important questions in an uncertain environment in order to obtain valuable information and thus better adapt to the development of the organisation (Ashford & Cummings, 1983). Many previous studies have confirmed that although feedback seeking is beneficial to individuals and organisations, it is also a risky behaviour for individuals to expose their own weaknesses to others (e.g. Ashford, 1986; Chun et al., 2018; Qian et al., 2022; VandeWalle, 2003). Thus, individual characteristics and situational factors usually greatly promote or hinder the occurrence of feedback seeking (Crommelinck & Anseel, 2013; De Stobbeleir et al., 2020; Sully De Luque & Sommer, 2000). Among situational factors, supervisor behaviour or leadership style are important research contents (Parker & Collins, 2010; Qian et al., 2019), and many scholars have explored the impact of positive supervisor behaviour or style on employee feedback seeking from the perspective of positive leadership. For example, Huang (2012) has confirmed that the empowerment behaviour of the supervisors can enhance the trust of employees in the leader, and then make employees implement more feedback-seeking behaviours on daily basis. Beenen and colleagues (2017) have verified that supervisor autonomy support can establish a good relationship between supervisors and employees, thereby motivating new employees to actively participate in feedback-seeking activities. Therefore, the current study believes that positive supervisor feedback, as a typical positive behaviour of supervisors (Holroyd et al., 2008; Su & Zhang, 2022), is very likely to have a positive effect on employee feedback seeking.

Feedback intervention theory holds that the evaluative information provided by the feedback source about the task completion status or past behaviour of the feedback recipient can induce the feedback recipient to show more feedback seeking, thus affecting the actual performance of the feedback recipient (Alder, 2007; King, 2016; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). For employees, when they receive evaluative information from their direct supervisors through positive feedback, they usually feel trusted and supported by their supervisors and the organisation (Su & Xiao, 2022), which can also motivate them to actively seek feedback in their daily work. Meanwhile, feedback seeking refers to a self-regulating activity of individuals (Ashford et al., 2003; Qian et al., 2022), through which employees in the organisation can evaluate their own level, exercise their work skills and improve their own performance output in time, among others. (Callister et al., 1999; Sherf & Morrison, 2020; VandeWalle, 2003). That is to say, feedback seeking of employees stimulated by positive feedback from their supervisors can lead to the further improvement of their performance. In addition, positive feedback from supervisors can create a climate of respect, freedom and ease in the organisation (Steelman et al., 2004). In this scenario, employees do not need to worry about seeking feedback that may affect their image (Su et al., 2019), so they will be willing to make more efforts to seek feedback and try to obtain more important feedback information (London, 2014), which can effectively improve their work ability and thus exhibit higher performance. Taken together, there are reasons to believe that positive supervisor feedback will effectively promote subordinates to seek feedback in their daily work, and ultimately affect their performance. Therefore, this study posits:

**Hypothesis 2:** Employee feedback seeking mediates the relationship between positive supervisor feedback and employee performance.

## The moderating role of feedback orientation

Given the critical influence of the feedback recipients on the feedback process and its actual effectiveness (Lechermeier & Fassnacht, 2018), it is important to understand individual differences regarding how people respond to feedback (Ilgen et al., 1979). Hence, London and Smither (2002) developed the concept of feedback orientation, which is 'an individual's overall perception and acceptance of feedback from others in the organization'. In essence, it provides a more stable description of individual differences in feedback responses over time and can therefore be considered a quasi-trait with implications for each stage of the feedback process (Linderbaum & Levy, 2010; Su & Zhang, 2022). Individuals with high feedback orientation usually consider that feedback is very important, are more willing to seek and accept feedback, expect to improve themselves through feedback and also believe that they have the responsibility to use and provide feedback (Dahling et al., 2012; Rasheed et al., 2015). On the contrary, individuals with low feedback orientation are naturally resistant to feedback, more inclined to ignore feedback, cannot find real valuable feedback information in time, and are even less likely to respond to feedback (Linderbaum & Levy, 2010; Steelman & Wolfeld, 2018).

