Can Agentic Messages Help? Linguistic Strategies to Counteract Voice-Based Sexual Orientation Discrimination.

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Abstract

Gay men who believe to sound 'gay' expect to be discriminated against because of their voices and gay-sounding men are discriminated against in the hiring process. We examined whether uttering an agency-based message decreased discrimination expectancy and enactment. In Study 1a (N = 256; gay and bisexual men) and Study 1b (N = 216; gay men), speakers uttered agentic (vs neutral) messages. We assessed their self-perception as gay-sounding, agency self-attribution, and discrimination expectancy. Uttering agentic (vs neutral) messages made the speakers self-perceive as more agentic and this decreased discrimination expectancy. Additionally, self-perception as gay-sounding predicted discrimination expectancy. In Study 2 (N = 466), heterosexual participants listened to gay- and straight-sounding speakers uttering either neutral or agentic messages and rated them in terms of agency and employability. Gay-sounding speakers uttering agentic messages were less likely to be discriminated against than when uttering neutral messages. Results show the positive impact of linguistic strategies involving agentic messages to reduce discrimination expectancy and hiring biases.

In many modern societies, discrimination based on sexual orientation in the workplace is illegal. Still, gay men face and fear discrimination, especially in the hiring context (Flage, 2020). Even though sexual orientation is usually not disclosed to the hiring team, people guess it from multiple cues including voice. The 'gay voice' stereotype guides such sexual orientation categorisation (Kachel et al., 2020; Morandini et al., 2023; Sulpizio et al., 2015) and triggers hiring biases (Fasoli & Hegarty, 2020). However, hiring decisions are not only influenced by *how* the speaker sounds but also by *what* the speaker says. The current research examines the effect of message content on sexual orientation voice-based discrimination.

'Gay' Voice and Discrimination

Heterosexual individuals who strongly believe in the existence of a 'gay voice' are more likely to discriminate against gay-sounding men (Fasoli et al., 2021). In particular, heterosexual people perceive gay-sounding men as less suitable for managerial positions than straight-sounding men (Fasoli et al., 2017; Fontenele et al., 2023) and gay-sounding teachers are perceived as having less leadership and class management skills (Taylor & Raadt, 2021). This negative bias emerged because gay-sounding men are perceived as lacking agency (Fasoli & Hegarty, 2020), a quality that is crucial for men to get jobs (Moscatelli et al., 2020). This result confirms the importance of gender stereotyping in relation to gay leaders (Fassinger et al., 2010). Indeed, gay men are often seen as less masculine than straight men and the lower attribution of agency creates a disadvantage when they apply for stereotypically masculine jobs (Steffens et al., 2019) and are evaluated as leaders (Pellegrini et al., 2020).

That heterosexual individuals discriminate against gay-sounding speakers is only one side of the coin. The second side is that gay men are affected by the 'gay voice' stereotype and self-stereotyping. Self-stereotyping as masculine and agentic is associated with gay men's

likelihood to apply for leadership roles and self-perception as effective leaders (Salvati et al., 2021). Moreover, men are aware that, if they match the 'gay voice' stereotype, they are likely to be perceived as gay (Ravenhill & de Visser, 2019) and, hence, they are not keen for their voices to disclose their sexual orientation (Fasoli et al., 2018). Gay men try to sound 'straight', especially when they dislike the 'gay voice' stereotype, when they have not come out, or when interacting with people who have not accepted their sexual orientation (Daniele et al., 2020; Mann, 2012). Importantly, gay men who believe to sound gay expect to be discriminated against by others and remain vigilant about the way they sound (Fasoli et al., 2021). This can lead to a vicious cycle in which fear of voice-based discrimination can lead gay individuals to avoid applying for jobs and lower their professional, which can further contribute to maintaining a low-agency stereotype of gay men. As a result, companies may not benefit from a diverse talent pool and, accordingly, limit their innovation and inclusion.

Message Content and Agency

One way to manage voice-based impressions is to emphasise the content of the utterances. Literature on code-switching provides one framework for analysing the use of language in the professional context. Code-switching is defined as an adjustment in behaviour that allows an individual to achieve desired goals (Anicich & Hirsh, 2017; Molinsky, 2007; Morton, 2014) and involves changes in speech and language to meet expectations (Goffman, 1981). This strategy can be used to avoid others' stereotyping and be perceived as more professional at work (McCluney et al., 2021), but it comes with costs (Dickens & Chavez, 2018). Indeed, for gay men, modulating their voices to sound straight can be associated with stress (Fasoli et al., 2023, 2024) as it involves 'passing' and concealing their identities, and therefore is something that should not be encouraged. However, in a job interview, it is not only

how a person sounds, but also what they say that would convince the employers to hire them. So far, research has merely focused on the impact of vocal cues in hiring decisions while omitting to consider the role of the message that is conveyed. This content-related strategy is less 'intrusive' as it does not involve hiding one's identity and may make feel the speaker more in control. Indeed, in job interviews, self-presentation strategies to match expectations are usually in place (see Roberts, 2005; Rudman & Glick, 1999). In such a context, using agentic language may reduce expectations of rejection and create advantages because the person takes an *agentic* perspective that puts them in control rather than being the mere recipient of others' decisions (see Abele & Wojciszke, 2007).

Agency is defined as goal orientation and the ability to plan and execute goal achievement (Bakan, 1966; Bandura, 2001). As such, it plays an important role in organizational contexts and hiring decisions (Cuddy et al., 2011; Froehlich et al., 2020). The belief that one can achieve one's goal (i.e., a sense of agency) contributes positively to human functioning across contexts (Holden et al., 1990; Multon et al., 1991; Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998). Therefore, agency is related to higher success rates in undertaken activity, self-esteem, social status, career success, and well-being (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014; Wojciszke et al., 2011). Importantly, individuals seen as agentic are also perceived as more human (Formanowicz et al., 2018), more men-like (Hsu et al., 2021), and as more respectable (Prestwich et al., 2021; Wojciszke et al., 2009).

