





## EXAMINING THE EFFECT OF LEADER–MEMBER EXCHANGE SOCIAL COMPARISON ON EMPLOYEE VOICE BEHAVIOR: THE ROLE OF EMPLOYEE–ORGANIZATION AND SUPERVISORS’ ORGANIZATIONAL EMBODIMENT

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### ABSTRACT

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Drawing on social comparison theory (SCT), this research aims to explore the moderated path by testing the interaction effect of a supervisor's organizational embodiment between leader–member exchange social comparison and employee voice behavior (EVB), as well as the mediating role of the employee–organization relationship (EOR). The hypothesis was tested based on the moderated mediation model using a sample of 788 employees through a structured questionnaire from public sector organizations in Fiji. The findings of the study showed that leader–member exchange social comparison (LMXSC) are positively related to employee voice behavior. Furthermore, the mediating role of the employee–organization relationship quality had significantly strengthened the relationship. In addition, supervisors’ organizational embodiment (SOE) also positively moderated the influence of LMXSC on EVB, and LMXSC on EOR quality. This research delineates the brighter side of social comparison, suggesting that employee voice behavior can be enhanced through fair distribution of the leaders’ resources among the employees, communication training, two-way interactive communication, and employee empowerment in improving work ethics and creating a sustainable organization. Finally, to lead an organization ethically, managers need to encourage voicing behavior of subordinates. Employees need to stand up against unethical issues to enhance the social responsibility of the corporation. The limitations and directions for the future are also presented.

**Contribution/Originality:** This study is the first to investigate how disparity in leader–member exchange social comparison influences employees voice behavior and its importance in improving an organization. In addition, this study is the first one to include the combined interaction effect of employee–organization relationship and supervisors’ organizational embodiment.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Leading an organizational change can be very challenging for leaders as organizations try to gain a sustainable competitive advantage in the long run. Rhetorically, organizations not only attempt to attract and maintain a prodigious workforce that is not only enthusiastic and proficient but assume responsibilities beyond in-role behavior through quality leader–member exchange relationship in contemplating organizational changes (Nemeth, 1997). In reality, this may not be possible as leaders are often constrained by limited resources. The leader–member exchange (LMX) theory assumes that with limited resources, leaders are likely to develop differential relationships

in terms of support, benefit and work-related resources with employees in the organization (Dansereau Jr, Graen, & Haga, 1975). However, a limitation in leader–member exchange theory is that leader–member dyads are treated in isolation, while the independence of relationships with the social setting at the workplace is neglected (Sparrowe & Liden, 1997). Recently, LMX scholars have diverted their interest towards the social comparison aspect of leader–member exchange relationships through shared events, informal conversations and interactions to further their understanding of the quality of the relationship between coworkers and leaders (Henderson & Liden, 2007; Hu & Liden, 2013; Vidyarathi, Liden, Anand, Erdogan, & Ghosh, 2010). Interestingly, leader–member exchange social comparison (LMXSC) offers an important explanation for social comparison theory; to date, the empirical research on its effect on coworkers' behavior has been scarce. As such, we have a limited understanding of the nomological network of variables linked to LMXSC. According to prior literature, subjective comparison of individuals with their coworkers was positively related to organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and job performance beyond the effect of LMX, providing individuals an impetus for behavior, i.e., higher social comparison encourages individuals to engage more in voluntary activities (Vidyarthi et al., 2010). In contrast, Huang, Lihua, Jun, & Lin (2015) demonstrated that social comparison had a negative effect on organizational deviance, indicating that supervisors tended to suppress voicing behavior. Duffy, Scott, Shaw, Tepper, & Aquino (2012) highlighted that individuals with high LMXSC tended to engage more in additional tasks and citizenship behavior, and low LMXSC may activate the intention to harm the organization through unacceptable and damaging behavior, such as schadenfreude, bullying or aggression (Smith & Kim, 2007). Therefore, we added a new dimension to the current study by arguing that as well as organizational citizenship behavior, employee voice behavior is also a welcome proactive and additional behavior that has the potential to improve the organization through constructive changes for three reasons. First, individuals high in social comparison will indicate more access to resources and more opportunities for communication (Botero & Van Dyne, 2009). Second, high LMXSC builds trust in a relationship and stronger work support. This suggests that employees believe that little risk is involved in speaking out and that their suggestions are understood (Botero & Van Dyne, 2009; Hsiung, 2012). Third, individuals with better LMXSC may contribute towards role expansion, take on more responsibilities in improving the work environment, and progress towards the partnership level (Uhl-Bien, Graen, & Scandura, 2000).

To explain this, we considered social comparison theory (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007; Festinger, 1954; Wood, 1996), which postulates that individuals naturally form a tendency to compare, evaluate and gain self-relevant information in forming their behaviors and attitudes. The theory further states that the quality of the relationship rises and falls according to the distribution of resources. When individuals receive a greater share of a leader's resource, it fosters self-enhancement, prosocial and extra-role behavior, and provides more opportunities for voice behavior (Botero & Van Dyne, 2009), while low resource allocation can make individuals feel worse about themselves, which may cause them to react through absurd behavior (Lyubomirsky & Ross, 1997; Zell & Alicke, 2009). Moreover, social comparison theory (SCT) also states that individuals with high LMXSC show greater commitment to and satisfaction with the organization, and can help in alleviating any crises in the organization through sharing ideas, taking an active part in decision making, and providing corrective feedback to improve organizations. Martin, Thomas, Legood, & Dello Russo (2018) denoted that social comparison has a powerful effect in forming an efficient, open, productive and sustainable organization. As such, having stronger ties or a good relationship with leaders will help the employees decrease risks related to voicing behavior (Mo & Shi, 2018). Moreover, employee voicing behavior can assist the organization in adapting to a rapidly changing business environment with a quality decision-making process (LePine & Van Dyne, 2001; Morrison & Milliken, 2000) for the sustainable growth of an organization. Furthermore, we examined the combined interaction effects of a supervisor's organizational embodiment (SOE) as a moderator and the mediating role of the employee–organization relationship (EOR). We argued that LMXSC is a powerful driver of EOR and, as a result, will be strongly associated with employee voice behavior. According to Festinger, (1954), a high LMXSC is shared by greater respect, high