Many previous studies based on feedback intervention theory have confirmed that the individual differences of feedback recipients have an important impact on the actual effectiveness of feedback (e.g. Armitage & Christian, 2003; King, 2016; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Su & Zhang, 2022), that is, the exact same feedback has different effects on different individuals. Hence, it is reasonable to believe that feedback orientation will enhance the effect of positive feedback on feedback seeking and employee performance. Concretely speaking, when faced with positive feedback from supervisors, employees with high feedback orientation can better use and respond, tend to actively seek evaluation information related to their own performance (Linderbaum & Levy, 2010), and adopt measures such as proactively improving working methods to improve their

own performance (Dahling et al., 2012). On the contrary, employees with low levels of feedback orientation are inherently less responsive to feedback (Gabriel et al., 2014). They are usually more indifferent to feedback from their supervisors within the organisation (Gong et al., 2017), and are less likely to actively seek, process, and utilise the valuable information passed on by their supervisors through feedback (Wang et al., 2015). Even when their supervisors give them positive feedback in the form of praise, recognition, and encouragement, it is difficult for them to show the changes expected by the organisation and supervisors. Taken together, this study posits:

> **Hypothesis 3:** Feedback orientation will boost the relationship between positive supervisor feedback and employee feedback seeking, such that the relationship is stronger for employees who have high levels of feedback orientation than those who have low levels of feedback orientation.

> **Hypothesis 4:** Feedback orientation will boost the relationship between positive supervisor feedback and employee performance, such that the relationship is stronger for employees who have high levels of feedback orientation than those who have low levels of feedback orientation.

Based on the above discussion, the hypothesised research model constructed in this study is shown in Figure 1.

# Method
## Sample and procedure

This study attempted to collect sample data from 500 employees and their direct supervisors from two large manufacturing enterprises in Shandong Province, China. With the strong support of the human resource directors of the two companies, this study conducted on-site questionnaires among the employees and their direct supervisors at three different points in times to obtain sample data. Meanwhile, all participants were assured that their responses would be kept confidential and were asked to report the last four digits of their phone numbers for matching between the three time points.

More concretely, the sample data for this study were collected at 2-week intervals to reduce common method bias (Conway & Lance, 2010). At time 1, this study invited employees to take apart in the first questionnaire and asked them to report their demographic information, feedback orientation and perceptions of positive feedback from their direct supervisor. After eliminating invalid questionnaires, a total of 433 questionnaires were retained
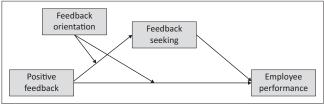


**FIGURE 1:** Hypothesised research model.

for the first questionnaire survey. Then, 2 weeks later, employees were asked to self-report their feedback seeking on a daily basis at time 2. A total of 421 valid questionnaires were received in the second survey. Another 2 weeks later, supervisors were invited to rate the performance of their immediate employees, who had participated in the previous two surveys at time 3. A total of 503 samples were obtained in the last survey.

After matching the data of employees (obtained at Time 1 and Time 2) and direct supervisors (obtained at Time 3), this study finally got 368 samples with a response rate of 73.6%. Among the final valid sample, 166 (45.1%) were female and 202 (54.9%) were male. In terms of age, 223 (60.6%) were under 30 years old, 113 (30.7%) were between 31 and 40 years old and 32 (8.7%) were 41 years old and above. With regard to educational background, 234 (63.6%) had a bachelor's degree or above, indicating that the employees who participated in the survey had a good educational background. In terms of the tenure with the current supervisor, the vast majority (282, 77.4%) of the surveyed employees chose to work for more than 1 year.

## Measures

The core variable questionnaires used in this study are all in Chinese; therefore, all specific items are processed according to the standard translation and back-translation procedures proposed by Brislin (1980). Meanwhile, responses for all four core variables were formatted on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

*Positive supervisor feedback* was measured at Time 1 using the 9-item scale developed by Jaworski and Kohli (1991). An example of items is 'My supervisor usually lets me know when I do a good job' ($\alpha$ = 0.89).

*Employee feedback orientation* was also measured at time 1 using the 20-item scale developed by Linderbaum and Levy (2010). An example of items is 'Feedback is very important for me to improve performance' ($\alpha$ = 0.96).

*Employee feedback seeking* was measured at time 2 using the 11-item scale developed by Callister and colleagues (1999). An example of items is 'I often ask my supervisor how am I doing at work' ($\alpha$ = 0.91).

*Employee performance* was rated by their direct supervisors at time 3 using the 6-item scale developed by Tsui and colleagues (1997). An example of items is 'this employee's quantity of work is above average' ($\alpha$ = 0.90).