The importance of agency for how people see themselves and others not surprisingly also shows in language. For example, Robinson et al. (2016) conducted an archival analysis of speeches and interviews of notable figures in different fields (e.g., physics, politics). They found a positive correlation between the use of agentic words (e.g., "strong", "achieve") and

longevity, likely due to the relationship between agency, self-regulation, and self-efficacy. When individuals encounter words that convey agentic content, such as "strive" or "act", they tend to exhibit more goal-oriented behaviour compared to when exposed to neutral words (Weingarten et al., 2016). Moreover, the use of agentic language is associated with the evaluations of the source as agentic (Formanowicz et al., 2021). In the workplace, Bongiorno et al. (2014) have shown that using assertive speech makes women being perceived as likeable and influential as men. Also, McClean et al. (2022) have found that agentic messages conveyed by women are more likely to be endorsed by others because they increase the perception of women as competent. However, no studies have considered the role of agentic messages in relation to sexual orientation. Building on this research on linguistic agency, and the fact that gay-sounding speakers are discriminated against because they are seen as lacking agency (Fasoli & Hegarty, 2020), we propose that using sentences pertaining to agency can increase one's sense of agency or how agentic a gay man is perceived as well as decrease discrimination expectancy in gay/bisexual men and the enactment of discrimination by heterosexual listeners.

Overview

In this research, we examined whether sounding gay and speaking in an agentic way plays a role in predicting expectations of hiring rejection in gay and bisexual men and hiring discrimination enacted by heterosexual individuals. To fully understand sexual orientation voice-based discrimination, it is important to consider the minority's and majority's perspectives as well as both the speech (voice and message) production and perception. Indeed, discrimination is a component of stigma that involves both the experiences of the stigmatised minority and the 'dominant' majority (see Link & Phelan, 2001) and, in the context of voice, requires considering both the speakers' and listeners' points of view (see Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010). In Study 1, we

focused on the minority/speaker's perspective. We examined whether sexual minority men had voice-based discrimination concerns when imagining applying for a job. We predicted that the more they believe in sounding gay, the more they would expect to be discriminated against (Hypothesis 1). Additionally, we examined whether speaking in an agentic (vs neutral) way would increase speakers' sense of agency (Hypothesis 2) and buffer expectations of being discriminated against when applying for a job (Hypothesis 3). This is because using agentic language allows the speaker to take an agentic perspective that puts him in control. In Study 1a we recruited gay and bisexual men, while in Study 1b we aimed to replicate the results on gay men only (Study 1b).

In Study 2, we focused on the majority/listeners' perspective. We tested how heterosexual individuals perceived gay- and straight-sounding speakers depending on whether they were speaking in an agentic (vs neutral) way. We aimed to replicate previous work (Fasoli & Hegarty, 2020) showing that gay-sounding speakers are perceived as less agentic (Hypothesis 4a) and are more discriminated against (Hypothesis 4b) than straight-sounding speakers in the hiring context. In line with Formanowicz et al. (2021), we also predicted that speakers uttering agentic messages would be perceived as more agentic (Hypothesis 5a) and would be less discriminated against (Hypothesis 5b) than speakers uttering neutral messages. Finally, we expected that the gay-sounding speaker would be less likely to be discriminated against when uttering agentic rather than neutral messages and, hence, that listening to the speakers uttering agentic messages would diminish differences between gay- and straight-sounding speakers observed in the neutral condition (Hypothesis 6). All the hypotheses were preregistered[1].

For Studies 1a and 2, we recruited participants from the UK and Poland to increase

[1] The hypotheses are presented in an order different to the preregistered one and the results of one additional hypothesis (Study 1b) are reported in the Supplemental Online Materials.

generalizability and examine different cultural contexts. Compared to the UK, Poland shows a lower recognition of LGBTQ+ rights (ILGA-Europe, 2023) and acceptance of gay people (PEW, 2020). Hence, gay-sounding speakers may expect and receive more discrimination in Poland than in the UK[2].

All the data, materials, preregistrations (Study 1a, Study 1b, and Study 2), and analyses are available on the Open Science Framework. The research project was approved by the University of Surrey and SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities Ethics Committees.

Study 1a

Method

Participants

We recruited 300 participants on Prolific (rewarded £1.50) using the following pre-screening criteria: being British/Polish, having English/Polish as the first language, being male, age range 18-99, and identifying as gay/bisexual – for demographics see Table 1. After excluding participants who did not provide final consent, failed to meet the attention check threshold, and did not identify as men (see Table 1), the final sample consisted of 256 sexual minority participants. Participants were either British citizens and English native speakers (n = 130) or Polish citizens and Polish native speakers (n = 126), who identified as men[3].

A G*Power (Faul et al., 2009) sensitivity analysis showed that the sample (N = 256) was adequate to detect a small to medium effect size f = .17 when 2 × 2 ANOVAs were conducted and small to medium effect size f^2 = .05 when regression analyses with 5 predictors were

[2] We included nationality in the analyses although it was not mentioned in our pre-registration as it was exploratory.
[3] Adding sexual orientation as a predictor in the analyses did not change the pattern of the reported results. Also, when including participants who did not identify as men in the analyses, the pattern of results remained similar (see OSF).

involved (α = .05, power: 1 - β = .80). According to Fritz and MacKinnon (2007), our sample exceeded the one (Bca-CI: N = 148) indicated as necessary to detect an effect size (τ' = 0.26) for both a and b paths in a mediation.

Materials

Message Manipulation. Participants were asked to read out loud and memorize 7 sentences. For English, the sentences were construed based on a large norming study on linguistic agency (Nikadon et al., 2023). For Polish, we translated 100 sentences from the English dataset representing high and neutral agency. In both languages, the sentences' selection was based on participants' ratings of the words on a 7-point scale ranging from -3 (*Does not pertain to agency at all*) to 3 (*Decidedly pertains to agency*), with 0 representing a neutral point (for a full description of the stimuli see Supplementary Online Materials – henceforth SOM). We selected seven sentences (e.g., "I achieved my goal despite setbacks", "The strength of my argument settled the matter") that were rated as agentic ($M_{English}$ = 2.70, $SD_{English}$ = 0.10; M_{Polish} = 2.00, SD_{Polish} = 0.36). Six out of 7 sentences were the same in English and Polish. We also included seven neutral sentences (e.g., "I hear footsteps on the porch", "I look nothing like them") that were rated as neutral ($M_{English}$ = 0.00, $SD_{English}$ = 0.00; M_{Polish} = 0.04, SD_{Polish} = 0.20). For additional information on stimuli selection see SOM). Participants were presented with the sentences in a randomized order.

