



Examining the Role of Transparent Organizational Communication for Employees' Job Engagement and Disengagement during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Austria

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ABSTRACT

This study provides an understanding of how employees' perception of organizational transparency during the long-lasting situation of the COVID-19 pandemic engendered their job engagement as well as job disengagement. Data were collected by means of an online survey among 410 employees in Austria during March 2021. Results show that employees' perception of their organization's approach to transparency directly influenced their job engagement and disengagement. Importantly, the relationship between transparency and job engagement was also mediated through organizational trust, and job-specific state anxiety mediated the relationship between transparency and job disengagement. The results imply the importance of transparency during times of great uncertainty and emphasize the necessity to closely consider employees' emotional states and worries during a crisis.

KEYWORDS: transparent organizational communication, COVID-19, organizational trust, job-specific state anxiety, job (dis)engagement

At the beginning of 2020, the COVID-19 virus started to spread suddenly and uncontrollably all over the world, resulting in a pandemic and a major social and economic global disaster with widespread implications for the public and private sectors alike. In many organizations, the COVID-19 pandemic spawned a

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crisis, as it was an unexpected event with high uncertainty and ambiguity (Coombs, 2015) where control within the organization was not constantly maintained. In such a situation, organizations have to inform their employees about crisis-related changes, meet their needs to reduce job-specific anxiety (Spielberger et al., 1983), and maintain trust in management (Hon & Grunig, 1999).

To contain the spread of the virus, the Austrian government—like many other governments in Europe and all over the world—has ordered several shutdowns since March 2020, which led to radical changes regarding organizations' freedom to operate. The long-lasting crisis situation has involved many restrictions that caused hardship and uncertainty for organizations and their employees. Thus, a major organizational concern and an economic necessity are to ensure employees' continued job engagement (Chanaana & Sangeeta, 2020; Mani & Mishra, 2020), which is defined as the degree to which individuals stay attentive and absorbed in the performance of their jobs (Saks, 2006). If employees disengage with their jobs, an organization's performance can suffer severely (Wollard, 2011). To achieve job engagement and minimize the risk of job disengagement, effective internal crisis communication is vital (Strandberg & Vigsø, 2016), which is defined as "the communicative interaction among managers and employees, in a private or public organization, before, during and after an organizational or societal crisis" (Johansen et al., 2012, p. 271). During the COVID-19 pandemic, practitioners and employees alike have called for a transparent, helpful, and bidirectional organizational communication approach (Argenti, 2020; Orange fiery, 2020).

Extant research has not only highlighted the role of governmental transparency during the COVID-19 (Moon, 2020) and SARS pandemics (Menon & Goh, 2005) but also demonstrated the importance of organizational transparency to build trust and alleviate stress (Spalluto et al., 2020). Under normal conditions, employee communication benefits from a transparent approach in which managers communicate substantial information, give options for participation, and hold themselves accountable (Rawlins, 2009). Transparency is considered a key element in strategic communication (Albu & Wehmeier, 2014), and research has shown positive effects of transparency perceptions on organizational

identification (Men et al., 2020), employee engagement (Jiang & Men, 2017; Men & Hung-Baesecke, 2015), trust (Rawlins, 2009; Yue et al., 2019), internal reputation and improvement of the quality of employee-organization relationships (Men, 2014; Men & Stacks, 2014), positive communication behavior (Kim, 2018), as well as health information disclosure intentions (Lee & Li, 2020).

The role of transparent communication in organizational crises can be explained by drawing on the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), which describes how the deployment of organizational resources results in employees' reciprocation in terms of pro-social attitudes and behavior. Transparent organizational communication can be seen as a socioemotional resource (Foa & Foa, 1980) that employees may repay with trust in their management and job engagement (Saks, 2006). However, if employees do not experience transparency from their organization, they may feel discouraged to return any resources. Even worse, a lack of transparency may enhance employees' uncertainty and anxiety experienced during times of crisis and cause them to disengage from their job by disconnecting from their work roles (Kahn, 1990). Currently, not much is known about the actual value of transparency perceptions in warding off negative reactions and strengthening positive ones during organizational crisis situations like those caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine the role of transparency perceptions in strengthening job engagement and buffering job disengagement during a time where high uncertainty is expressed and employees depend on support not just from the government but also from their employers. This research aims to reveal the influence of employees' perceptions of transparent internal crisis communication during the COVID-19 pandemic on their job engagement and disengagement and unveil factors that mediate this relationship.

The present study strengthens our understanding of crisis communication during a major pandemic in several ways. First, we provide empirical evidence for the value of a specific crisis communication approach that has been considered a problem-solving mechanism for different societal challenges (Ringel, 2017). Second, the study contributes to crisis communication literature (e.g., Frandsen & Johansen, 2011; Heide & Simonsson, 2020) by

integrating the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) to explain the potential of transparent communication during a crisis to stimulate the reciprocation of job engagement and prevent job disengagement. Third, the study sheds light on the effects of crisis communication on an under-researched, yet success-critical construct: job disengagement. It further reveals the role of job-specific anxiety, which is an emotional response in times of health uncertainty (J. Hu et al., 2020) for job disengagement. The study aims to stimulate the debate on the value of a transparent approach in crisis communication to protect organizations from negative outcomes. Finally, its results will encourage communication scholars to rethink the conceptualization of transparent communication.

After outlining the main constructs, theory, and deriving hypotheses, we will present the results of a survey conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic among 410 people employed in organizations in Austria. The paper concludes with a discussion, theoretical and practical implications, limitations, and ideas for further research.

Literature Review

Transparent Organizational Communication during Crises

The public attribution of transparency is considered to be a celebrated, respected ideal and aspiration of modern society (e.g., Christensen & Cheney, 2015). During the COVID-19 pandemic, practitioners have stressed the importance of a transparent communication approach. Argenti (2020), for example, advises those responsible for corporate communication to transparently explain what they know about the crisis, from where they obtain knowledge about the events surrounding the crisis, and what they do not know. A survey among adults employed in the U.S. supports this claim by emphasizing the demands for a transparent organizational communication approach from employees (Orangefiery, 2020).