*Control Variables.* This study controlled for some demographic variables of employees, including gender, age, education level and work tenure, that might affect their response to feedback from supervisors (e.g. Balcazar et al., 1985; Jaworski & Kohli, 1991; London & Smither, 2002; Noefer et al., 2009; Su & Zhang, 2022), and their performance

on a day-to-day basis (e.g. Alder, 2007; Chen et al., 2002; De Vader & Alliger, 1986; Evans & Dobrosielska, 2021; Huang, 2012). Gender of employee was coded as: 1 = 'male', 2 = 'female'. Education was coded as: 1 = 'high school or lower degrees', 2 = 'junior college degrees', 3 = 'bachelor degrees', 4 = 'master degrees' and 5 = 'doctoral degree or above'. Age was coded as: 1 = '≤ 22', 2 = '23–30', 3 = '31–40', 4 = '41–50' and 5 = '≥ 51'. Work tenure of employee, especially under the current supervisor was coded as: 1 = '< 1', 2 = '1–3', 3 = '3–6', 4 = '6–10' and 5 = '≥ 10'.

## Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Capital Normal University Institutional Review Committee of School of Literature (No. CNU001202211006).

# Results

## Preliminary analyses

Prior to the main analysis, several preliminary analyses were performed in this study. To begin with, a range of corresponding confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) were performed to check the discriminative validity of the primary variables. The results are shown in Table 1, from which we can know that the main fitting indexes of the four-factor model ($\chi^2$/df = 2.85, CFI = 0.93 > 0.9, TLI = 0.92 > 0.9, RMSEA = 0.07 < 0.08, SRMR = 0.06 < 0.08) satisfy the metrological requirements (Kline, 1998), and the fitting effect was also significantly better than that of other three models. In other words, the measures of positive feedback, employee performance, feedback seeking and feedback orientation in this study can be clearly divided into constructs.

Furthermore, the Harman's single factor test was used to assess the common method bias of the current study based on Podsakoff and Organ's (1986) suggestions. The result presented the fact that the largest factor explained 31.95% of the variance, and all the factors explained 68.89%. In addition, the single factor model fitted poorly ($\chi^2$/df = 5.89, RMSEA = 0.14, CFI = 0.82, TLI = 0.81, SRMR = 0.13, see Table 1). Therefore, the common method bias of the current study was not a major issue.

## Descriptive statistics and correlation analyses

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics and correlation analysis results of positive feedback, feedback orientation,

**TABLE 1:** Confirmatory factor analyses.

| Models | $\chi^2$/df | CFI | TLI | RMSEA | SRMR |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Four-factor model: PF, FS, FO, SP | 2.85 | 0.93 | 0.92 | 0.07 | 0.06 |
| Three-factor model: PF, FS + FO, SP | 4.12 | 0.89 | 0.87 | 0.09 | 0.08 |
| Two-factor model: PF, FS + FO + SP | 5.16 | 0.85 | 0.83 | 0.12 | 0.10 |
| Single-factor model: PF + FS + FO + SP | 5.89 | 0.82 | 0.81 | 0.14 | 0.13 |

Note: $N$ =368; Ideal model-fit indicators are: $\chi^2$/df < 3, CFI > 0.9, TLI > 0.9, RMSEA < 0.08, SRMR < 0.10.
PF, positive feedback; FS, feedback seeking; FO, feedback orientation; SP, employee performance; CFI, comparative fit index; TLI, Tucker Lewis Index; RMSEA, root mean square error of approximation; SRMR, standardized root mean square residual.

feedback seeking and employee performance. As shown, positive supervisor feedback was positively related to feedback seeking ($r$ = 0.50, $p$ < 0.001) and employee performance ($r$ = 0.31, $p$ < 0.001). Besides, feedback seeking was also positively related to employee performance ($r$ = 0.33, $p$ < 0.001). Therefore, these findings preliminarily support the hypothesis of the current study.

## Primary analyses

In order to test all the proposed hypotheses and theoretical model, the Bootstrapping analysing method was applied via the PROCESS macro in SPSS 22.0 (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) in this study, and 5000 bootstrap samples were used according to the analytical procedure proposed by Cole et al. (2008). To be specific, for the direct influence of positive feedback on employee performance and the mediating effect of feedback seeking, namely Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2, the Model 4 of PROCESS macro was firstly used to test both. The results are presented in Table 3. Secondly, in order to test the moderating role of feedback orientation, Model 1 of PROCESS macro was introduced to check Hypothesis 3 and Hypothesis 4. The results are presented in Table 4. Finally, this study employed Model 8 of PROCESS macro to test the whole theoretical model, and the results are presented in Table 5.