Voice Self-perception. Participants indicated whether they perceived their voices as gay sounding by answering 3 items (e.g., "Do you think your voice sounds 'gay'?"; Fasoli et al., 2018; α = .92). Answers were provided on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). A higher score of an averaged rating corresponded to a stronger perception of sounding gay.

Agency. We asked participants to indicate how 8 agentic traits (e.g., competent,

confident, determined, efficient; Kosakowska-Berezecka et al., 2022; $\alpha = .90$) described them at that moment. They answered on a scale from 1 (*does not describe me at all*) to 7 (*describes me well*) and ratings were averaged. The higher the score, the higher the agency they attributed to themselves.

Discrimination Expectancy. We adapted 9 items (e.g., "The employers will not hire me", "The employers will have doubts about hiring a person who sounds like me"; $\alpha = .88$; Fasoli et al., 2021) assessing the likelihood to expect discrimination when applying for a job. Participants were asked to imagine that they applied for a job they were interested in and that the position was permanent and with a competitive salary. They indicated their agreement with each statement on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). A higher score of an averaged rating corresponded to a higher discrimination expectancy.

Public Identification and Outness. We assessed how comfortable participants were to publicly disclose their sexual orientation by using 5 items (e.g., "I am comfortable about people finding out that I am gay") of a subscale of the Short Internalized Homonegativity Scale (Currie et al., 2004; $\alpha = .78$). Answers were reported on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly* agree). We also assessed the level of outness by asking participants to indicate whether different people (e.g., family members, co-workers; $\alpha = .81$) were aware of their sexual orientation on a scale from 1 (*out to none*) to 4 (*out to all*). Average scores were calculated so that higher scores indicated higher public identification and outness, respectively.

Attention Check. Participants read 6 sentences taken from the list of stimuli used for the message manipulation, 3 involving agentic messages and 3 neutral messages, and indicated which sentences they uttered. We coded the answer (0 = incorrect, 1 = correct) and sum them. The attention check score ranged from 0 to 6. A score below 3 implied exclusion thresholds.

Procedure

Participants completed the study online either in English or Polish depending on their nationality (average duration: 7 minutes). After consenting to take part in the study, participants indicated whether they perceived their voices as gay sounding. Next, they were randomly allocated to read aloud either agentic or neutral messages. They then self-rated in terms of agency and reported their discrimination expectancy. We also assessed measures of communion and vigilance (see SOM). Finally, participants answered attention check items, reported their demographics, and were thanked and debriefed.

Results

Voice Self-perception and Discrimination Expectancy

Hypothesis 1 predicted a positive association between voice self-perception and discrimination expectancy. We ran a regression to assess the role of voice self-perception on discrimination expectancy while controlling for other variables (i.e., age, nationality, outness, public gay identification; R^2 = .19, F[5,245] = 11.35, p < .001). The more participants perceived their voices as gay sounding, the more likely they expected to be discriminated against, B = .19, SE = .04, t = 5.00, p < .001, 95% CI [.12, .27], in line with Hypothesis 1. Moreover, public identification, B = -.24, SE = .05, t = -4.78, p < .001, 95% CI [-.35, -.14], was a significant predictor suggesting that the less participants were comfortable with others recognising their sexual orientation, the more discrimination they expected. No other predictor was significant.

Agency

Hypothesis 2, suggesting that uttering agentic messages would increase speakers' self-attribution of agency, found support. We conducted a 2 (message: agentic vs neutral) × 2 (nationality: British vs Polish) ANOVA and found a significant main effect of message, F(1,252)

= 10.12, p = .002, η_p^2 = .04, indicated that participants in the agentic message condition (M = 4.86, SD = 1.21) attributed themselves more agency than those in the neutral message condition (M = 4.44, SD = 1.05). A main effect of nationality, $F(1,252) = 14.93$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$, also indicated that British participants (M = 4.91, SD = 1.04) self-rated higher in agency than Polish participants (M = 4.38, SD = 1.20). The interaction between message and nationality, was not significant, $F(1,252) = .83$, $p = .36$, $\eta_p^2 = .003$.

Discrimination Expectancy

We did not find support for Hypothesis 3 predicting that uttering agentic messages would buffer participants' expectations of being discriminated against. We conducted a 2 (message: agentic vs neutral) × 2 (nationality: British vs Polish) ANOVA. No significant main effect of message, $F(1,252) = 0.11$, $p = .75$, $\eta_p^2 = .000$, was found. However, the effect of nationality was significant, $F(1,252) = 4.68$, $p = .03$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, indicating that Polish participants (M = 2.94, SD = .95) reported higher discrimination expectancy than British participants (M = 2.65, SD = 1.14). The interaction between message and nationality, $F(1,252) = 0.32$, $p = .57$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$, was not significant.

Indirect Effect

Given the theoretical predictions (Fielder et al., 2011), we approached the analysis of the indirect effect when the total effect is not significant (see also: Hayes, 2013). It is possible that for the agentic message to be successful in decreasing discrimination expectancy, a self-attribution of agency is needed. Uttering agentic messages can make speakers feel 'in control' (agentic perspective, Abele & Wojciszke, 2007) which increases their self-attribution of agency. Agency is associated with success and self-esteem (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014) and is therefore likely associated with discrimination expectancy. We ran an exploratory mediation analysis

(PROCESS, Model 4, 5000 bootstraps) including message (0 = neutral, 1 = agentic) as the independent variable, discrimination expectancy as the dependent variable, agency as the mediator, and nationality as a covariate. The results showed an indirect effect from message to discrimination expectancy via agency, *point estimate* = -.15, *SE* = .05, 95% $CI_{Bootstrapped}$ [-.26, -.06] (see Figure 1) indicating that uttering agentic messages increased the self-attribution of agency that, in turn, reduced the expectations of being discriminated against. The indirect effect remained intact when we included voice self-perception as a covariate in the model. Importantly, voice self-perception was also a significant predictor of the discrimination expectancy (see SOM).