From a conceptual point of view, organizational transparency is inspired by considerations from management and strategic communication research (Men & Stacks, 2014; Rawlins, 2009). According to Schnackenberg and Tomlinson (2016), transparency

perceptions are the degree of perceived information disclosure, clarity, and accuracy. Therefore, researchers have defined transparency as “the perceived quality of intentionally shared information from a sender” (p. 1788). In communications, the multidimensional conceptualization by Rawlins (2009) is frequently used, based on which Men and Stacks (2014) defined internal transparent communication as “an organization’s communication to make available all legally releasable information to employees whether positive or negative in nature—in a manner that is accurate, timely, balanced, and unequivocal, for the purpose of enhancing the reasoning ability of employees, and holding organizations accountable for their actions, policies, and practices” (p. 306). Specifically, Rawlins (2009) found empirical support for the combination of three dimensions, or organizational efforts, to create perceptions of transparency (Balkin, 1999): (1) the distribution of substantial information; (2) the provision of possibilities for participation to identify stakeholders needs; and (3) objective reporting about organizational activities and actions to hold the organization accountable (Rawlins, 2009).¹

The first dimension, substantial information, comes close to the understanding of the transparency concept as defined by Schnackenberg und Tomlinson (2016). Rawlins referred to this as the sharing of information that is relevant, clear, complete, accurate, reliable, and verifiable in a timely manner. During the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, sharing general crisis-related information about the virus and respective regulations in addition to providing employee-oriented instructions on what to do and not do have been considered core elements of crisis communication (Heide & Simonsson, 2020). Rawlins’s second dimension, participation, is considered essential to find out stakeholders’ needs and wants. The importance of providing platforms for discussion has also been emphasized in the crisis communication literature (Heide & Simonsson, 2020). The third dimension, accountability, means to focus on areas that require improvement and to expose

1. Rawlins proposed a fourth dimension of transparency, which he termed secrecy. A closer look at this dimension reveals that it means the opposite of dissemination of substantial information; therefore, it is not separately integrated in the model.

the organization's weaknesses (Rawlins, 2009). This demonstrates responsibility and the ability to take criticism, thereby enhancing the organization's ethical nature (Men & Stacks, 2014). Rawlins (2009) concluded that striving for transparency entails integrity, respect, and openness, which also engenders stakeholder trust (Balkin, 1999).

Empirical research on the value and effects of a transparent approach during a crisis situation on employees has become more prevalent in recent years. It has been shown that transparent communication stimulates employees' sensemaking and sensegiving processes during a crisis, which highlights the importance of ensuring participation, evaluating strategic communication behavior, and developing further communication strategies (Kim, 2018). For the external organization context, the relationship between transparency and trust was experimentally investigated by Auger (2014), who confirmed the positive effect of transparency on the public's trust and support. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Lee and Li (2021) showed that transparent information is relevant to increasing public trust. As employees are important receivers of crisis information (Strandberg & Vigsø, 2016), more research about the effects of internal transparent communication is needed.

Job Engagement and Job Disengagement

Job engagement matters, especially during a worldwide pandemic with massive effects on the economy and organizations (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2020; Mani & Mishra, 2020). There are various conceptualizations and research streams on the antecedents and effects of engagement in the working context (Shen & Jiang, 2019). Drawing on Kahn (1990), Saks proposed a concept differentiating between job engagement and organizational engagement. In this study, we focus on job engagement, which Saks (2006) defined as "cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components that are associated with individual role performance" (p. 602). It is rather "the degree to which an individual is attentive and absorbed in the performance of their roles" (Saks, 2006, p. 602) than a mere attitude held by an employee. We prefer this comprehensive understanding over more

narrow views that perceive engagement solely as an affective state (e.g., Men, 2015) or a psychological state (e.g., Schaufeli, 2013), as it is more closely related to employees' actual behavioral support for their employer. According to Kahn (1990), three psychological conditions exhibit a relevant impact on job engagement and, correspondingly, job disengagement: meaningfulness, safety, and availability.

Previous research has shown the positive effects of employee engagement, like a higher rate of job satisfaction (Biswas & Bhatnagar, 2013; Saks, 2006), commitment to the organization (Saks, 2006), reduced turnover intentions, and an increased willingness to support the employer through positive communication behavior (Kang & Sung, 2017; Shen & Jiang, 2019). Yin (2018) underlined the positive influence of engagement on citizenship behavior (see also Saks, 2006), task performance, and the negative relationship between counterproductive work and engagement. Additionally, engagement matters for organizational success (Saks & Gruman, 2014; Wollard, 2011) and competitiveness (Men & Bowen, 2017; Saks & Gruman, 2014), as well as employee well-being (Men & Bowen, 2017; Wollard, 2011) and employee satisfaction (Men & Bowen, 2017).

On the contrary, job disengagement, which is much less discussed in the academic literature (Rastogi et al., 2018), can be understood as a state where employees cognitively, physically, and emotionally uncouple themselves from their normal work role as a way of self-protection (Kahn, 1990). According to Kahn, the absence of the three psychological conditions—meaningfulness, safety, and availability—trigger the decision to actively disengage. Disengagement is, therefore, an internal process, a form of disconnection from the job where individuals protect themselves from perceived threats (Kahn, 1990; Wollard, 2011). It is not a permanent state but rather a condition that depends on the work environment and “manifests in behaviors that put physical, mental, and emotional distance between the worker and their work, their peers, and their organization” (Wollard, 2011, p. 529). Others perceive disengagement as a component of burnout (Rastogi et al., 2018). Importantly, job disengagement is more than the absence of

job engagement, as different cognitive, emotional, and behavioral outcomes are expected to further influence employees' personal and professional lives (see Wang et al., 2019, for the school context). Employees who are disengaged in their jobs do not merely lack energized involvement in their work role. They also engage in maladaptive processes where they emotionally, mentally, and physically withdraw from their required responsibilities.

Importantly, job disengagement is assumed to be a huge problem for organizations (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2020) and employees (Wollard, 2011), as demonstrated by a systematic literature analysis on the effects of job disengagement. It is presumed to include low energy, low social behavior, disinterestedness, dissatisfaction, poor work performance, counterproductive work behavior, uncertainty, and turnover intentions (Rastogi et al., 2018). Empirically, it has been shown that job disengagement (Kahn, 1990) mediates the relationship between psychological contract violation and turnover intentions (Azeem et al., 2020). For the public sector, Aslam et al. (2018) found that organizational injustice, negative political influence, and work overload lead to disengagement.