commitment, trust, appreciation of loyalty and a greater sense of obligation (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Moreover, SCT posits that when an employee receives a greater share of a leader's resources, they acknowledge the treatment as coming from the organization and engage more in prosocial behavior creating a feeling of trust, satisfaction, commitment and more active participation in the organization. In contrast, low resource allocation will show low commitment, satisfaction (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, and Sowa, 1986; Rousseau, 1989; Rousseau, 1998), employee isolation and more critical behavior (Waters, Bortree, & Tindall, 2013). Similarly, social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) states that when leaders identify more with the organization and are congruent with organizational values, employees will show more loyalty to the leader and the organization (Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Eisenberger et al. (2010); Eisenberger et al. (2014) opined that high supervisor organizational embodiment (SOE) can result in close relationships between the leader and the organization, enhancing more exchange relationships to better their support from the leader. In contrast, low SOE would mean low LMXSC and result in low commitment, doubt in relations, a tendency of non-cooperation and socio-emotional failure leading to counterproductive behavior (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Meyer, 2009; Shoss, Eisenberger, Restubog, & Zagenczyk, 2013). Organizational change in a turbulent economy can very be challenging for leaders to maintain good work ethics within the workplace in the twenty-first century. As far as we know, this research is the first to discover the interacting role of supervisor's organizational embodiment between the LMXSC-EVB, and LMXSC-EOR. To confirm this relationship, cross-sectional data were collected from the public sector domain. The findings confirm that the presence of a quality relationship between employee and organization strengthens employee voicing behavior. Additionally, the analysis of mediated moderation shows that LMXSC has a positive relationship with EOR, and consequently influences employee voicing behavior to a large degree for those individuals having higher, rather than lower SOE. By doing so, we contribute to the extant literature on LMX social comparison by suggesting a new perspective in explaining how the difference in social comparison influences employee voicing behavior in creating long-term sustainable growth of an organization.

## 2. THEORY AND HYPOTHESIS

### 2.1. Leader–Member Exchange Social Comparison and Employee Dissent Behavior

Leader–member exchange theory (LMX) reflects the quality of an individual's relationship with their supervisor and reciprocates the benefit related to LMX (trust, support, valued resources and challenging tasks, time, and socio-emotional benefit) through positive behaviors and attitudes (Dulebohn, Bommer, Liden, Brouer, & Ferris, 2012; Rockstuhl, Dulebohn, Ang, & Shore, 2012). LMX theory further assumes that leaders are often restricted by resources and are likely to develop different relationships in terms of support, benefit, and work-related resources with employees in the organization (Dansereau Jr. et al., 1975). Prior research highlighted that to maintain their reputation and status in the organization, leaders distribute resources to employees based on skill, performance and competencies; trust and compatibility; and leader prejudice based on ethnicity, religion and race to form high LMX quality (Graen & Scandura, 1987; Liden & Graen, 1980). Naturally, when resources are shared unevenly, the employees in the absence of formal assessment make comparative and subjective ratings of one's own leader–member relationship with that of coworkers reporting to the same leader (Festinger, 1954; Hu & Liden, 2013). In relation to this, Vidyarthi et al. (2010) labeled this concept as a leader–member exchange social comparison (LMXSC). Factors such as the quality of the relationship between leaders and members depend on positive leadership characters and traits, and a style that influences employee voice behavior (Chen & Hou, 2016; Lee, Choi, Youn, & Chun, 2017; Liu, Zhu, & Yang, 2010; Van Dyne, Kamdar, & Joireman, 2008). Recently, scholars have highlighted that LMXSC forms the basis of determining the quality of relationships between leaders and members and provides individuals with an impetus for behavior. According to the scholars, subjective rating provides individuals with self-relevant knowledge positively related to organizational citizenship behavior and job performance, e.g., higher social comparison encourages individuals to engage more in voluntary behavior (Vidyarthi

et al., 2010). In contrast, Huang et al. (2015) demonstrated that social comparison had a negative effect on organizational deviance by supervisors suppressing voicing behavior. Dong, Jiang, Rong, & Yang (2020) denoted this as violating the principle of equality and neutrality of resource distribution, affecting individuals' participation in the organization. These contrasting views suggest that when individuals perceive disparity in resources, they tend to exhibit different behaviors. According to Duffy et al. (2012), individuals with better social comparisons can display extra-role behaviors, while less favorable social comparisons may lead to behavior that will harm the organization (Smith & Kim, 2007). Therefore, we argue that speaking up is a proactive behavior with a greater potential to provide corrective challenges. As such, it becomes equally important to examine how social comparison affects individual willingness to engage in voicing behavior, as this has not been examined in prior literature.