Study 1b

Study 1b aimed to replicate the results of Study 1a while focusing on a bigger sample of gay men. Bisexual men are less likely to be identified as such by voice (Morandini et al., 2023) and this may play a role in their expectations. Hence, here, we recruited only gay men. We recruited only British participants because, after excluding those who participated in Study 1a, there were not enough Polish participants who identified as gay available in Prolific.

Method

Participants

We recruited 229 male participants on Prolific (rewarded £1.50) based on the following pre-screening criteria: age: 18-99, sex = male, nationality = British, first language = English, and sexual orientation = gay.[4] The final sample consisted of 215 gay individuals who identified as men and met the attention check threshold.

A G*Power (Faul et al., 2009) sensitivity analysis showed that the sample (*N* = 215) was

[4] We aimed to recruit 300 participants. However, after a month from starting data collection, participants stopped taking part in the study.

adequate to detect a small to medium effect size $f = .19$ for ANOVAs with two groups and small to medium effect size $f^2 = .06$ when regression analyses with 4 predictors were involved ($\alpha = .05$, power: $1 - \beta = .80$). According to Fritz and McKinnon's (2007), our sample exceeded the one (Bca-CI: $N = 148$) indicated as necessary to detect a medium effect size ($\tau' = 0.26$) for both a and b paths, in mediation analyses.

Procedure and Measures

The same procedure and measures as in Study 1 were involved (average duration: 7 minutes). Reliability was good across variables: voice self-perception ($\alpha = .96$), agency ($\alpha = .86$), discrimination expectancy ($\alpha = .92$), public identification ($\alpha = .75$) and outness ($\alpha = .67$).

Results

Voice Self-perception and Discrimination Expectancy

A regression testing the role of voice self-perception on discrimination expectancy while controlling for other variables (i.e., age, outness, public gay identification; $R^2 = .29$, $F[4,210] = 21.68$, $p < .001$) showed that the more participants perceived their voices as gay-sounding, the more likely they expected to be discriminated against, $B = .32$, $SE = .04$, $t = 8.16$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.24, .40], in line with Hypothesis 1 that predicted a positive association between voice self-perception and discrimination expectancy. As in Study 1a, public identification, $B = -.23$, $SE = .07$, $t = -3.45$, $p < .001$; 95% CI [-.36, -.10], was a significant predictor of discrimination expectancy. No other predictor was significant.

Agency

A 2 (message: agentic vs neutral) ANOVA yielded a significant main effect of message, $F(1,213) = 4.01$, $p = .047$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, indicating that participants in the agentic message condition ($M = 5.02$, $SD = 0.99$) attributed themselves more agency than those in the neutral message

condition (M = 4.76, SD = 0.92), in line with Hypothesis 2 predicting that uttering agentic messages would increase self-agency.

Discrimination Expectancy

A 2 (message: agentic vs neutral) ANOVA showed no significant effect of message, $F(1,213) = .05$, $p = .82$, $\eta_p^2 = .00$, which was not in line with Hypothesis 3 predicting that uttering agentic messages would buffer participants' expectations of discrimination.

Indirect Effect

As in Study 1a, we ran a mediation analysis (PROCESS, Model 4, 5000 bootstrap) including message (0 = neutral, 1 = agentic) as the independent variable, discrimination expectancy as the dependent variable, and agency as the mediator. The results showed an indirect effect from message to discrimination expectancy via agency, *point estimate* = -.11, SE = .05, 95% $CI_{Bootstrapped}$ [-.21, -.001] (see Figure 1), indicating that uttering agentic messages increased the self-attribution of agency that, in turn, reduced the expectations of being discriminated against. The indirect effect remained intact when we included voice self-perception as a covariate in the model. Importantly, voice self-perception was a significant predictor of the discrimination expectancy (for details see SOM S3).

Discussion

Study 1 a and b showed that the more participants perceived their voices as gay sounding, the more they expected to be discriminated against. Moreover, gay and bisexual men who reported being less comfortable with their sexual orientation and being recognised as gay were more likely to expect discrimination. Moreover, uttering agentic messages increased the self-attribution of agency which was associated with decreased rejection expectancy. These results were replicated across two countries.

Study 2

Study 2 focused on the heterosexual majority and listeners' perspective and tested whether listening to gay-sounding speakers uttering agentic messages when applying for a job could buffer the discrimination against them.

Method

Participants

Five hundred and forty-six participants completed the study. We pre-screened them on Prolific for the following pre-screening criteria: being British/Polish, having British/Polish as the first language, age range 18-99, and identifying as heterosexual. After excluding those who did not identify as heterosexual and failed to meet the attention check threshold, the final sample consisted of 466 heterosexual participants (see Table 1 for demographics). A G*Power (Faul et al., 2009) sensitivity analysis showed that the sample (N = 466) was adequate to detect a small to medium effect size f = .13 in 2×2×2 ANOVAs with 8 groups. According to Fritz and McKinnon's (2007), our sample exceeded the one (Bca-CI: N = 148) indicated as necessary to detect a medium effect size (τ' = 0.26) for both a and b paths, in a mediation analysis.

Materials

Speakers and Message. We recorded 10 British (M_{age} = 31.64, SD = 4.53) and 10 Polish speakers (M_{age} = 36.40, SD = 6.662), who identified as either gay or straight while uttering the agentic and neutral sentences described in Study 1. Speakers were selected based on a pretest (N_{UK} = 49 and N_{PL} = 44 heterosexual participants) assessing their perceived sexual orientation. Sexual orientation ratings were provided on a Kinsey-like scale (1 = *exclusively heterosexual* – 7 = *exclusively gay*; for details on the recording see SOM). We selected 6 British speakers – 3 that were perceived as gay (M = 5.24, SD = .81) and 3 as straight (M = 2.50, SD = .89), $t(49)$ = 15.46,

$p < .001$ – and 4 Polish speakers – 2 perceived as gay ($M = 4.06$, $SD = .96$) and 2 as straight ($M = 2.35$, $SD = .87$); $t(43) = 8.76$, $p < .001$. Participants were randomly allocated to listen to the speaker uttering either agentic or neural sentences that were the same used in Study 1's message manipulation and were uttered one after the other in a fixed order.