Development of Hypotheses

The Influence of Transparency on Job Engagement and Disengagement

The social exchange theory provides a valuable theoretical rationale to explain workplace behavior (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) and is, therefore, suitable to analyze the role of transparent crisis communication and job (dis)engagement. One of the key assumptions is that relationships in the working context are based on reciprocity (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), where "something has to be given and something returned" (Blau, 1964, p. 876). This reciprocal exchange is particularly crucial in times of crisis when organizations and employees depend on one another even more than in normal times. During the COVID-19 pandemic, organizations have demanded a lot from their employees. Most employees had to adapt to changed working conditions either at their workplace or when working from home. In sectors with slumps in orders, employees often had to accept pay cuts, while those in system-

relevant sectors had to work even harder. This meant that organizations needed to provide adequate resources in return for their employees' resources in the form of job engagement. As argued in the social exchange theory, organizations can provide economic (money, goods and services) and socioemotional (information, love, status) resources in exchange for employees' supportive emotions, cognitions, and behavior (Blau, 1964; Foa & Foa, 1980). As economic resources were scarce during the pandemic, the need to provide socioemotional resources, especially *information*, became even greater. Transparent communication can serve as a socioemotional resource by providing relevant, timely, and accurate information to employees. The role of communication to engage employees has already been recognized in the academic discourse (e.g., Rich et al., 2010), and previous research provides empirical support for the positive relationship between organizational transparency and job engagement.

Interviews with public relations practitioners suggest that internal communication is vital to build a culture of transparency, which helps to engage employees at work (Mishra et al., 2014). Jiang and Men (2017) as well as Jiang and Shen (2020) confirmed the direct relationship between a good organization–employee relationship and engagement. Additionally, both studies showed that authentic leadership mediated by transparent organizational communication fosters engagement. Employees are also more likely to identify with their organization when they perceive the dimensions of transparency (Men et al., 2020; Men & Hung-Baesecke, 2015). Lemon (2019) complemented prior discussions by stressing the role of active listening by management to engage employees. Insights into the influence of transparency on job engagement have been gained in the context of stable political, economic, and social contexts but not in times of crises that are marked by uncertainty and perceived threats to high priority goals (Seeger et al., 2003). A lack of resources from the organization should undermine perceived meaningfulness, safety, and availability and, thereby, stimulate job disengagement. Drawing on the social exchange theory and the findings from “stable economic times,” we hypothesize for times of crisis:

H1: The higher the employees' perceived transparency of organizational communication, the higher their job engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic.

H2: The lower the employees' perceived transparency of organizational communication, the higher their job disengagement during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Influence of Job-Specific State Anxiety on Job Disengagement

As a result of the strict regulations enforced by the Austrian government during the pandemic, many employees had to adapt to working from home, whereas others working in system-relevant professions had to remain “on the front line” under aggravated conditions. Whether at home or “on the front line,” many were affected by the effects of reduced working hours, resulting in reduced wages or even potential job loss. In addition to these work-related stressors, the media fueled anxiety in people by permanently reiterating the negative and possibly deadly effects of a COVID-19 infection and the detrimental effects of the pandemic on the national and world economy. This is likely to lead to job-specific state anxiety in employees (Spielberger et al., 1983).

Spielberger et al. (1983) defined anxiety as an emotional state characterized by feelings of apprehension, worry and tension, rising blood pressure, and anticipation of future threats or dangers. According to Brooks and Schweizer (2011), state anxiety occurs “in reaction to stimuli, including novel situations and the potential for undesirable outcomes” (p. 44). Furthermore, research on terrorism management suggests that experiences of mortality cause feelings of anxiety and, as a consequence, damage individuals' well-being (Burke et al., 2010). There is a link between exposure to death and the triggering of anxiety, which consequently initiates self-protection and withdrawal behavior and, in an organizational context, reduces job engagement (Grant & Wade-Benzoni, 2009; Sliter et al., 2014). Recent research in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in China and the U.S. has confirmed the negative influence of state anxiety on job engagement (J. Hu et al., 2020),

showing that the mortality salience triggered by the pandemic enhanced state anxiety, and servant leaders helped anxious people to stay engaged in their jobs. Hence, we hypothesize:

H3: The stronger the employees' job-specific state anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic, the stronger their disengagement with their job.

The Influence of Employees' Organizational Trust on Job Engagement

During a crisis, employees' welfare depends on the decisions made by their corporate management who have to quickly introduce measures under high levels of uncertainty. In a victim crisis elicited by a health disaster, organizations suffer through no fault of their own (Coombs, 2007). Nevertheless, they bear the responsibility to manage the uncertain situation, which includes providing trustworthy information. As Veil et al. (2011, p. 111) noted: "Once an organization is no longer considered a source of trustworthy information, management of the crisis is lost." Based on Hon and Grunig (1999), Rawlins (2008) defined organizational trust as "one party's willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that the latter party is competent and dependable, has integrity, and acts with goodwill" (p. 5). Integrity is the belief that an organization acts fairly and justly; dependability refers to the belief that an organization does what it says it will do; and competence is the belief that the organization is able to do what it says it will do (Hon & Grunig, 1999). All three dimensions are considered important in a crisis context where individuals lack the knowledge to make their own decisions (Gillespie et al., 2020) and depend on the provision of relevant resources from their organization (Blau, 1964). In the internal organizational context, trust has been shown to foster openness to change (Yue et al., 2019) and organizational affective commitment (Xiong et al., 2016). Moreover, good employee–organization relationships during a crisis have a positive effect on internal reputation and employees' behavioral intentions—favoring new tasks with extra responsibility and even the sacrifice of privileges, risks, or discomfort (Kim et al., 2019; Mazzei et al., 2019). Several studies have investigated

trust in various contexts as a key antecedent of employees' engagement (e.g., Ugwu et al., 2014). With regard to a pandemic, Siegrist and Zingg (2014) highlighted the importance of trust in different institutions, organizations, or actors. They concluded that trust can positively influence people's acceptance of the rules and their adoption of recommended behaviors, like the willingness to vaccinate. For the COVID-19 context, Lee and Li (2021) showed the importance of organizational trust in order to create risk awareness and influence social distancing behavior in the general public.