As presented in Table 3, after controlling for gender, age, education and tenure, positive feedback positively predicted feedback seeking ($\beta$ = 0.56, $p$ < 0.001, 95% CI = [0.46, 0.66]), and feedback seeking positively predicted employee performance ($\beta$ = 0.22, $p$ < 0.001, 95% CI = [0.11, 0.34]). Meanwhile, the direct effect of positive feedback on employee performance was also significant ($\beta$ = 0.23, $p$ < 0.001, 95% CI = [0.09, 0.63]). In addition, the mediating effect of feedback seeking was 0.13 ($p$ < 0.001, 95% CI = [0.07, 0.20]),

**TABLE 2:** Descriptive statistics and correlations analyses.

| Variables | Mean | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Positive feedback | 2.58 | 0.67 | 1 | | |
| 2. Feedback orientation | 2.61 | 0.79 | 0.56*** | 1 | |
| 3. Feedback seeking | 2.49 | 0.82 | 0.50*** | 0.53*** | 1 |
| 4. Employee performance | 3.30 | 1.02 | 0.31*** | 0.34*** | 0.33*** |

Note: $N$ = 368; *** $p$ < 0.001.
SD, standard deviation.

**TABLE 3:** Mediation analyses.

| Variables | Feedback seeking | | | Employee performance | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | $\beta$ | SE | 95% CI | $\beta$ | SE | 95% CI |
| Gender | -0.23** | 0.09 | [-0.39, -0.06] | -0.12 | 0.09 | [-0.32, 0.07] |
| Age | -0.05 | 0.05 | [-0.15, 0.05] | -0.34*** | 0.06 | [-0.46, -0.23] |
| Education | 0.06 | 0.04 | [-0.03, 0.14] | 0.02 | 0.05 | [-0.08, 0.11] |
| Tenure | -0.01 | 0.04 | [-0.09, 0.07] | -0.02 | 0.05 | [-0.12, 0.07] |
| Positive feedback | 0.56*** | 0.05 | [0.46, 0.66] | 0.23*** | 0.07 | [0.09, 0.36] |
| Feedback seeking | | | | 0.22*** | 0.06 | [0.11, 0.34] |
| The mediating effect of feedback seeking | | | | 0.13*** | 0.03 | [0.07, 0.20] |
| The Sobel $Z$ test | | | | 3.53*** | 0.04 | [0.07, 0.20] |

Note: $N$ = 368; ** $p$ < 0.01, *** $p$ < 0.001.
SE, standard error; CI, confidence interval.

**TABLE 4:** Moderation analyses.

| Variables | Feedback seeking | | | Employee performance | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | β | SE | 95% CI | β | SE | 95% CI |
| Constant | 2.58*** | 0.39 | [1.84, 3.33] | 3.58*** | 0.48 | [2.64, 4.52] |
| Gender | -0.02 | 0.09 | [-0.18, 0.15] | -0.07 | 0.10 | [-0.32, 0.07] |
| Age | -0.03 | 0.05 | [-0.12, 0.07] | -0.34*** | 0.06 | [-0.46, -0.23] |
| Education | -0.01 | 0.04 | [-0.08, 0.08] | 0.01 | 0.05 | [-0.08, 0.11] |
| Tenure | -0.04 | 0.04 | [-0.04, 0.12] | -0.02 | 0.05 | [-0.12, 0.07] |
| Positive feedback | 0.39*** | 0.15 | [0.11, 0.68] | 0.26*** | 0.08 | [0.11, 0.42] |
| Feedback orientation | 0.35*** | 0.14 | [0.07, 0.62] | 0.21*** | 0.07 | [0.06, 0.35] |
| Positive feedback × feedback orientation | 0.26*** | 0.05 | [0.17, 0.35] | 0.15** | 0.09 | [0.05, 0.34] |
| $R^2$ | 0.52 | - | - | 0.26 | - | - |
| $F$ | 31.29*** | - | - | 12.24*** | - | - |

Note: $N$ = 368; **$p$ < 0.01, ***$p$ < 0.001.
SE, standard error; CI, confidence interval.