Agency and Discrimination. Participants rated the candidate's agency by using the 8 agentic traits used in Study 1 ($\alpha = .93$). They also indicated how suitable the candidate was for the job on 5 items (e.g., "The candidate will bring the required skills to the job", 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; see Fasoli & Hegarty, 2020; $\alpha = .92$) and the extent to which they would have liked to hire the candidate (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*)[5]. Since the job suitability and employability measures were highly correlated ($r = .76$, $p < .001$), items were averaged and recoded to calculate a score of *discrimination* in hiring so that the higher the score the higher the job-related discrimination.

Procedure

Participants were recruited via Prolific (rewarded £1.50) and completed the study online (average duration: 9 minutes). After consenting to participate, they were asked to read a job advertisement for a managerial position (Fasoli & Hegarty, 2021). Then, they were asked to listen to one job candidate. Participants listened to one speaker of their language (either English or Polish) randomly selected from a voice pool of gay- and straight-sounding British/Polish speakers. Participants were told the audio recording involved a series of information provided by the job candidate during the interview or recorded during an informal conversation to ensure both types of stimuli were plausible. We added that the information could be taken from an

[5] For Polish sample, due to a technical error, we did not record this one item variable. The results were analogous if only the job suitability scale was considered.

informal conversation to make sure there was a rationale for the neutral sentences that were unrelated to the job context. Next, participants rated the candidate on agency and answered questions assessing discrimination in hiring. Finally, before being thanked and debriefed, they reported their demographics, indicated whether they encountered any audio issues, and completed an attention check measure that consisted of selecting one among 3 sentences (one taken from the agentic sentences, one from the neutral sentences, and a filler one) uttered by the candidate. Only participants who selected the correct sentence were retained in the sample.

Results

All the analyses were conducted in the following design: a 2 (speaker sexual orientation: straight-sounding vs gay-sounding) × 2 (message: neutral vs agentic) × 2 (nationality: British vs Polish) ANOVA with all factors as between-participants.

Agency

Hypothesis 4a suggesting that gay-sounding speakers would be perceived as less agentic than straight-sounding speakers was only partially supported. Indeed, we found significant main effects of speaker sexual orientation, $F(1,458) = 11.33$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .02$, and nationality, $F(1,458) = 19.45$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$, that were qualified by an interaction, $F(1,458) = 3.92$, $p = .048$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. British participants rated speakers as similarly agentic ($M_{gay\text{-}sounding} = 4.76$, $SD = .96$ vs $M_{straight\text{-}sounding} = 4.91$, $SD = 1.02$; $p = .33$) while Polish participants rated the gay-sounding speakers ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 1.23$) as less agentic that the straight-sounding speakers ($M = 4.66$, $SD = 1.29$; $p < .001$).

Hypothesis 5a predicting that uttering agentic messages would increase the attribution of agency was instead fully supported. We observed a significant main effect of message, $F(1,458) = 25.41$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$, indicating that the candidates were perceived as more agentic when

they uttered agentic (M = 4.87, SD = 1.17) than neutral (M = 4.40, SD = 1.11) messages. No further significant interaction emerged (Fs > 3.45, ps > .06).

Discrimination

Hypothesis 4b predicting a bias against gay-sounding speakers found partial support. We found main effects of speaker sexual orientation, $F(1,458) = 9.43$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, and nationality, $F(1,458) = 16.20$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, that were qualified by a significant interaction, $F(1,458) = 5.43$, $p = .02$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. Polish participants discriminated against the gay-sounding speakers (M_{gay} = 4.45, SD = 1.31 vs $M_{straight}$ = 3.89, SD = 1.36; $p < .001$) whereas British participants did not (M_{gay} = 3.79, SD = 1.02 vs $M_{straight}$ = 3.70, SD = 1.05; $p = .59$).

In line with Hypothesis 5b, predicting that uttering agentic messages would decrease discrimination, speakers uttering agentic messages (M = 3.70, SD = 1.19) were indeed less discriminated against than those uttering neutral messages (M = 4.20, SD = 1.21), $F(1,458) = 24.13$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$. This effect was qualified by an interaction with nationality, $F(1,458) = 5.43$, $p = .02$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$, indicating that Polish participants discriminated less the speakers in the agentic than neutral message condition ($M_{neutral}$ = 4.63, SD = 1.26 vs $M_{agentic}$ = 3.69, SD = 1.36; $p < .001$) whereas British participants did not ($M_{neutral}$ = 3.79, SD = 1.02 vs $M_{agentic}$ = 3.70, SD = 1.05; $p = .50$).

Importantly, Hypothesis 6 suggesting that uttering agentic messages would buffer the bias toward gay-sounding speakers was supported. A significant interaction between speaker sexual orientation and message, $F(1,458) = 10.88$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, emerged. The gay-sounding speakers were less discriminated against in the agentic than in the neutral messages condition ($p < .001$), while no difference occurred for the straight-sounding speaker ($p = .28$). Looking at the data differently, in the agentic message condition there was no difference between

gay- (M = 3.69, SD = 1.14) and straight-sounding speakers (M = 3.71, SD = 1.23; p = .84). In the neutral condition, instead, gay-sounding speakers (M = 4.54, SD = 1.14) were more discriminated against than straight-sounding speakers (M = 3.87, SD = 1.20; p < .001). The three-way interaction was not significant (F = .43, p = .51) indicating the interplay between voice and message to be similar across nationalities.

Indirect Effects

A similar analysis to Study 1 examined whether the attribution of agency to speakers mediated the effect of message on discrimination. We conducted a mediation analysis (PROCESS, Model 4, 5000 bootstraps) with nationality and speaker sexual orientation as covariates since they both interacted with the message (see Figure 2). We observed a significant indirect effect of message on discrimination, *point estimate* = -.42, SE = .09, 95% $CI_{Bootstrapped}$ [-.59; -.25] indicating that when speakers uttered agentic messages he was perceived as more agentic and, in turn, less discriminated against. Speaker sexual orientation (b = -.35, SE = .10, 95% CI [-.55, -.14]) and nationality (b = -.45, SE = .10, 95% CI [-.65, -.24]) both predicted speakers' agency but not discrimination ($b_{speaker}$ = .05, SE = .07, 95% CI [-.09, .19] and $b_{nationality}$ = .06, SE = .07, 95% CI [-.08, .20]). When entering speaker sexual orientation as a moderator in the analysis, the moderated mediation index was not significant (see SOM).