In view of these arguments and previous findings, we conclude that employees' trust in their organization fosters job engagement because they feel confident that their organization has the competence and the integrity to find good and fair solutions, thus allowing the employees to attend to and absorb their role. Hence:

H4: The stronger the employees' trust in the organization during the COVID-19 pandemic, the stronger their job engagement.

The Influence of Transparency on Organizational Trust and Job-Specific State Anxiety

During a crisis, employees have considerable needs for information and high expectations for adequate and timely information from management (Heide & Simonsson, 2014; Johansen et al., 2012). Effective internal crisis communication is vital for safeguarding trust in the relationship between an organization and its employees (Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2015; Ulmer et al., 2017), as it can signal competence and integrity; this, in turn, elicits a sense of safety in employees, which is an important condition for engagement (Kahn, 1990). Siegrist and Zingg (2014) recommended a transparent crisis communication approach during a pandemic, which includes informing individuals about what is known and unknown about the pandemic "without triggering unnecessary fears and anxiety" (p. 20) by discussing uncertainties. They argued that failure to inform about the pandemic transparently can abruptly undermine trust toward the responsible institutions or organizations. Additionally, management research has indicated that a lack of information during a crisis

can generate negative outcomes, such as a loss of trust in management (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2000). According to Jahansoozi (2006), transparency during crises functions as “a relational condition or variable that promotes accountability, collaboration, cooperation and commitment” (p. 943) and “a critical condition for rebuilding trust” (p. 954). Research has already confirmed this relationship (Rawlins, 2008; Yue et al., 2019), highlighting the expanded role of transparent communication as a key driver for a good, sustainable organizational climate (Men, 2014; Men & Stacks, 2014), which is essential also after a crisis. Furthermore, research on the COVID-19 pandemic has indicated the need to increase transparency efforts toward employees to increase trust (Spalluto et al., 2020). This assumption is confirmed by Lee and Li (2021) for the external institutional context by showing that transparent information during the COVID-19 pandemic increases public trust in health institutions. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H5: The higher the employees’ perceived transparency of organizational communication during the COVID-19 pandemic, the stronger their trust in the organization.

H6: Organizational trust mediates the positive effect of transparent communication on job engagement.

Effective crisis communication is crucial to improve employees’ perceptions about uncertainties (Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2011), and effective crisis communication is essential to reduce anxiety and uncertainty (Bordia et al., 2014). As Kim et al. (2019) showed, a good organizational-employee relationship can reduce anxiety during a crisis. Moreover, ambiguous messages from management and/or confusing information from external media can negatively affect employees’ organizational trust. A transparent approach can help reduce anxiety, as it includes two-way symmetrical communication where management is willing to listen and respond to concerns (Men & Stacks, 2014). According to the uncertainty reduction theory, in an unknown situation, individuals actively collect information to reduce their uncertainty and alleviate their concerns (Hogg & Belavadi, 2017). Thus, a communication style that contains substantial information allows participation and

holds organizations accountable, thus reducing feelings of anxiety triggered by the pandemic. On the other hand, if transparency is lacking in communication, anxiety persists. Thus, we hypothesize:

H7: The lower the employees' perceived transparency of organizational communication during the COVID-19 pandemic, the higher their job-specific state anxiety.

H8: Job-specific anxiety mediates the negative effect of transparent communication on job disengagement.

Method

Procedure

To test the hypotheses, an online survey among people employed in organizations in Austria was conducted between March 8 and 12 of 2021, almost 1 year to the date after the Austrian government mandated the first shutdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants were recruited with the assistance of the market research service provider Dynata. Invited panelists were employed for more than 1 year in an organization with 250 or more employees, so that respondents' evaluations of internal crisis communication were based on a comparable timespan. In total, 436 people fulfilled these criteria and completed the questionnaire. Of those, 26 were excluded from the final sample because they were categorized as "speeders" (i.e., they spent less than 50% of the median response time (= 512 sec) on the questionnaire). The survey was structured as follows: After an introduction, which broadly introduced the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on organizations and employees as the topic of the survey, respondents were asked for their informed consent. Next, some general questions about current employment (e.g., tenure, share of remote working during the pandemic) were presented to focus the respondents' minds on their work situation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants were then asked to think about the past year and evaluate their organizations' internal communications (transparency) during this time span. The following section was introduced by a clear instruction indicating that the subsequent questions would

address how respondents feel and think at the moment. In this section, the respondents' perception of job-specific state anxiety, organizational trust, and job engagement/disengagement were measured. The questionnaire closed with sociodemographic questions.

Sample

The final sample comprises 410 respondents, of whom 51% identified as female and 49% as male. The average age was 43.7 (SD = 10.8). Asked for their highest educational qualification, 29.5% stated to have a high school diploma, 29.2% held a university degree, 25.9% had completed an apprenticeship, 12.8% had an intermediate educational qualification, and 2.5% stated they had compulsory schooling. The respondents were employed across a variety of industries and sectors (public administration/service: 16.8%, healthcare and social assistance: 15.9%, manufacturing: 15.4%, retail/trade: 8.8%, transportation and logistics: 7.8%, media, information and communication: 6.1%, educational services: 5.9%, finance and insurance: 5.1%, science and research: 2.7%, construction: 2.4%; accommodation and food services: 2.2%, utilities: 2.0%, and other sectors: 8.9%). The majority (71%) worked in an organization with more than 1,000 employees. Organizational tenure was distributed as follows: 15.6% had been employed with the organization for up to 3 years, 14.6% for 3–5 years, 18.1% for 5–10 years, and 51.5% for more than 10 years. A position with managerial responsibility was held by 31% of the employees in the sample. More than half (57.3%) of the respondents stated that they had worked at least partially from home during the past year due to the pandemic.

Measurements

If available, measures to gauge the variables were taken or adapted from established scales. All items were rated on 7-point rating scales.