According to social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), individuals tend to compare themselves with coworkers to evaluate their capabilities and gain insight of self-relevant knowledge to form their behaviors and attitudes. When individuals perceive their position as disadvantageous, the intention to harm is activated (Duffy et al., 2012). Moreover, SCT suggest that when individuals recognize their relationship to be better in term of resource, they display positive behaviors and have more opportunities for communication (Botero & Van Dyne, 2009). Wang, Law, Hackett, Wang, & Chen (2005) denoted that employees with better quality LMXSC tend to have off-job interactions and also make progress towards the partnership level (Uhl-Bien et al., 2000). Similarly, individuals with high LMXSC tend to comprehend more regarding leader perspective and position and hence a greater likelihood of providing useful suggestions and achieving goals that will collectively benefit coworkers and leaders (Hsiung, 2012; Hsiung & Tsai, 2009). To this effect, SCT also suggests that individuals with better relationships with leaders tend to develop more trust in relationships, stronger work support, and believe that there is little risk involved when voicing their concerns or suggestions and that their suggestions are understood (Botero & Van Dyne, 2009; Hsiung, 2012). As such, employee voice behavior is generally regarded as a panacea in providing challenging suggestions pertinent to work-related issues to create a sustainable organization (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998; Young Seong & Kristof-Brown, 2012). In addition, Yrle, Hartman, & Galle (2002) highlighted that individuals with high LMXSC are comfortable sharing ideas, are innovative, play an active part in decision making, stimulate positive responses, actively engage in self-enhancement, and provide corrective feedback in improving organizations (Goldman & Myers, 2015; Kassing, 2011; Lyubomirsky & Ross, 1997; Zell & Alicke, 2009). A group of scholars also demonstrated that during organizational change, an employee with in-depth knowledge and experience can help leaders to alleviate crises through critical evaluation, significantly improving the leader-employee relationship (Grunig & Huang, 2000; Kim & Rhee, 2011). Moreover, Bolino & Turnley (2009) also opined that individuals in a high-quality relationship often avoid indulging in deviant behaviors and are more engaged in extra-role behaviors, indicating that individuals with a high share of resources are given autonomy to express their views. Bearing this in mind, we argue that individuals with high LMXSC are in a more comfortable position to express their opinions or concerns with leaders to try to improve work ethic and relationships. Therefore, we propose that LMXSC will significantly affect employee voicing behavior.

*H1: Leader-member exchange social comparison will have a positive relationship with employee voicing behavior.*

## *2.2. The Mediating Role of the Employee-Organization Relationship*

Employees in an organization have an inherent need to establish and maintain a healthy sustainable relationship within the organization (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). These so-called relationships "generally refer to patterns of exchange between two interacting members or partners, whether individuals, groups, or organizations, typically directed at the accomplishment of some common objectives or goals" (Ferris, Blass, Douglas, Kolodinsky, & Treadway, 2003). Men & Stacks (2014) described EOR as "the degree to which an organization and its employees trust one another, agree on who has the rightful power to influence, experience satisfaction with each other, and commit oneself to the other" and this quality of the relationship depends on level of trust, autonomy and

commitment. The quality of the relationship between the leader and the employee is a crucial element in understanding the employee's behavior towards the organization and what makes an employee thrive at work (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). Hence, to perform a given task, employees rely on collaboration, support, direction, information and resources forged through the establishment of relationships.

Prior literature demonstrated that low LMXSC can be physiologically damaging for the focal employee resulting in low commitment and low satisfaction (Eisenberger, Stinglhamber, Vandenberghe, Sucharski, and Rhoades, 2002; Rousseau, 1989), more critical behavior (Waters, Bortree, & Tindall, 2013), greater separation from the leader, low positive effects, reduced performance and commitment, reduced trust towards the supervisor and the organization (Rowold & Rohmann, 2009), and ultimately looks for solutions outside the organization. Similarly, individuals with low LMXSC develop low trust of the organization and become apprehensive that the leaders may underestimate their valuable suggestions (Detert & Burris, 2007), as such, they may resort to silent behavior in the organization due to apprehension. However, Lind (2001) argued that even dissatisfied employees with a poor allocation of resources rely on leaders to voice their concerns in the organization, considering this as relationship-building with the organization. Consequently, this also provides a signal to employees that they are being valued by the organization and, in turn, they will not harm the wellbeing of the organization. Therefore, we argue that high quality LMXSC is a powerful driver of EOR and, as a result, will be strongly associated with employee voice behavior. As highlighted by Festinger, (1954), high LMXSC is shared by greater respect, mutual trust, loyalty, and a greater sense of obligation in the organization (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). The theory posits that the value of exchange relationship fluctuates depending on how a leader's share of resources is being distributed. The more evenly the resources are distributed, the more the relationship is perceived as positive. This suggests that individuals with high LMXSC tend to have high trust and commitment with the organization and greater willingness to provide critical feedback or ideas. Comparatively, individuals with high LMXSC through support, obligation and tangible and intangible resources create less separation, develop positive attitudes (Fisk & Friesen, 2012), have more autonomy in decision making (Sparrowe & Liden, 1997; Vecchio & Gobdel, 1984) have enhanced trust (Epitropaki et al., 2016), are open-minded and have a cognitive ability that benefits the organization in the long run (Basadur, 2004). As such, self-evaluation by employees provides emotional, motivational and cognitive information in predicting their behavior and attitudes and can adjust accordingly to the organizational setting. Therefore, having received a greater share of their leader's resources (e.g., time, autonomy in decision making and emotional support), the employee feels motivated and reciprocates the leader's positive behavior through increasing their efforts, commitment and satisfaction towards the organization, and thus more constructive feedback can be anticipated in the organization as the employee will feel more comfortable raising any issues of concern. Therefore, we can reasonably say that EOR will be a suitable mediator between LMXSC and EDB.

*H2: EOR will mediate the relationship between leader-member exchange social comparison and employee voice behavior; as such, high EOR will have a positive relationship between LMXSC and employee voice behavior.*

### 2.3. The Moderating Role of Supervisor's Organizational Embodiment (SOE)

Levinson (1965) stated that coaching, directive and evaluative functions carried out by supervisors are roles assigned to them by the organization and employees may interpret this as favorable or unfavorable treatment from the supervisor on behalf of the organization. Eisenberger et al. (2010) highlighted that supervisors, as organizational agents congruent with organizational values and objectives, can influence employees' behavior and attitudes. The more a supervisor identifies with an organization, the more favorable attribute is honored to employees, improving affective commitments (Tajfel, 1978). Similarly, Eisenberger et al. (2010); Eisenberger et al. (2014) denoted that supervisors' organizational embodiment (SOE) can result in closer relationships between the leaders and the organization, enhancing more exchange relationships to better their support from the leader. Comparably, when individuals perceive more resources, they develop quality relationships with leaders and see the

leaders as having stronger self-concepts, making individuals more connected to the organization. Accordingly, the higher the supervisor's organizational embodiment, the more employees feel obligated to participate in organizational activities.