We also conducted an exploratory analysis to replicate previous work on voice showing discrimination of gay-sounding speakers as a function of lack of agency (Fasoli & Hegarty, 2020). We conducted a mediation analysis (PROCESS, Model 4, 5000 bootstraps) with speaker (0 = straight-sounding, 1 = gay-sounding), agency as the mediator, discrimination as the dependent variable, and nationality and message as covariates (see Figure 3). Replicating previous findings, we found a significant indirect effect of speaker sexual orientation on

discrimination via agency, *point estimate* = .28, *SE* = .08, 95% $CI_{Bootstrapped}$ [.12; .45]. Message (*b* = .51, *SE* = .10, 95% CI [.31, .71]) and nationality (*b* = -.45, *SE* = .10, 95% CI [-.65, -.25]) both predicted speakers' agency but not discrimination ($b_{message}$ = -.10, *SE* = .07, 95% CI [-.24, .04] and $b_{nationality}$ = .06, *SE* = .07, 95% CI [-.08, .20]). This effect was not moderated by message as the moderated mediation index was not significant (see SOM).

Discussion

Study 2 showed that uttering agentic messages increased the attribution of agency to the speaker. Importantly, gay-sounding speakers were more likely to be discriminated against when speaking in a neutral than in an agentic way and uttering agentic messages buffered the bias favouring straight- over the gay-sounding applicants. Interestingly, the higher attribution of agency to speakers because of uttering agentic (vs neutral) messages was associated with a decreased discrimination bias but this was true regardless of the speakers' voice. At the same time, the lower agency attributed to the gay-sounding (vs straight-sounding) speaker was associated with higher discrimination. Results also showed differences between countries with Polish participants, especially, perceiving gay-sounding applicants as less agentic and suitable for the role than straight-sounding applicants.

General Discussion

This research examined the interplay between voice and message content in the context of sexual orientation discrimination. When examining voice-based discrimination, we considered both the minority and majority's perspectives. Our findings replicated previous work (Fasoli et al., 2021; 2023a) showing that gay men who believe to sound gay also expect to be discriminated against but, for the first time, we showed this in the context of hiring decisions. We also replicated previous work (Fasoli & Hegarty, 2020) by showing that heterosexual individuals are

likely to discriminate against gay-sounding men applying for leadership positions as they perceive them as lacking agency. Such findings contribute to the literature examining the barriers gay men expect and face when applying for jobs and being judged as potential leaders (see Fassinger et al., 2010; Pellegrini et al., 2020; Salvati et al., 2021).

We also focused on the message production and perception, namely the speakers' and listeners' perspectives. We showed that uttering agentic messages makes gay and bisexual male speakers self-perceived as more agentic and this is associated with lower expectations of being discriminated against when applying for a job. Communicating agentic messages implies that speakers assume an agentic perspective that can make them feel in control (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007) and able to influence the way others form impressions and make decisions about them (McCluney et al., 2021; Roberts, 2005). Since agency is associated with success (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014; Wojciszke et al., 2011), it follows that an increase in self-agency because of taking an agentic perspective via language use is associated with lower discrimination expectancy. This linguistic strategy seems to be effective regardless of the speakers' beliefs about their voices as gay sounding. Men, in general, are concerned with fitting into the masculine and agentic stereotype (Kosakowska-Berezecka et al., 2016) and gay men desire to conform to masculine gender expectations (Hunt et al., 2016). Uttering agentic messages represents a strategy that allows gay and bisexual men to confirm gender-related expectations. For men who believe to sound gay, uttering agentic messages may 'compensate' voice-based or group stereotypes (e.g., being feminine, lacking agency) they may have internalized (Fasoli et al., 2018; Hinton et al., 2019) whereas for those who do not endorse such voice beliefs, uttering agentic messages can be a way to fulfil stereotype-consistent expectations. Hence, although the underlying processes may be different, agentic messages are effective in increasing self-

attributed agency and being indirectly associated with a decrease in their expectations of being discriminated against when applying for a job. This suggests that communicating agency is a strategy that goes beyond how men perceive their own voices.

When looking at discrimination enactment by heterosexual individuals, we found that listening to someone who conveys agentic messages reduces the negative bias toward gay-sounding job candidates. This is important as it suggests that voice-based discrimination observed in previous work (Fasoli et al., 2017; Fasoli & Hegarty, 2020; Taylor & Raadt, 2022) in the short run can be limited by simply communicating agency. This contributes to the literature showing that agentic language in resumes and self-presentations (Conroy & Green, 2020; Ng et al., 2020; Prati et al., 2019; Roberts, 2005) can be useful in managing first impressions. Indeed, agentic language can be a 'persuasive' strategy that goes beyond a perception of the person as agentic and the message as effective (Formanowicz et al., 2021). In the ears of heterosexual listeners, agentic messages 'compensate' for the lack of agency attributed to gay-sounding speakers. Agentic messages likely make the listeners perceive the gay-sounding speakers as having traits needed to successfully hold a leadership position and allow them to gain status (see Berger et al., 1997; Webster et al., 1998). This finding is in line with studies showing that agency is highly valued and minority individuals (women) who communicate in ways similar to what is expected by men (e.g., confident, assertive, task-oriented) receive more positive evaluations (Bongiorno et al., 2014; McClean et al., 2022). Interestingly, we found that listeners attributed more agency to the speaker when he communicated in an agentic way and this was associated with lower discrimination likelihood. However, this mediation effect was not moderated by the speaker's sexual orientation. This effect speaks once again about the fact that uttering agentic messages increases (gay and straight) men's chances of being seen as a good fit for the

stereotypically masculine job (see Heilman, 1983). Future research should investigate if the buffering effect of agentic messages on voice-based discrimination is explained by different mechanisms (e.g., gender role conformity, status) or by a specific dimension of agency. Agency consists of competence and assertiveness, with the former focusing on abilities and the latter focusing on motivation (Abele et al., 2016). These dimensions are differently related to status (Carrier et al., 2014) and, so far, only competence has been found to matter in voice-based sexual orientation discrimination (Fasoli & Hegary, 2020). Our agentic sentences referred to both dimensions and, thus, we cannot distinguish which dimension was particularly affected by the message and specifically related to perceived sexual orientation.