Perceived transparency of organizational communication during the crisis was measured in accordance with previous studies (e.g., Jiang & Luo, 2018; Men & Stacks, 2014; Yue et al., 2019)

that had operationalized transparent communication as a second-order construct comprising the three dimensions of substantiality, participation, and accountability (Rawlins, 2008). However, our data revealed violations of discriminant validity between transparent communication and organizational trust.² Such violations need to be addressed, because “a lack of discriminant validity calls into question whether statistically significant parameters are really supported by the data or are simply an artifact of modeling the same constructs twice in one model” (Voorhees et al., 2016, p. 120). Possible remedies for the issue are revisiting data collection or dropping redundant constructs from the model, if conceptually appropriate (Voorhees et al., 2016). The study presented here is already the result of revisiting data collection after the issue of a lack of discriminant validity between transparency and trust had come up in data collected earlier during the pandemic (in April 2020). As documented in the Appendix (see Appendices A1 and A2), attempts to refine the measurements (particularly by supplementing the trust measurement with the three items to gauge employees’ overall willingness to trust their organization and by more precisely defining a different time reference for the two measurements) did not fix the problem.³ As a remedy, we finally excluded the accountability and participation dimensions from the measurement of transparency, focusing on substantiality only. This solution ensured discriminant validity between employees’ perception of transparency of organizational communication and their trust in the organization. From a theoretical perspective, this narrower operationalization is appropriate, as, for example, Schnackenberg and Tomlinson (2016) limited their conceptualization of organizational transparency to perceived information

2. Rawlins proposed a fourth dimension of transparency, which he termed *secrecy*. A closer look at this dimension reveals that it means the opposite of dissemination of substantial information; therefore, it is not separately integrated in the model.

3. Beside the lack of discriminant validity between transparency and trust, results from an exploratory factor analysis did not support the three-dimensional structure of transparency, because accountability and participation are loaded on one common factor. This is reflected in a lack of discriminant validity between these two dimensions (see Appendices A1 and A2).

disclosure, clarity, and accuracy, aspects that are all reflected in the measurement of substantiality.

For the measurement of employees' trust in their organization, we adapted items from the scale by Rawlins (2008) that captures employees' overall willingness to trust the organization and perceived trustworthiness (i.e., the perceived goodwill, integrity, and competence of the organization). Job-specific state anxiety was measured with items from the short form of the Spielberger state-trait anxiety inventory (Marteau & Bekker, 1992). Four items from the scale by Saks (2006) were used to measure job engagement in our study context. Job disengagement was measured by three negatively valenced items: one taken from Saks and two developed by the authors in order to gauge respondents' deficient job role performance.

Detailed information on the wording of questions, scale endpoints, and items can be found in Table 1.

TABLE 1 Measurement Model

Construct/Items	SL	α	CR	AVE
Transparent Organizational Communication		0.96	0.96	0.77
Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements about the internal communication of your organization during the corona time. (Scale from 1 "strongly disagree" to 7 "strongly agree")				
<i>My organization...</i>				
<i>... provides information in a timely fashion to people like me.</i>	0.86			
<i>... provides information that is relevant to people like me.</i>	0.88			
<i>... provides information that is complete.</i>	0.92			
<i>... provides information that is easy for people like me to understand.</i>	0.85			
<i>... provides accurate information to people like me.</i>	0.90			
<i>... provides information that is reliable.</i>	0.92			
<i>... provides detailed information to people like me.</i>	0.80			
<i>... provides information that can be compared to previous performance.</i>	deleted			

Job-Specific State Anxiety	0.84	0.85	0.65
Please tell us how you feel at the moment with respect to your job. (Scale from 1 "not at all" to 7 "very much so")			
<i>I feel tense.</i>	0.77		
<i>I feel upset.</i>	0.88		
<i>I feel worried.</i>	0.75		
Organizational Trust	0.95	0.95	0.73
Below you will find several statements about your organization. Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with each of these statements. (Scale from 1 "strongly disagree" to 7 "strongly agree")			
<i>I trust the organization to take care of people like me.</i>	0.90		
<i>I feel confident that my organization acts in the best interest of people like me, even if I cannot monitor its actions.</i>	0.90		
<i>Whenever this organization makes a decision, I know it will be concerned about people like me.</i>	0.83		
<i>I believe this organization takes the opinions of people like me into account when making decisions.</i>	0.79		
<i>The organization treats people like me fairly and justly.</i>	0.87		
<i>The organization can be relied on to keep its promises.</i>	0.87		
<i>I feel very confident about the skills of this organization.</i>	0.81		
<i>I'm willing to let the organization make decisions for people like me.</i>	deleted		
<i>I think it is important to watch this organization closely so that it does not take advantage of people like me.</i>	deleted		
<i>This organization has the ability to accomplish what it says it will do.</i>	deleted		
Job Engagement	0.80	0.81	0.59
Finally, here are some statements about how you are currently doing with your work. Please indicate again how strongly you agree or disagree with each of these statements. (Scale from 1 "strongly disagree" to 7 "strongly agree")			
<i>I really "throw" myself into my job.</i>	0.72		
<i>I am totally into my job.</i>	0.79		
<i>I am highly engaged in my job.</i>	0.80		
<i>Sometimes I am so into my job that I lose track of time.</i>	deleted		

Job Disengagement	0.82	0.82	0.60
<i>At the moment I can hardly concentrate on my work.</i>	0.83		
<i>I often think of other things when doing my job.</i>	0.75		
<i>I am not very productive at my job at the moment.</i>	0.75		

Note: SL = standardized loading; α = Cronbach's alpha; CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted; all loadings are significant at the .001 level.

Results

In accordance with Kline (1998), we executed a two-step structural equation modeling analysis using AMOS 26 software under maximum likelihood estimation (see Table 2). First, the measurement model was tested based on the a priori theoretical conceptualizations of the constructs. Second, we tested the structural model and the hypothesized relationships between the variables. In both steps, the cutoff criteria proposed by L. T. Hu and Bentler (1999) served as a reference point for the evaluation of the data-model fit.