		LMXSC	EOR	EVB
High SOE	STRAND 1	(high resource allocation)	(high level—trust / satisfaction / commitment / control mutuality)	(voice)
Low SOE	STRAND 2	(low resource allocation)	(low level—trust / satisfaction / commitment / control mutuality)	(silent dissent)

Figure-1. A three-dimensional view of supervisors' organizational embodiment in determining the interaction between LMXSC, EVB and quality of EOR.

As alluded to earlier, when a supervisor's organizational embodiment (SOE) is high, the directive, requested resources, attention, encouragement, compliments, interaction, goal-setting, praise and support are perceived to come from the organization (Eisenberger et al., 2010). As such, we expect supervisors to assist employees, maintain trust in a relationship, share responsibility and strengthen the employee-organization relationship (EOR). Similarly, social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) highlighted that high SOE increases the effect of LMX on affective commitments and develops a close relationship between the leaders and the organization, enhancing more exchange relationships to better their support from the leader. Moreover, high SOE will strengthen the quality relationships between employees and supervisors (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Shoss et al., 2013), and encourage more employee voice behavior in improving the organization. According to Gerstner & Day (1997), high SOE maintains the direction of resource distribution. As such, individual feels more psychologically committed to providing suggestive feedback as they perceive that the communication channel is open between them and the leaders (Botero & Van Dyne, 2009; Burris, Detert, & Chiaburu, 2008) (see Figure 1). In contrast, social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) also denoted that low SOE shows supervisors as having a lower sense of identification, do not comply with organizational norms, and demonstrate non-alignment with the strategic objectives of the organization. In this way, supervisors act in their own interests and have an exchange relationship rather than offering guidance (Eisenberger et al., 2010). Supervisors with a lower organizational embodiment lose the importance of maintaining healthy relationships and fair resource distribution, causing both leaders and employees to question the integrity of the organization (Agrawal & Knoeber, 1996; Eisenberger et al., 2010). Similarly, low SOE would mean low LMXSC, which leads to low commitment, doubts regarding relations, the tendency toward non-cooperation, and socio-emotional failure leading to counterproductive behavior (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Meyer, 2009; Shoss et al., 2013). As such, low SOE will worsen the relationship between supervisor and employee, forcing employees to engage in destructive behavior and seek alternative sources for explanations (see Figure 1).

Therefore, we argue that when individuals perceive a supervisor with high SOE, it creates a bond between supervisor and employee, creating trust, attachment, high organization identification, distinctiveness in social existence, high performance from the employees, and drives more employee voice behavior. Accordingly, high SOE can enhance quality exchange relationships between employees and supervisors, increasing employee organizational commitment, building trust and sharing the balance of power in decision-making in exchange for favorable relationships with supervisors and the organization. Therefore, we suggest the following hypothesis:

H3: SOE will moderate the relationship between LMXSC and EVB and, as such, high SOE will strengthen the relationship between LMXSC and employee voice behavior.

H4: SOE will moderate the relationship between LMXSC and EOR and, as such, high SOE will strengthen the relationship between LMXSC and EOR.

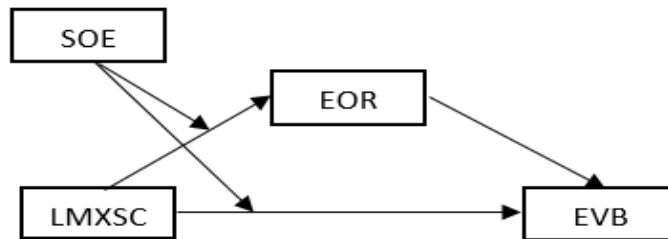


Figure-2. Proposed research model.

Note: The framework in Figure 2 provides a proposed model for the research, suggests how disparity in leader-member exchange social comparison (LMXSC) can influence employee voicing behavior through employee-organization relationship (EOR) and supervisor's organizational embodiment (SOE).

### 3. METHOD

#### 3.1. Sample and Procedure

The study was conducted through the distribution and collection of survey data via convenience sampling from 788 employees in public sector organizations in the turbulent economy of Fiji. A cover letter was attached to the survey questionnaire to ensure awareness of the voluntary nature of the study. Participants were asked to fill in the questionnaire and return it in a sealed envelope. No missing data were reported. We controlled several demographic characteristics including gender, age, organizational experience and salary scale to see if controls have any significant statistical effects. Gender was coded as a dummy variable (0 = male, 1 = female). Males made up 35.5% of participants and the remaining 64.5% were females. Age categories were as follows: 20–25 years (15.4%), 26–30 years (36.3%), 31–35 years (20.8%), 36–40 years (7.3%) and 41 years and above (20.2%). Finally, as part of the demographic variable, we included organizational experience recorded as 1–3 years (19.2%), 4–7 years (40.1%), 8–11 years (15%), 12–14 years (3.9%), 15–17 (11.2%) and more than 18 years (10.6%).

#### 3.2. Measures

All constructs were measured using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

##### 3.2.1. Leader–Member Social Comparison (LMXSC)

We used a seven-item scale proposed by Vidyarthi et al. (2010) to measure LMXSC. The respondents were requested to show the social comparison aspect of LMXSC with their leader. The sample items included: "My supervisor has made a significant investment in me." Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was measured at 0.86.

##### 3.2.2. Employee–Organization Relationship (EOR)

The EOR was measured using an eight-item measurement scale developed by Shore, Tetrick, Lynch, & Barksdale (2006) and used the following phrase: "My organization has made a significant investment in me." Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was measured at 0.88.

##### 3.2.3. Supervisors' Organizational Embodiment (SOE)

We used a five-item measurement scale developed by Eisenberger et al. (2010) to measure the supervisors' organizational embodiment. The sample item included: "When my supervisor encourages me, I believe that my organization is encouraging me." Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was measured at 0.92.