To our knowledge, this is the first research examining the interplay between voice and message that went beyond mere information processing and message interpretation (Fasoli et al., 2020; Nygaard et al., 2009). Moreover, it is the first cross-cultural/linguistic research on the consequences of auditory gaydar. We found minor nationality differences. Compared to British participants, Polish participants attributed to themselves less agency and reported a stronger discriminatory bias toward gay-sounding speakers not communicating in an agentic way. This may indicate that less LGBTQ+-friendly contexts, like Poland, could influence both sexual minorities' self-stereotyping (Simon et al., 1991; Simon & Hamilton 1994) and anti-gay biases (Bettinsoli et al., 2019). Importantly, nationality did not affect the overall effects of voice and agentic messages on discrimination expectancy or enactment.

Limitations and Future Directions

This research is not without limitations. First, the message stimuli we used consisted of single sentences uttered one after the other rather than a spontaneous uninterrupted speech and, in the neutral message condition, sentences were unrelated to the job context. This decreases the

ecological validity of our stimuli. Also, the sentences were not the same in English and Polish and the neutral sentences varied in their content. Such differences may have created confounds. Future research should use more controlled message stimuli, although some cultural differences in the stimuli perception may be unavoidable. It would also be important to include a manipulation check assessing the speakers' and listeners' understanding of the message content as referring to agency and a measure assessing the agentic perspective, namely speakers' feelings or attribution of being in control and able to influence others' impressions or decisions (see Bialobrzeska et al., 2019). Second, we only considered male speakers, but lesbian-sounding and trans speakers are also at risk of being discriminated against when applying for managerial roles (Fasoli & Hegarty, 2020; Fasoli et al., 2024b). Future research should extend this work by considering other groups of speakers whose voices convey information concerning multiple stigmatized identities (Fasoli et al., 2023b). Third, we only focused on male-dominated roles, which are usually advertised with more agentic words (Pietraszkiewicz et al., 2019). Gay men are often seen as a better fit for female-dominated jobs because they are seen as more communal than straight men (Barrantes & Eaton, 2018; Niedlich et al., 2022). Future research should consider the role of agentic messages in other hiring situations and examine whether conveying communal messages can advantage them for female-dominated jobs. Fourth, studies have shown that both vocal and visual cues matter in the perception of sexual orientation (Kachel et al., 2020; Rieger et al., 2010) and judgments (Gerrard et al., 2023). Future studies could therefore expand this research by examining and/or comparing the role of agency when voice/language (i.e., agentic messages) and/or visual cues (i.e., agentic face) are involved.

Conclusion

This research shows the importance of both voice and message content in discrimination expectancy and enactment. Overall, we demonstrated that agentic language can be used to tackle hiring discrimination against gay men by increasing agency other- and self-perception.

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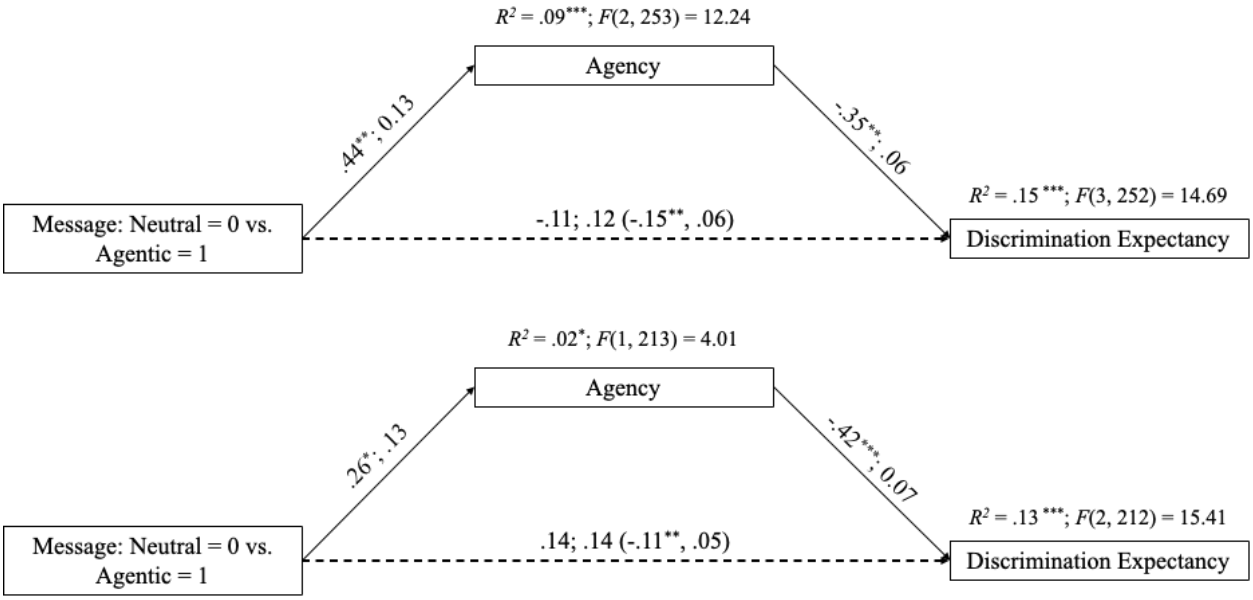
Table 1. Demographic Information

	Study					
	Study 1a		Study 1b		Study 2	
	n	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*
Nationality						
British	127	49.6	214	99	231	49.6
British/Other	3	1.2	2	1	-	-
Polish	125	48.8	-	-	235	50.4
Polish/Other	1	0.4				
Gender						
Woman	-	-	-	-	232	49.8
Man	256	100	215	100	234	50.2
Sexual orientation						
Gay	148	57.8	215	100	-	-
Bisexual	108	42.2	-	-	-	-
Heterosexual	-	-	-	-	466	100
Education (British sample)						
University or college degree	74	28.9	129	60	127	27.3
University or college below a degree	20	7.8	29	13.5	29	6.2
Upper secondary school qualification	28	10.9	38	17.7	53	11.4
Lower secondary school qualification	8	3.1	16	7.4	21	4.5
None of these	-	-	3	1.4	2	0.6
Education (Polish sample – Study 1a)						
PhD	2	1.4	-	-		
MA or equivalent diploma	12	8.7	-	-		
BA or equivalent diploma	22	8.6	-	-		
High school graduate	83	32.4	-	-		
High school	3	1.2	-	-		
Vocational training	3	1.2	-	-		
Primary education	1	0.4	-	-		
Education (Polish sample – Study 2)						