**TABLE 5:** Whole research model analyses.

| Feedback orientation | Index of direct effect | | | Index of indirect effect | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | β | SE | 95% CI | β | SE | 95% CI |
| $M$–$SD$ | 0.14 | 0.10 | [-0.05, 0.33] | 0.01 | 0.02 | [-0.02, 0.05] |
| M | 0.16 | 0.08 | [0.01, 0.30] | 0.05 | 0.02 | [0.02, 0.10] |
| $M$+SD | 0.14 | 0.09 | [0.00, 0.34] | 0.08 | 0.03 | [0.03, 0.17] |
| *Index of moderated mediation effect* | | | | 0.05 | 002 | [0.02, 0.09] |

Note: $N$ = 368.
SE, standard error; CI, confidence interval.

and the results of the Sobel $Z$ test showed that the indirect effect of positive feedback on employee performance via feedback seeking was also significant ($Z$ = 3.53, $p$ < 0.001, 95% CI = [0.07, 0.20]). Therefore, Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 were supported.

This study then evaluated whether feedback orientation moderates the effect of positive feedback on feedback seeking and employee performance. As shown in Table 4, the interaction between positive feedback and feedback orientation not only has a significant impact on feedback seeking (β = 0.26, $p$ < 0.001, 95% CI = [0.17, 0.35]), but also on employee performance (β = 0.15, $p$ < 0.01, 95% CI = [0.05, 0.34]). The specific moderating effects of feedback orientation on the impact of positive feedback on feedback seeking and employee performance were drawn in Figure 2 and Figure 3 respectively. It was seen that among employees whose feedback orientation were relatively high (vs. low), the positive link from positive feedback to employee performance and feedback seeking became stronger (vs. weaker). Therefore, Hypothesis 3 and Hypothesis 4 were both supported.

Finally, the conditional indirect effects analyses were used to test the whole moderated mediation model. As shown in Table 5, the indirect impact (β = 0.08, 95% CI = [0.03, 0.17]) of positive supervisor feedback on employee performance via feedback seeking was significant for those with high levels of feedback orientation. However, this indirect effect (β = 0.01, 95% CI = [−0.02, 0.05]) was not significant for employees with low levels of feedback orientation. Taken together, the whole moderated mediation model of this study was supported.
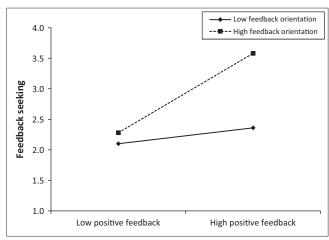


**FIGURE 2:** The moderating effect of feedback orientation on the relationship between positive feedback and feedback seeking.
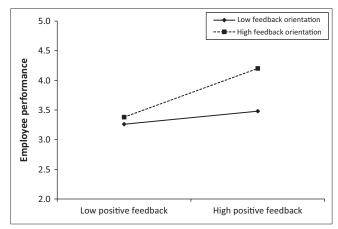


**FIGURE 3:** The moderating effect of feedback orientation on the relationship between positive feedback and employee performance.

# Discussion

According to the feedback intervention theory (e.g. Alder, 2007; Armitage & Christian, 2003; King, 2016; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996), this study proposed and validated a model to explain how and when positive supervisor feedback influences employee performance. Through the analysis of a multi-time and multi-source survey on 368 Chinese employees and their direct supervisors, this study confirmed that positive supervisor feedback has a positive effect on employee performance. Feedback seeking partially mediates the effect of positive feedback on employee performance. Feedback orientation positively moderates the impact of positive supervisor feedback on feedback seeking and employee performance. Specifically, positive feedback has a more significant stimulating effect on feedback seeking and performance of employees with high feedback orientation than those with low feedback orientation.

## Theoretical implications

This study has several important theoretical implications. Specifically, it is first verified that the positive feedback employees perceive from their direct supervisors can effectively motivate them to seek feedback in their daily

work, thus promoting their performance improvement in the Chinese context. This conclusion not only opens the 'black box' of how positive supervisor feedback affects employee performance from the light of feedback seeking, but also responds to calls in previous studies to use Chinese samples to continue to strengthen the research on the impact of positive feedback from supervisors on employees (Chen et al., 2002; Su & Xiao, 2022; Zheng et al., 2015). Moreover, the stimulating effect of positive feedback from supervisors on feedback seeking and performance of their direct employees further deepens the understanding of supervisor feedback giving and employee feedback response (Evans & Dobrosielska, 2021; Harackiewicz & Larson, 1986; Noefer et al., 2009; Steelman et al., 2004), and enriches the existing feedback research literature in organisational management (Beenen et al., 2017; London, 2014; Qian et al., 2022).