### 3.2.4. Employee Voice Behavior (EVB)

We used a five-item measurement scale developed by Kassing (1998) to measure employee voice behavior. The sample item included: "I make suggestions to management or my supervisor about correcting inefficiency in my organization." Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was calculated at 0.88. The survey consisted of 71 latent variables. The results of descriptive statistics, inter-correlation and alpha/reliability coefficient are shown in Table 1. Consistent with predictions, leader-member exchange social comparison (LMXSC) is positively related to employee voice behavior (EVB); employee organization relationship (EOR) was positively related to LMXSC; and EOR is positively related to employee voice behavior (EVB). Supervisor's organizational embodiment (SOE) also had a positive association with LMXSC, EOR and employee voice behavior (EVB).

Table-1. Descriptive statistics and correlations.

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Age	2.80	1.35	1							
2. Gender	1.09	1.27	0.011	1						
3. Occupation	2.69	1.41	0.746**	0.143**	1					
4. Salary	2.81	0.88	0.257**	-0.030	0.305**	1				
5. LMXSC	3.33	0.81	0.018	-0.184**	-0.034	0.099**	(0.60)			
6. EOR	3.72	0.74	0.009	-0.062	0.022	-0.005	0.482**	(0.68)		
7. EVB	3.25	0.57	0.044	0.152**	0.086*	0.003	0.190**	0.493**	(0.56)	
8. SOE	0.19	0.66	0.042	0.066	0.101**	-0.026	0.384**	0.135**	0.123**	(0.62)

Note: \*\* p < 0.01, \*\*\* p < 0.001.

The control variables may confound the significant relationship of interest; as such, individual demographic characteristics were included in the analysis (Tekleab & Taylor, 2003). The analysis shows that gender and occupational experience are positively related to employee voice behavior.

## 4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Following the recommendation by Anderson & Gerbing (1988), before testing the hypotheses we examined the construct validity using average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability (CR). As shown in Table 2, all items had significant factor loading. AVE ranged from 0.56 to 0.68, which exceeded the recommended level of 0.5, and the composite reliability of all the constructs met the threshold of 0.7 (Fornell, 1981). The Cronbach's alpha value of the construct exceeds 0.7, suggesting good reliability for the measurement scale. Additionally, we conducted a series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) to confirm the distinctiveness of our research constructs. Analysis of moment structures (AMOS) was used to determine chi-square statistics along with the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) and the comparative fit index (CFI) (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). Table 3 shows the model of LMXSC, EOR, EVB and SOE as the best model fit for the study;  $\chi^2 = 1953.919$ , d.f. = 730, CFI = 0.952, TLI = 0.946 and RMSEA = 0.052.

Moreover, common method bias (CMB) can potentially pose a critical threat of biasness in any behavioral research, especially with one-time data collection (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012). However, this can be mitigated through various procedures and the use of statistical remedies, as suggested by Podsakoff et al. (2012). In the procedure, we minimized evaluation, ensured respondents' anonymity and took particular care with items, wording and separation of other variables from predictor variables. Using statistical remedy, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) approach was used to eliminate CMB. First, we used Bagozzi's method and suggestion (Bagozzi & Yi, 1990) that any correlation between the construct more than 0.9 indicates the presence of common method bias. Our research showed the correlation between the focal variables as 0.75 (see Table 1). Second, we used a common latent factor (CFL) to check standardized regression weights for the proposed measurement model with CFL and found the differences to be minuscule (see Table 2). Statistically, our analysis showed no threat of CMB. Finally, we examined the moderation effect using conditional process analyses (Hayes, 2018).



H1 predicts that leadership–member exchange social comparison (LMXSC) will have a positive effect on employee voice behavior. As expected, the result in Table 5 shows LMXSC and EVB voice ( $\beta = 0.166, p < 0.001$ ), which confirms that H1 is supported. A recommendation by Baron & Kenny (1986) was followed to test the hypothesis for a mediation effect. The indirect effect of employee–organization relationship (EOR) on employee voice behavior (EVB) through leadership–member exchange social comparison (LMXSC) is stronger for an individual with a high EOR Table 4; therefore, H2 is supported.

Table-2. Factor loading with CFA.

Item	Factor Loading	Error	Cronbach's Alpha	AVE	Composite Reliability
LMXSC1	0.819	0.120	0.86	0.60	0.77
LMXSC2	0.889	0.132			
LMXSC3	0.866	0.129			
LMXSC4	0.867	0.126			
EOR1	0.766	0.032	0.88	0.68	0.82
EOR2	0.796	0.040			
EOR3	0.840	0.039			
EOR4	0.788	0.039			
EOR5	0.722	0.031			
EOR6	0.779	0.068			
EOR7	0.803	0.079			
EOR8	0.899	0.076			
EOR9	0.774	0.076			
EOR10	0.806	0.072			
EOR11	0.722	0.036			
EOR12	0.846	0.040			
EOR13	0.854	0.041			
EOR14	0.751	0.034	0.88	0.56	0.74
EVB1	0.848	0.035			
EVB2	0.837	0.034			
EVB3	0.791	0.034			
EVB4	0.680	0.043			
EVB6	0.786	0.036	0.92	0.62	0.78
SOE1	0.747	0.041			
SOE2	0.844	0.040			
SOE3	0.833	0.041			
SOE4	0.835	0.041			
SOE5	0.765	0.044			
SOE6	0.797	0.046			
SOE7	0.730	0.040			
SOE8	0.787	0.040			
SOE9	0.776	0.038			

Table-3. Model fit.

$\chi^2$	df	RMR	RAMSEA	IFI	TLI	CFI
1953.919	730	0.030	0.052	0.952	0.946	0.952

Source: Field survey, 2020.

Table-4. The mediation effect of employee–organization relationship.

H2		SE	T-Value	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Total Effect
	LMXSC → EOR → EVB	0.035	8.916	0.010	0.298	0.308

Source: Field survey, 2020.