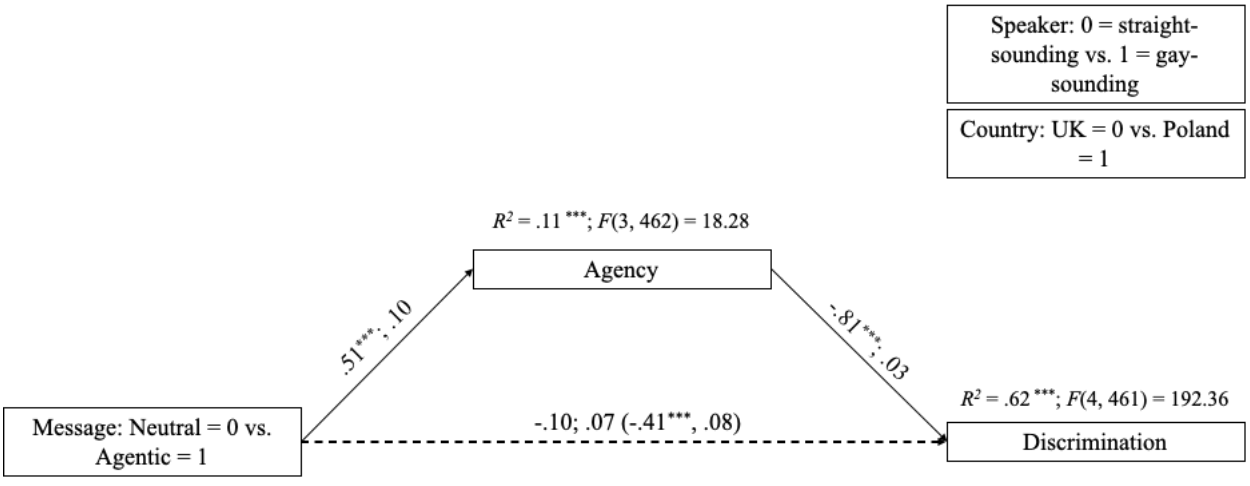
University or college degree	-	-	-	-	114	24.5
University or college degree w/o degree	-	-	-	-	53	11.4
High school education	-	-	-	-	64	13.7
Vocational education	-	-	-	-	2	0.4
Primary education	-	-	-	-	1	0.2
Occupation						
Full-time job	114	44.5	135	62.8	-	-
Part-time job	17	6.6	29	13.5	-	-
Self-employed	16	6.3	11	5.1	-	-
Student	68	26.6	15	7.0	-	-
Currently unemployed	36	14.1	24	11.2	-	-
Retired	5	2.0	1	0.5	-	-
Excluded from the initial sample						
Heterosexual	14	4.6	2	1.8	-	-
Gay	-	-	-	-	9	1.6
Bisexual	-	-	3	1.3	10	1.8
Sexual orientation: different from 'gay' and 'bisexual'	18	6.0	2	0.9	-	-
Gender different from 'man' (Study 1a/b) or identifying a non-binary (Study 2)	8	2.7	1	0.4	1	0.2
No consent to data use	3	1.0	4	1.7	8	1.5
not meeting attention check threshold	1	0.3	1	0.4	52	9.5
English not first language	-	-	1	0.4	-	-
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Age	29.96	12.25	31.79	9.48	35.17	13.92
Political orientation (1 = *left-wing*, 7 = *right-wing*)	3.06	1.42	2.77	1.49	3.49	1.29

Figure 1. Mediation analysis Study 1a (Upper) and Study 1b (Lower). Coefficients and Standard Errors of direct (indirect) effects are reported.



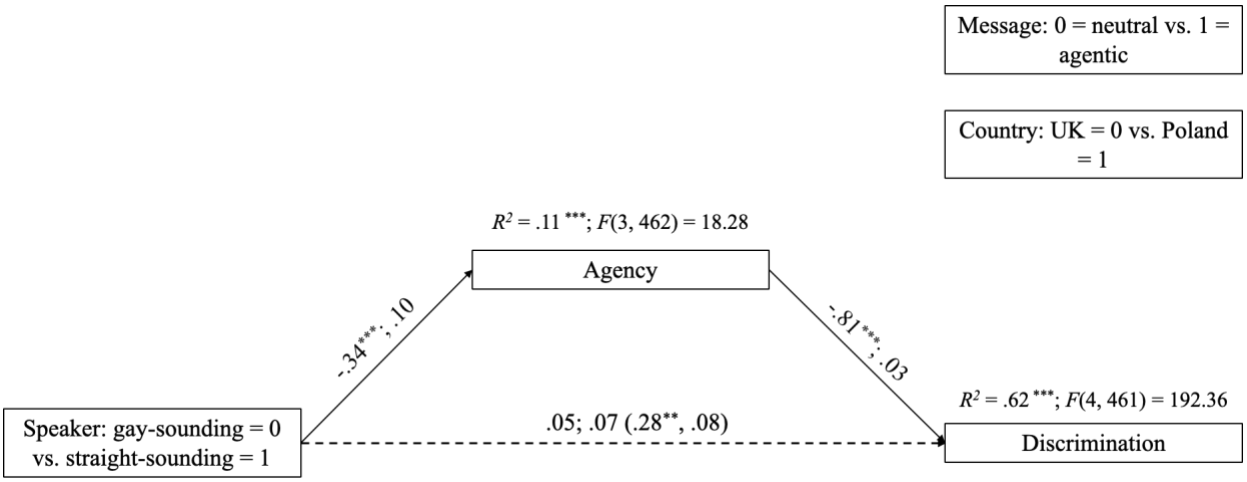
* p < .05, ** p < .01, and *** p < .001

Figure 2. Mediation analysis Study 2 with message as predictor. Coefficients and Standard Errors of direct (indirect) effects are reported.



* p < .05, ** p < .01, and *** p < .001

Figure 3. Mediation analysis Study 2 with speaker as predictor. Coefficients and Standard Errors of direct (indirect) effects are reported.



* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, and *** $p < .001$