TABLE 2 Discriminant Validity of Construct Measurements

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
(1) Transparent communication	0.88	0.79	0.32	0.48	0.25
(2) Organizational trust	0.79	0.85	0.36	0.52	0.21
(3) Job-specific state anxiety	-0.32	-0.38	0.81	0.33	0.51
(4) Job engagement	0.49	0.52	-0.34	0.77	0.68
(5) Job disengagement	-0.25	-0.22	0.51	-0.67	0.77

Note: Diagonal and bold elements are the square roots of the AVE (average variance extracted). Below the diagonal elements are the correlations between the constructs' values, and above the diagonal elements are the HTMT (heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations) values. All bivariate correlations are significant at the $p < .001$ -level.

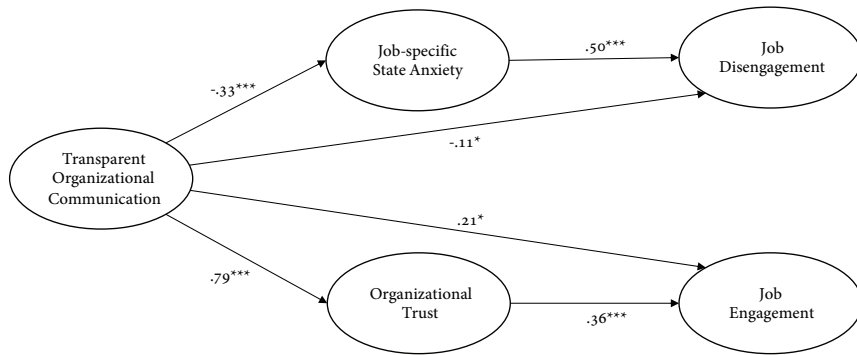
Measurement Model

After deleting a few indicators that showed unsatisfactory factor loadings during initial confirmatory factor analysis (see Table 1), the final measurement model showed a good model-data fit ($\chi^2 = 438,564$ [$p < .001$]; $df = 218$; CFI = .973; TLI = .969; RMSEA = .049 [90% CI: .042, .055], SRMR = .042). Standardized factor loadings

are reported in Table 1 and exceeded, in all cases, the ideal threshold of .70 (Chin, 1998). Strong reliability and convergent validity were indicated for all constructs (see Table 1): Cronbach's alpha scores ranged from .80 to .96 and composite reliabilities from .81 to .96, all exceeding the minimum threshold of .70. In addition, all AVE (average variance extracted) scores were above the cut-off criterium ($> .50$) for convergent validity (Hair et al., 2009). For a rigorous assessment of discriminant validity, we applied two techniques: the common Fornell-Larcker-criterion (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) and the more recently proposed heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations (Henseler et al., 2015; Voorhees et al., 2016). For all dyads of constructs, the Fornell-Larcker criterion was fulfilled, and the HTMT ratio was below the conservative threshold of .85, which indicates discriminant validity across all measurements (see Table 2). Overall, the constructs exhibit sound measurement properties.

Structural Model

Based on previous literature (e.g., Yue et al., 2019), age, gender, organizational tenure, position, and company size could potentially affect the endogenous variables and were included as controls in the structural model. Additionally, we assumed that whether an employee was working from home or at the regular workplace could possibly impact the endogenous variables (especially job-specific anxiety, job engagement, and job disengagement). Consequently, the share of time working from home due to the pandemic was included as a further control variable in the structural model. For reasons of model parsimony, only the significant paths from the control variables to the endogenous variables were retained in the final model (significant effects are reported in the annotations of Figure 1). Overall, the structural model demonstrated an acceptable fit ($\chi^2 = 659.963$ [$p < .001$]; $df = 285$; CFI = .953; TLI = .946; RMSEA = .057 [90% CI: .051 to .062], SRMR = .069) and all hypothesized relationships were significant ($p < .05$). Hence, the hypothesized model was retained as the final model (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1 The structural model with standardized path coefficients

Note: $\chi^2 = 659.963$ [$p < .001$]; $df = 285$; $CFI = .953$; $TLI = .946$; $RMSEA = .057$ [90% CI: .051 to .062], $SRMR = .069$. Job-specific state anxiety: $R^2 = .14$; organizational trust: $R^2 = .62$; job disengagement: $R^2 = .31$; job engagement: $R^2 = .29$. The following significant effects emerged for the control variables: age \rightarrow job-specific state anxiety: $\beta = -.21^{***}$; working from home \rightarrow disengagement: $\beta = .15^{**}$; gender \rightarrow organizational trust: $\beta = .09^{**}$; $***p < .001$, $**p < .01$, $*p < .05$.

Hypothesis Testing

The data reveal a positive relationship between transparent organizational communication and employees' job engagement ($\beta = .21$, $p < .05$), supporting H1. As assumed in H2, transparent organizational communication had a significant negative effect on employees' job disengagement ($\beta = -.11$, $p < .05$). Beside these direct effects, a main interest of the study was to assess the mediating influence of job-specific state anxiety and organizational trust.

In support of H3, job-specific state anxiety had a positive effect on job disengagement ($\beta = .50$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, the proposed attenuating effect of transparent organizational communication on job-specific anxiety (H7) was significant ($\beta = -.33$, $p < .001$). To examine whether job-specific anxiety mediated the effect of transparent communication on job disengagement, we conducted a mediation test using the bootstrapping procedure

($N = 2,000$ samples). A bias-corrected bootstrap interval completely below zero indicated a significant negative indirect effect ($\beta = -.17, p < .001, [95\% \text{ CI}: -.25 \text{ to } -.10]$) and supported H8. Thus, the lower the perceived organizational transparency, the higher the participants' job-specific state anxiety, which then enhanced the level of job disengagement. For job-specific state anxiety, R^2 was .14, and for job disengagement, R^2 was .31.

In support of H4, organizational trust had a positive and significant effect on job engagement ($\beta = .36, p < .001$). Also, the positive effect of transparent organizational communication on organizational trust proposed in H5 was supported ($\beta = .79, p < .001$). The bootstrapping procedure resulted in a bias-corrected confidence interval completely above zero and supported a significant positive indirect effect ($\beta = .24, p < .001, [95\% \text{ CI}: .11 \text{ to } .38]$) of transparent communication on job engagement via employees' organizational trust. This supports H6. For organizational trust, R^2 was .62, and for job engagement, R^2 was .29. To substantiate the above findings, we also estimated the model based on the data from the earlier study—all the hypothesized effects showed significance (see Appendix A3).