H3 predicts that supervisor's organizational embodiment (SOE) will moderate the relationship between LMXSC and EVB. As expected, the results in Table 5 show that the integration term indicates significant moderation ( $\beta = 0.272, p < 0.001$ ); therefore, H3 is supported. Similarly, H4 also predicted that SOE will moderate the relationship between LMXSC and EOR. The interaction term shows a significant moderation effect ( $\beta = 0.213, p < 0.001$ ); therefore, H4 is supported.

Table-5. The moderating effect of supervisor's organizational embodiment.

	Outcome Variable: EOR									Outcome Variable: EVB								
	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	$\beta$	SE	t	$\beta$	SE	t	$\beta$	SE	t	$\beta$	SE	t	$\beta$	SE	t	$\beta$	SE	t
Constant	3.858	0.084		2.564	0.104		2.945	0.108		3.137	0.074		2.602	0.108		2.975	0.109	
Age	-0.01	0.026	-0.03	0.01	0.016	0.002	-0.018	0.020	0.03	-0.007	0.023	-0.295	-0.012	0.022	-0.029	-0.004	0.020	-0.18
Gender	-0.04	0.018	-0.07	-0.032**	0.012	-0.06	-0.014	0.015	-0.063	0.060	0.016	1.796	0.078	0.016	0.0172	0.065	0.015	0.116
Occupation	0.027	0.025	0.06	-0.015	0.016	-0.03	0.033	0.020	-0.03	0.033	0.022	1.502	0.041	0.022	0.102	0.029	0.020	0.001
Salary	-0.013	0.027	-0.18	0.01	0.017	0.01	-0.038	0.022	0.01	-0.009	0.024	-0.384	-0.025	0.024	-0.039	-0.019	0.022	-0.86
Independent LMXSC				0.158***	0.020	0.198	0.274***	0.027	0.208				0.166**	0.025	0.234	0.112***	0.027	0.019
Moderator SOE				0.702***	0.025	0.687	-0.675***	0.056	-0.023				0.470**	0.030	0.516	-0.720***	0.057	-0.521
Interaction effect LMXSC*SOE							0.213***	0.016	0.686							0.272***	0.017	0.084
Mediator EOR																0.391***	0.042	0.288
R <sup>2</sup>	0.002			0.6			0.612			0.026			0.348			0.355		
$\Delta R^2$	0.021***			0.073***			0.375***			0.021***			0.343***			0.355***		

Dependent Variable: EVB (employee voice behavior).

Note: \*\* p < 0.01, \*\*\* p < 0.001. Dummy variables: gender (0 = male, 1 = female), age, occupational experience, salary scale, LMXSC = leader-member exchange social comparison, SOE = supervisor's organizational embodiment, EOR = employee-organization relationship.

Finally, the result of the mediated moderating effect is shown in Table 6. When combining all the variables, the significant interaction shows the effects of EOR as a mediator and SOE as a moderator.

Table-6. The mediated moderating effect.

Variable	Coeff.	Mean	SE	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	1.811	1.814	0.145	1.529	2.104
LMXSC	0.196	0.270	0.026	0.149	0.242
EOR	0.391	0.390	0.036	0.320	0.459
SOE	-0.186	-0.191	0.062	-0.320	-0.067
Int_1	0.088	0.089	0.019	0.050	0.126
Age	0.002	0.002	0.018	-0.033	0.036
Gender	0.068	0.069	0.011	0.048	0.090
Occupation	0.017	0.017	0.016	-0.015	0.049
Salary	-0.003	-0.004	0.018	-0.039	0.031

Outcome Variable: EVB

Note: Outcome Variable: EVB (employee voice behavior).

Gender, age, occupational experience, salary scale. LMXSC = leader-member exchange social comparison, SOE = supervisor's organizational embodiment, EOR = employee-organization relationship.

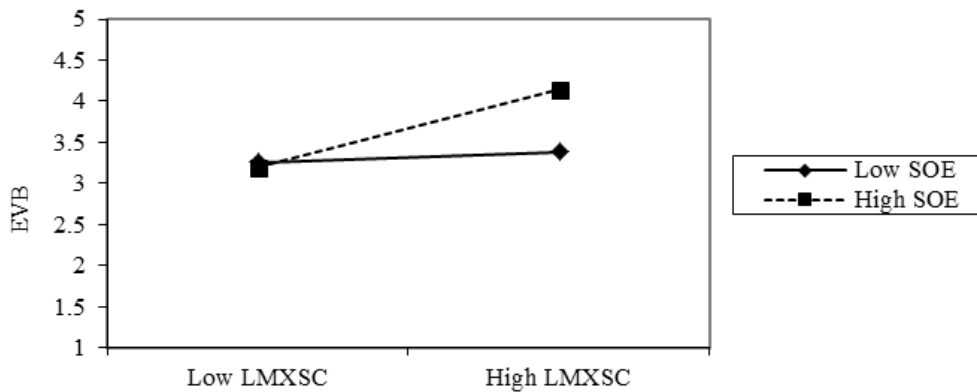


Figure-3. Interaction of leader-member exchange social comparison (LMXSC) with supervisor's organizational embodiment (SOE).

Source: Field survey, 2020.

In Figure 3, the slope test suggests that the relationship between LMXSC and SOE was stronger (slope = 0.720,  $p < 0.001$ ) showing that employee voicing behavior is more congruent with high SOE than low SOE.