Additionally, this study adds to knowledge about the effectiveness of positive supervisor feedback on subordinates by investigating the moderating role of feedback orientation. Consistent with previous research (Gabriel et al., 2014; Steelman & Wolfeld, 2018; Su & Zhang, 2022), this study reconfirms that feedback orientation, as a quasi-trait (Linderbaum & Levy, 2010; Gjerde et al., 2022; Gong et al., 2017), can strengthen the effect of positive feedback on feedback seeking and employee performance. For employees with a high level of feedback orientation, positive feedback has a more significant impact on their feedback seeking and performance. This conclusion not only reflects the influence boundary of positive feedback on employee feedback seeking and performance more accurately (Evans & Dobrosielska, 2021; Holroyd et al., 2008; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996), but also provides a new basis for the academic community to understand the conditions under which positive feedback from supervisors affects employees (Fedor et al., 1989; Ilgen et al., 1981; Wondim et al., 2021).

Finally, the conclusions of this study also make some contributions to the feedback intervention theory. Using feedback intervention theory as the theoretical lens (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996), this study examines in detail the roles of feedback seeking and feedback orientation in the association between positive feedback and employee performance using Chinese samples. In a sense, these results test the explanatory power and applicability of feedback intervention theory in explaining how and when supervisor feedback affects employees (Lechermeier & Fassnacht, 2018; London, 2014). It also further expands the breadth and depth of the theory (King, 2016; Sherf & Morrison, 2020). In addition, the findings of this study confirm the validity and effectiveness of the feedback intervention theory in the relationship between supervisor feedback and employee feedback responses using Chinese sample, which also further enriched the academic research on feedback intervention theory (Huang, 2012; Qian et al., 2019; Su & Zhang, 2022).

## Managerial implications

The findings of this study also provide some implications for practice. It is well-known that feedback is a typical motivational strategy for supervisors to encourage their subordinates (Chun et al., 2018; Goltz et al., 1990; Ilgen et al., 1979), and employees are more willing to accept a positive feedback from supervisors rather than a negative feedback (Layous et al., 2017; Noefer et al., 2009). First of all, this study suggests that supervisors should provide feedback in a positive way in daily work, especially when employees do well at work, supervisors should express affirmation, appreciation and praise for employees in a timely and open manner (Hamzah et al., 2021; Holroyd et al., 2008; Su & Zhang, 2022; Wondim et al., 2021), so as to actually achieve the purpose of motivating their employees. Additionally, one of the best ways for a supervisor to provide feedback to an employee is to actually listen (Qian et al., 2019). High-quality feedback requires supervisors to understand the situation of employees from the perspective of employees (Ilgen et al., 1981; London, 2014), which is essentially a kind of empathy. Hence, supervisors should regard listening as an important part of feedback work.

Secondly, the mediating effect of feedback seeking provides a new possible reflective perspective on organisational management, making it possible to recognise that positive feedback from supervisors can motivate employees to show more feedback seeking in their daily work, and ultimately promote employee performance. Hence, this study suggests that feedback seeking of employees should be highly valued and motivated. Specifically, the organisation can further broaden the channels and methods for employees to seek feedback by establishing a scientific and complete feedback system (Alder, 2007; Damanpour & Schneider, 2006; Gong et al., 2017), help employees better understand the gap between the current work performance and organisational requirements, timely discover and correct possible deviations (Goltz et al., 1990) and ultimately improve employee performance. In addition, considering the trainability of feedback skills (Tolli & Schmidt, 2008), on the one hand, the organisation should provide supervisors with training on communication timing, language strategies and other specialised skills (Huang, 2012), so as to effectively improve their ability to give feedback. On the other hand, employees should also be provided with training on related skills such as feedback perception, feedback interpretation and feedback seeking to further improve their ability to accept feedback (Lechermeier & Fassnacht, 2018).