Discussion

Grounded in the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Kahn, 1990) and the concept of organizational transparency (Rawlins, 2009), the purpose of this research was to examine the relationship between transparent organizational communication and job engagement, particularly job disengagement during the COVID-19 pandemic in Austria. Specifically, this study investigated the role of transparent organizational communication as a resource needed by employees during a crisis for engendering organizational trust and reducing job-specific anxiety, which were hypothesized to be important mediators explaining job (dis)engagement in employees.

The results emphasize the value of relevant, clear, complete, accurate, reliable, and verifiable information in a timely manner

during this health crisis to stimulate job engagement and protect employees and organizations from job disengagement. Contrary to the theoretical and empirical assumptions by Rawlins (2009), transparent communication is—at least in this study context—more adequately represented just through the dimension of substantial information (see also Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016), as participation and accountability are insufficiently discriminant to organizational trust. With this adaptation to the transparency construct, the study confirmed the role of organizational trust as a relevant mediator of the relationship between transparent communication and job engagement (Yue et al., 2019). This suggests that transparent internal communication and trust are crucial to uphold employees' willingness to provide resources in the form of job engagement throughout the crisis, when the environment is full of divergent information, negative reporting, and the risk of becoming infected by a potentially deadly virus. However, when employees do not perceive that they are receiving adequate resources from their employer in the form of transparent communication, the likelihood of disconnecting with work roles (Wollard, 2011) increased, as employees experienced enhanced job-specific anxiety. Yet, anxiety only weakly mediated the influence of transparent organizational communication on job disengagement, indicating that there are other factors that influenced job-specific anxiety during the crisis. Interestingly, younger employees perceived more job-specific anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic than older employees, which is indicated by a significant effect of age on job-specific state anxiety ($\beta = -.21, p < .001$). This may be due to more unstable and precarious working conditions of younger people. The results further reveal that employees working in remote conditions were more disengaged from their jobs ($\beta = .15, p < .01$), which can be explained by their greater isolation and disconnection from their work environment. This finding points to the necessity for more resources than merely substantial information to prevent those working remotely from home to disconnect from their jobs.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The study contributes to the current literature on crisis communication and the discussion about antecedents to protect organizations and employees from disengagement during a crisis. Additionally, the results of the study question the multidimensional conceptualization of transparent communication (Men & Stacks, 2014; Rawlins, 2009).

Above all, the study also confirmed the importance of transparent organizational crisis communication (Kim, 2018) for the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The results complement prior research on organizational transparency (Jiang & Shen, 2020; Men & Stacks, 2014; Men et al., 2020; Yue et al., 2019) and support the theoretical relationship of transparency and engagement (Kahn, 1990). The research confirms the importance of socioemotional resource *information* as a relevant driver for desired reactions during an uncertain situation (Foa & Foa, 1980), thereby expanding the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) to the context of a health crisis. Furthermore, the results are also consistent with findings from prior research on the value of organizational trust during crises (Siegrist & Zingg, 2014; Spalluto et al., 2020). Importantly, this research contributes to the scarce findings on job disengagement during crises and fosters the debate about this construct (Kahn, 1990; Wollard, 2011). As shown, disengagement is influenced by transparent communication but not very strongly. During the COVID-19 pandemic, external stressors were most likely important causes of anxiety and, subsequently, disengagement. As J. Hu et al. (2020) already assumed in their study conducted in China and the U.S., the pandemic has mental and emotional influences that require sensitivity from crisis management. As the crisis context has most likely had a strong influence on people's emotional state, including job-specific state anxiety, appealing communications and supportive management behaviors are likely antecedents that will help reduce stress and anxiety and, subsequently, disengagement over and above transparent communication. We can further assume that if a crisis originates from within the organization, the stressors may also be more

internal, and transparent communication may play an even bigger role in reducing disengagement. As noted by Kim et al. (2019), more research is needed to explore “the roles of emotions for internal crisis communication studies” (p. 13).

The research also contributes to the discussion on the conceptualization of transparency. As shown across two data sets, transparency may be more adequately conceptualized in a narrow way, as suggested by Schnackenberg and Tomlinson (2016) and as captured by Rawlins’s (2008, 2009) dimension of substantial information. The participation and accountability dimensions suggested by Rawlins may not adequately discriminate against other constructs like trust, as revealed by our research. Thus, we encourage scholars studying transparency to recognize this finding and pay close attention to the dimensionality and discriminant validity of the dimensions suggested by Rawlins.

With regards to practice, our research suggests that organizations should communicate substantial information that is related to the crisis situation and relevant for the organization and employees to encourage their workforce to reciprocate helpful resources, especially job engagement. In particular, this includes crisis-related information on safety measures, changes in working routines, the organization’s condition and its development, and what this means for employees with respect to their work and well-being. When such information is communicated in a way that fulfills the aspects of substantiality (Rawlins, 2009), employees will be intent on relying on management because they believe that their leaders are competent to take the right actions and have integrity and their best interests in mind. If this is met, organizations will be able to maintain an engaged workforce, even in an uncertain situation. If transparent organizational communication is missing, however, the risk of employees’ physical, emotional, and cognitive removal from work increases. Therefore, to minimize the potential loss of attentive and absorbed individuals, organizations should strengthen the efforts to meet employees’ needs during the crisis, which is possible through a transparent approach.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has several limitations. First, the results are limited to the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Austria. Nevertheless, the Austrian case does not differ significantly from several other countries in Europe that tried to contain the spread of the virus by shutting down public life since mid-March 2020, thereby causing a big strain on the economy and on employees. As the data were collected at one point in time—in the middle of the third shutdown in March 2021—the results represent a snapshot in time during this elongated crisis situation. This also means that a rigorous test of causality is not possible by means of the chosen design. Applying an experimental design could, therefore, be a next step. In addition, a mixed method approach combining quantitative and qualitative research would be valuable to better understand the role, value, and implementation of transparent organizational crisis communication in the work context during a pandemic.