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

### 5.1. Conclusion

As a pioneer, this study evaluates the quality of EOR through the lens of leader-member exchange social comparison (LMXSC) in a turbulent economy where public sector organizations are suffering from massive wastage of resources, centralized bureaucracies, preoccupation with rules and regulations, hierarchical chains of command, organizational crisis and poor service delivery (World Bank, 1998). As such, leaders often face resource constraints, which makes distribution more difficult among the workers (Liden & Graen, 1980). Accordingly, Vidyarthi et al. (2010) defined this as "when leaders differentiate, the varied levels of LMX quality within the group are likely to trigger social comparison processes". The LMXSC is an important concept in determining the level of motivation an employee has towards productive behavior, the attachment an employee has towards the leader, and what makes an employee thrive at work (Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). According to Festinger (1954), social comparison occurs when an employee objectively lacks understanding of one's self in the social context among workers in terms of performance, abilities and attitude, and the employee makes a subjective assessment in obtaining such information directly by observing focal employees (Henderson, Wayne, Shore, Bommer, & Tetrick,

2008). Therefore, LMXSC can be differentiated from LMX, as the former is based on social group comparison with employees from the work group as a reference point and the latter does not involve any comparative judgment.

This study investigated the effect of leader–member exchange social comparison on employee voice behavior (EVB) with the mediating role of the employee–organization relationship (EOR) in creating a sustainable organization. As expected, EOR plays a significant mediating role between LMXSC and EVB. The combination of LMXSC and EVB determines the quality of the relationship, and the findings from the research also show that the relationship between LMXSC and EVB is contingent on SOE. The results in Table 5 show that the presence of a quality relationship between employee and organization strengthens employee voice behavior. This shows that supervisors with high organizational embodiment encourage employee voice behavior to improve the policies and operating procedures in the organization.

The study also evaluated the effect of SOE between LMXSC and EOR. The finding suggests that supervisors with high organizational embodiment can assist employees, maintain trust in a relationship, and encourage shared responsibility and more active employee participation. This was also congruent with the findings of Eisenberger et al. (2010) who highlighted that high SOE increases the effect of LMX on affective commitments. Moreover, the analysis of mediated moderation shows that LMXSC has a positive relationship with EOR and, consequently, influences employee voice behavior to a large degree for those individuals having higher, rather than lower, SOE. This suggests that employees identify with their roles in the organization and it also reinforces employees' beliefs that they are being encouraged to participate more actively to provide constructive feedback to the organization. Such beliefs positively increase individual job performance and outcome and enhance extra-role behavior (Karriker & Williams, 2009; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). As such, the findings of the study expand our knowledge and understanding of the complexities of a leader's behavior and how a leader's behavior, action and distribution of resources can effectively improve individuals' participation in the organization through constructive feedback.

According to Venkatraman (1989), the contingency perspective of "fit-as-moderation", an organization's performance is attributed to matching its behavior to the external or internal environment. As an external attribute, the organization goes through changes; we aligned SOE as an internal attribute between LMXSC and EVB, and LMXSC and EOR. This study discovered the interaction between LMXSC and SOE on EVB and through EOR on EVB; indirectly the effect of SOE on these constructs is enhanced. In summary, the findings showed that with the varied distribution of leaders' resources, individuals engage in social comparison in public sector organizations in the turbulent economy. According to the findings, it is anticipated that organizations will encourage more constructive feedback when supervisors are identified as organizational representatives. Thus, to enhance the relationship between a leader and its members, there is a need to strengthen employee voice behavior for the sustainable growth of an organization.

### 5.2. Theoretical Implication

This research makes several theoretical contributions to the sustainable growth of an organization. First, from our knowledge, this research is the first to explore the relationship between leader–member exchange social comparison and employee voice behavior. Prior literature has mainly focused on leadership style and its influence on voicing behavior and little is known about social comparison and how it influences employee voice behavior. Van der Veen & Van der Wal (2012) suggested that research should not exclusively focus on leadership style, rather more focus is needed on leaders' deferential behavior with employees in the work setting. In response, our research extends the extant literature on LMXSC as an antecedent of employee voice behavior through examining the leaders' deferential behavior in terms of resource allocation among members in the work setting.

Second, LMXSC is channeled through EOR, which subsequently induces employee voice behavior in the form of constructive feedback for improving the organization. In addition to adding LMXSC as an antecedent of EVB, this research particularly emphasizes connecting the roles of leaders and the organization and aligning with the

moderating role of SOE. Social comparison theory posits that individuals tend to compare one's self with coworkers to evaluate their capabilities and to gain insight into self-relevant knowledge regarding their behavior, attitude, relationship and position within the organization (Festinger, 1954). In addition, we added a favorable explanation of an individual's behavior when the role of the leader in an organization is merged.

Third, this research further explains the occurring effects and processes through which EOR is moderated by SOE. SOE is a fairly new concept and very little research has been done to broaden the existing knowledge in extant literature (Eisenberger et al., 2014; Shoss et al., 2013). Scholars have called for further investigation of the moderating role of SOE because individuals' final behavioral outcomes substantially changed through the effect of a moderator between LMXSC, EOR and EVB. As such, SOE not only enables an individual to gain attention from leaders but also enhances the perception of organizational trust, commitment, satisfaction and power-sharing through the supervisor. As such, social comparison theory is further strengthened through SOE, for instance, high LMXSC could develop high-quality EOR (trust, commitment, satisfaction and control mutuality) through a leader's high organizational identification. The result shows that the level of SOE perceived by employees influences EOR on EVB, strengthens the important role of a leader as an organizational agent bridging the theoretical gap that explained employee organization exchange relationship through social comparison theory. Finally, to lead an organization ethically, managers need to encourage voicing behavior of subordinates. Employees need to stand up against unethical issues to enhance the social responsibility of the corporation.

### 5.3. Practical Implication

Employee voice behavior is essential in identifying the problems and providing amicable solutions required for the sustainable growth of an organization. Employees' voices regarding problematic management procedures or operations can sometimes provide very useful insights or ideas for the management team because these employees are the ones who operationalize work procedures within the organization (Finkenauer, Kerkhof, Righetti, & Branje, 2009; Kassing, 2011; Morrison, 2011). Moreover, employees who suppress their views and disagreements are found to be very unhappy, and unhappy employees are harmful to organizational productivity and the achievement of a sustainable competitive advantage in the long term (Davenport & Prusak, 1998). This research makes several practical implications for leaders in public sector organizations, especially in a turbulent economy such as Fiji.