Finally, it is equally important to actively cultivate the employees' feedback orientation traits. As a quasi-trait (Gjerde et al., 2022; Linderbaum & Levy, 2010), feedback orientation can significantly enhance the positive effect of positive supervisor feedback on subordinate feedback seeking and performance. Therefore, organisations and their managers need to pay attention to employees' acceptance of feedback and formulate relevant strategies to improve employees' feedback orientation (Gabriel et al., 2014;

London & Smither, 2002). For example, when an organisation recruits, hires or promotes employees (Dahling et al., 2012; Linderbaum & Levy, 2010; Su & Zhang, 2022), questionnaires can be used to measure the level of feedback orientation of candidates and to give priority to those with high feedback orientation, which can also lay the foundation for the expected effect of manager feedback.

Questionnaire surveys can be used to measure the level of feedback propensity of candidates, and candidates with high feedback propensity will be given priority. This can also lay the foundation for the expected effect of manager feedback, which can also lay the foundation for the expected effect of supervisor feedback. Furthermore, for those employees with low feedback orientation, the organisation can regularly organise feedback-related training to make them aware of the organisation's emphasis on feedback culture (Sully De Luque & Sommer, 2000), continuously strengthen their own feedback seeking awareness through training (Beenen et al., 2017; Steelman & Wolfeld, 2018), encourage them to make feedback-related attempts in the process of work and gradually improve their feedback orientation.

### Limitations and directions for future research

As with other related research, this study also has some limitations, which provide possible directions for future research. Firstly, this study collected sample data from two large manufacturing companies in China, and a large number of previous studies have confirmed that Chinese culture is quite different from Western culture (Chen et al., 2002; Gong et al., 2017). More specifically, Chinese employees are usually highly collectivist and power distance-oriented (Hofstede, 1984), which means they have more respect and fear for their supervisors (Guo et al., 2022; Liang et al., 2018). In other words, in the face of supervisor feedback, Chinese employees may react differently from those in other cultures (Su & Zhang, 2022; Zheng et al., 2015). Therefore, future studies are encouraged to collect sample data from different cultural backgrounds to test whether the conclusions of this study are cultural-specific or generalised.

Secondly, although this study adopted a time-lag research design, which overcomes the limitations of cross-sectional research design to a certain extent, the causal relationship between positive supervisor feedback and employee feedback seeking and performance has not been fully revealed. Hence, further studies can adopt longitudinal research designs or interventional experimental studies to explore the causal relationship among core variables. Meanwhile, as the results showed, feedback seeking only partially mediated the effect of positive feedback on employee performance. Previous studies have confirmed that there are many other possible link mechanisms between supervisor feedback and subordinate feedback responses

(Beenen et al., 2017; De Stobbeleir et al., 2020). Therefore, this study suggests that subsequent scholars should pay more attention to the mediating role of other variables in the process of supervisor feedback affecting subordinates, such as motivation (Harackiewicz & Larson, 1986), leader-member exchange (Bagger & Li, 2014), regulatory focus (Su & Xiao), and so on.

Thirdly, for the boundary condition of positive supervisor feedback and employee feedback reaction, this study only discussed the role of feedback orientation. Other individual characteristic variables, for example attribution (Hempel, 2008), self-efficacy (Sherf & Morrison, 2020; Tolli & Schmidt, 2008), and psychological safety (Qian et al., 2022), also affect how employees in organisations perceive and interpret feedback from their supervisors, and thus affect their responses to positive feedback. Moreover, external situational factors, such as feedback environment (Gong et al., 2017; Steelman et al., 2004), organisational culture (Evans & Dobrosielska, 2021; Sully De Luque & Sommer, 2000) and supervisor support (Bagger & Li, 2014; Hamzah et al., 2021), also play a considerable role in the relationship between superior feedback giving and subordinate feedback response. Therefore, future research can explore more boundary conditions for positive supervisor feedback to impact employees from both the individual and the external environment levels.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this study proposed and validated a theoretical model explaining how and when positive supervisor feedback influences employee performance. Based on feedback intervention theory, the mediating role of feedback seeking and the moderating role of feedback orientation were also explored in detail. The results indicated that positive supervisor feedback was a strong predictor of employee performance. Feedback seeking partially mediated the effect of positive supervisor feedback on employee performance. Feedback orientation can further enhance the impact of positive supervisor feedback on employee feedback seeking and performance. Above all, the findings of this study provide new knowledge in understanding the mechanism and boundary conditions of the positive feedback from supervisors on employee performance, offer some important empirical practices for feedback management and performance management for organisations.

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The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

## Authors' contributions

W.S. and S.J. contributed equally to this work.

## Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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## Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, S.J., upon reasonable request.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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