This study relied on self-report survey data collected from single source individuals. Although a check of common method variance using Harman's single factor test did not indicate any issues, future research can broaden the basis of data sources in order to gain more nuanced and thorough insights into the effects of transparent organizational communication during a crisis. Specifically, a case study approach would allow the triangulation of self-reported data about employees' cognitive and emotional processes with content analysis data about an organization's communication measures as well as observational data concerning actual job/organizational performance. Such a design would require a fully transparent research approach within an organization and cooperation with organizational members.

Another limitation results from the rather low influence of transparent organizational communication on job-specific state anxiety. It raises the question of further variables that influence job-specific state anxiety and, eventually, job disengagement. As indicated by the influence of age on anxiety, job-specific stability may have influenced job-specific state anxiety. Anxiety levels may have also increased over time with the developments of the COVID-19 pandemic becoming more severe (e.g., rising unemployment rates, business closures). Therefore, results have to be

interpreted in light of the specific situation one year into the pandemic. Job disengagement was also likely to be influenced by other factors like stressors at home, including responsibilities for children, home schooling, or social isolation in the case of people living alone. Disengagement may have also been caused by reduced wages that were introduced in sectors with slumps in orders. Thus, an investigation of the role of transparent crisis communication across industries can also be valuable, as different industries were differently affected by the pandemic.

Finally, another limitation is certainly the focus on a limited number of antecedents and mediators to explain job engagement and disengagement. Previous research has already shed light on the role of a servant leadership style to guide employees through the crisis and increase their willingness to stay engaged (J. Hu et al., 2020). While the research by J. Hu et al. was set in China and the United States, further research could explore the role of leadership styles and leadership communication during the crisis in Europe. In major organizational crises like those triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, organizational leaders are particularly challenged to manage the situation and comfort their co-workers to prevent them from disengaging from their job. Lastly, we would like to encourage future research to take a closer look at different kinds of social resources used in crisis communication that stimulate reciprocation in employees in terms of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral outcomes.

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Appendix

Study 2 refers to the survey that is presented in the main body of this paper, whereas study 1 refers to the original study that was conducted earlier in the pandemic and that first raised concerns about discriminant validity.

A1. Lack of discriminant validity between transparent communication and organizational trust (Study 1)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
(1) Substantiality	0.81	0.76	0.74		0.76	0.37	0.46	0.28
(2) Participation	0.77	0.82	0.94		0.86	0.28	0.47	0.20
(3) Accountability	0.72	0.96	0.79		0.86	0.26	0.45	0.28
(4) Transparent communication				0.92	0.88	0.33	0.50	0.24
(5) Organizational trust	0.76	0.88	0.86	0.90	0.86	0.33	0.50	0.24
(6) Job-specific state anxiety	-0.35	-0.26	-0.23	-0.28	-0.31	0.75	0.20	0.37
(7) Job engagement	0.45	0.47	0.45	0.49	0.50	-0.18	0.77	0.56
(8) Job disengagement	-0.27	-0.19	-0.16	-0.20	-0.22	0.37	-0.54	0.75

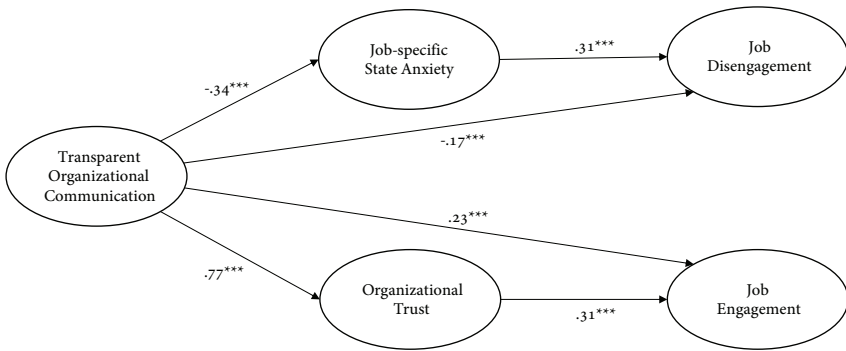
Note: Diagonal and bold elements are the square roots of the AVE (average variance extracted). Below the diagonal elements are the correlations between the constructs' values, and above the diagonal elements are the HTMT (heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations) values. All bivariate correlations are significant at the $p < .001$ -level. Highlighted values raise concern about discriminant validity.

A2. Lack of discriminant validity between transparent communication and organizational trust (Study 2)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
(1) Substantiality	0.89	0.83	0.74		0.77	0.29	0.47	0.24
(2) Participation	0.78	0.81	0.88		0.84	0.26	0.44	0.18
(3) Accountability	0.74	0.89	0.85		0.84	0.26	0.39	0.09
(4) Transparent communication				0.90	0.87	0.29	0.47	0.19
(5) Organizational trust	0.77	0.83	0.84	0.90	0.85	0.31	0.52	0.20
(6) Job-specific state anxiety	-0.30	-0.27	-0.29	-0.31	-0.33	0.80	0.32	0.50
(7) Job engagement	0.48	0.44	0.40	0.47	0.52	-0.33	0.77	0.68
(8) Job disengagement	-0.24	-0.17	-0.10	-0.17	-0.21	0.51	-0.67	0.77

Note: Diagonal and bold elements are the square roots of the AVE (average variance extracted). Below the diagonal elements are the correlations between the constructs' values, and above the diagonal elements are the HTMT (heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations) values. All bivariate correlations are significant at the $p < .001$ -level. Highlighted values raise concern about discriminant validity.

A3. The structural model with standardized path coefficients (based on the data from Study 1)



Note: All measurements are the same as in study 2 with the exception that for organizational trust the three items for overall trust have not been measured in this study. $\chi^2 = 940.895$ [$p < .001$]; $df = 291$; CFI = .955; TLI = .946; RMSEA = .047 [90% CI: .043 to .050], SRMR = .050. Job-specific state anxiety: $R^2 = .14$; organizational trust: $R^2 = .61$; job disengagement: $R^2 = .20$; job engagement: $R^2 = .27$; *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$; $n = 1,030$.