First, when leader resources are unequal in distribution, individuals have decreased trust in their leader resulting in low voicing behavior. As such, organizations need to guide and train leaders through communication training, which will enhance two-way communicative behavior, encourage constructive exchange and fairly allocate the resources in question to all employees thus maintaining favorable LMX (Gilliland, 1993; Liao, Liu, & Loi, 2010), and enabling individuals to perceive support from both leader and organization. Employees perceive these acquired resources from leaders as coming from the organization, enhancing employees' extra-role behaviors. Additionally, an organization should implement an open-door policy, as this will allow employees to voice any disagreement with their leader at any time.

Second, the employee–organization relationship can be enhanced through high SOE. A study suggests high SOE context rather than low SOE reveals more effects on enhancing EOR. Therefore, to enhance SOE, the organization should guide and support its representatives through social media, email, participation in policy, interactive communication, and incorporating a leader's thoughts and ideas for decision making, especially during the process of organizational transformation. Effective communication will see leaders identify more with the organization thus increasing employee trust towards the leader and the organization. Also, while hiring or recruiting leaders, the organization should carefully evaluate candidates' viewpoints and thoughts to see if they match the organization's goals and culture.

Third, while high LMXSC signals employees receiving a high share of leaders' resources, more research are needed to study employees with low LMXSC, as these employees may be frustrated by having lower LMXSC.

Having been identified, leaders should provide consistent feedback and devote more time on regular basis to address the coworkers' concerns, as this can foster a more relational and socio-emotional relationship.

Finally, the findings also showed that EOR mediated the relationship between LMXSC and EVB. Accordingly, the presence of EOR has strengthened employee voice behavior indicating that leaders should spend more time on team-building exercises, such as problem-solving, to increase the quality of the employee-organization relationship.

#### 5.4. Limitations and Future Research

First, the cross-sectional data do not allow causal inference; a quasi-field experiment or a longitudinal design would iron out the causal inference. Second, there is a possibility of other moderators having the potential to influence the relationship between LMXSC and employee voice behavior. Although we have used social identity theory to explain the overarching effect of supervisors' organizational embodiment, there are other plausible choices for moderating effect. According to Qin, DiRenzo, Xu, & Duan (2014), interactional justice climate and job security moderated the curvilinear relationship among prohibitive voice and emotional exhaustion. As such, future research could examine other potential moderators to provide a deeper understanding of LMXSC and employee voice behavior. Third, employee voice behavior was measured via a self-reported survey, which may be indicative of participants' self-perceived intentions. Future research could use an observational method or supervisor-directed questionnaire that would evaluate whether and how individuals voice their concerns when experiencing unsatisfactory situations or events at the workplace, as this might help in exploring additional expressions. Fourth, the study was conducted in public sector organizations in a turbulent economy. Future research could also include the private sector for a comparative study. Fifth, this study did not describe which department of the public sector was considered for the sample. Future research could include the department and LMX as a control variable. Finally, given that the sample for the study is based in Fiji, the generalizability of the findings cannot be attested to other countries with distinct cultural backgrounds. Fiji is a multiracial country with individuals at liberty to practice their own cultures. Employees in organizations work in harmony with national values as embedded in people's charter for change, peace and progress. Future research could test the applicability of the current model to other cultural domains.

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## APPENDIX

### Questionnaire

Please tick (✓) the appropriate choice

Age

1. 20-25     2. 26-30     3. 31-35     4. 36-40     5. More than 41

Gender

1. Male     2. Female

Occupational experience

1. 1-3     2. 4-7     3. 8-11     4. 12-14     5. 15-17     6. More than 18

Salary scale

1. Less than \$10,000     2. \$10,000-\$20,000     3. \$20,000-\$30,000     4. \$30,000-\$40,000   
 5. More than \$41,000

	Please tick (√) the appropriate column	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
	<b>Leader-member exchange social comparison</b>					
1	I don't mind working hard today – I know I will eventually be rewarded sooner or later					
2	I worry that all my efforts on behalf of my supervisor will be rewarded or not					
3	My relationship with my supervisor is about mutual sacrifice, sometimes I give more than I receive and sometimes I receive more than I give					
4	Even though I may not always receive the recognition from my supervisor I deserve, I know that he or she will take good care of me in the future					
5	My relationship with my supervisor is based on mutual trust.					
6	My supervisor has made a significant investment in me.					
7	I try to look out for the best interest of my supervisor because I can rely on my supervisor to take care of me.					
	<b>Employee-organization relationship</b>					
1	My organization has made a significant investment in me					
2	The things I do on the job today will benefit my standing with this organization in the long run					
3	There is a lot of give and take in my relationship with my organization.					
4	I worry that all my efforts on behalf of my organization will never be rewarded. (R)					
5	I don't mind working hard today—I know I will eventually be rewarded by my organization.					
6	My relationship with my organization is based on mutual trust.					
7	My relationship with my organization is based on mutual trust.					
8	I try to look out for the best interest of my organization because I can rely on my organization to take care of me					
	<b>Supervisors organizational embodiment</b>					
1	When my supervisor encourages me, I believe that my organization is encouraging me.					
2	When my supervisor is pleased with my work, I feel that my organization is pleased.					
3	When my supervisor compliments me, it is the same as my organization complimenting me.					

4	When my supervisor pays attention to my efforts, I believe that my organization is paying attention to my efforts.					
5	My supervisor is a characteristic of my organization.					
<b>Employee voice behavior</b>						
1	I make suggestions to management or my supervisor about correcting inefficiency in my organization.					
2	I bring my criticism about organizational changes that aren't working to my supervisor or someone in management.					
3	I speak with my supervisor or someone in organization when I question workplace decisions.					
4	I tell supervisor when I believe employees are being treated unfairly.					
5	I let other employees know how I feel about the way things are done around here.					

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