

Employee-centric perspective on organizational crisis: how organizational transparency and support help to mitigate employees' uncertainty, negative emotions and job disengagement

Employees' needs in organizational crises

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Abstract

Purpose – The study focuses on the negative implications that an organizational crisis can have for individual employees. Specifically, it considers job-related uncertainty, negative emotions (anxiety and frustration) and job disengagement. Through the lens of the social exchange theory, it is argued that internal crisis communication needs to provide sufficient socioemotional resources to their employees in order to mitigate these negative outcomes. In particular, the study argues for internal crisis communication that fosters organizational transparency and organizational support to achieve these mitigating effects.

Design/methodology/approach – An online survey among employees in Austria was administered one year after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic – this specific crisis context particularly evoked job-related uncertainty and negative emotions which are considered relevant drivers of job disengagement. The hypotheses were tested using structural equation modeling based on a sample of $N = 410$.

Findings – Results show that employees' perceptions of job-related uncertainty are strongly linked to job-related anxiety and frustration; job-related frustration, in turn, strongly influences job disengagement. Overall, employees' perceptions of organizational transparency and organizational support contribute both to prevent the risk of job disengagement; however, the processes how these effects evolve differ. Whereas organizational transparency works on the cognitive level via a reduction of employees' perceptions of uncertainty, organizational support shows its effect on the emotional level through a reduction of job frustration.

Originality/value – The study contributes to the scarce research on how internal crisis communication can address employees' uncertainty, negative emotions and job disengagement during a crisis. Moreover, despite the lack of organizational responsibility for creating the crisis, the study emphasizes organizational accountability to respond to the needs of its employees to mitigate negative effects.

Keywords Organizational transparency, Organizational support, Internal crisis communication, Job frustration, Job disengagement

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The caveat that organizations focus primarily on external stakeholders and the protection of their reputation during an organizational crisis has already been lamented in early work on crisis management and crisis communication (e.g. Pincus and Acharya, 1988), and “a rather one-sided focus on external communication rather than internal crisis communication” (Heide



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and Simonsson, 2021, p. 257) is still apparent. Only gradually, scholars have taken a closer look at crisis communication toward employees. Here, the focus lies on guiding employees through a crisis, and initiating their support (Frandsen and Johansen, 2011; Heide and Simonsson, 2015; Johansen *et al.*, 2012; Kim, 2018; Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2015). For instance, research shows how employees can be beneficial as strategic communicators during a crisis and what organizations can offer to enable employees to fulfill this role effectively (e.g. Kim, 2018; Kim and Lim, 2020). What is missing, though, is a recognition of employees as stakeholders who are individually affected by a crisis, which – by definition – “threatens to disrupt an organization’s operations” (Coombs, 2007, p. 164) and “can, at its worst, threaten the existence of the organization” (Fearn-Banks, 2001, p. 480).

Undoubtedly, protecting the organization is the primary goal of crisis management and crisis communication, but the dominant functionalist perspective of crisis management and crisis communication tends to decrease complexity (Heide and Simonsson, 2015). Specifically, it ignores that employees are not a homogeneous group and their crisis perceptions and experiences vary with individual factors such as organizational function, position, human type or personal life (Frandsen and Johansen, 2011). In addition, “employees as internal stakeholders have a stronger and more complex psychological dimension than most of the other stakeholders” (Frandsen and Johansen, 2011, p. 353). As a result, employees’ well-being can be affected to varying degrees, and for some more and for others less, an organizational crisis causes a personal crisis accompanied by negative feelings and considerable stress (Pincus and Acharya, 1988; also see Mazzei *et al.*, 2012). Here, our study aims to complement previous research by a more employee-centric perspective that captures the individually different effects of a crisis on employees and identifies organizational measures to mitigate them.

Dealing with the individual impact of a crisis on employees has organizational significance, both for organizational self-interest and ethical reasons. Since organizations depend on employees’ continuous support and engaged behavior in times of crisis, organizations need to recognize them as “one of the most valuable resources at stake” (Mazzei and Butera, 2021, p. 176). Given the uncertain nature of a crisis situation (Ulmer *et al.*, 2018), organizations that fail to address the needs of those affected can trigger just the contrary, namely disengagement from work. Previous research has focused strongly on how organizations can maintain employees’ job engagement and commitment during times of crisis, but disengagement is a unique psychological state that goes beyond the mere absence of engagement as it is a self-protective process of emotional, cognitive and physical withdrawal from the normal work (Kahn, 1990). To make the point even clearer: engaged employees are able to express their selves in their work role so that they are enthusiastic about it and get absorbed in fulfilling their job (e.g. Kahn, 1990; Jiang and Men, 2017; Saks, 2006; Men and Hung-Baesecke, 2015). Therefore, being low on engagement does not equal being disengaged, as one could still do his/her duty by the book. Like with other constructs in the organizational context, such as identification/disidentification (Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004) or trust/distrust (Saunders *et al.*, 2014), conceptualizing disengagement as a separate construct is necessary to derive a complete and nuanced picture of crisis implications for employees and organizational responses to them. As employees’ job disengagement can be considered a self-protection in reaction to negative crisis implications that brings not only undesirable consequences for the organization (e.g. lower productivity) but also for the individual (e.g. burn out or job termination), its study also pronounces the ethical obligation of organizations to take care of those directly affected by a crisis (Jong and Brataas, 2021), which applies not only to external victims, but also equally to employees suffering from the burdens of a crisis.

A crisis situation like the COVID-19 pandemic makes the necessity of employing an employee-centric perspective particularly urging. Because there are no precedents for the pandemic crisis context from which employees can derive possible scenarios for their

personal crisis management, the situation produces a very high level of extensive uncertainty. When we look at other organizational crisis scenarios, e.g. triggered by an accident, product failure or management misconduct, employees can draw on their own or others' experiences and are thus in a better position to assess the situation. Even organizations can draw on recommendations from crisis research and experience for these known contexts. However, an organizational crisis situation during the pandemic is different because it is characterized by the fact that it extends over a long and hardly predictable period of time and is associated with a plethora of uncertainties: First, there are radical changes in work processes (e.g. to a remote or hybrid mode) which interrupts known operations. Second, employees face constantly changing rules from external agencies concerning opening restrictions and rules of conduct. Third, not all jobs and organizations are guaranteed to persist, and fourth, employees face concerns about their own health and the health of others. Since the organizations are not primarily responsible for this situation, this would mean a low threat to an organizations' reputation according to established classifications (see [Coombs, 2007](#)) and thus make defensive crisis strategies appear sufficient. From a purely external point of view, this attribution of responsibility may be correct, but considering the plethora of uncertainties and the well-being of employees, such a situation entails a high degree of organizational accountability because employees expect their employers not only to care about the organizational reputation and continual success, but also about the well-being of their members.

In this light, our study has two overarching research interests. First, the study explores how individual differences in perceptions of job-related uncertainties lead to job disengagement during a crisis situation. Second, the study argues that the provision of socioemotional resources can help to buffer negative crisis implications for employees and reduce the prevalence of disengagement. Based on the social exchange theory ([Blau, 1964](#)) and resource theory ([Foa and Foa, 1980](#)), organizational scholars have differentiated between economic and socioemotional resources that can be provided in an exchange process between an organization and its employees ([Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005](#); [Mitchell et al., 2012](#); [Tomprou et al., 2020](#)). Particularly in times of crisis, when the financial scope of organizations is rather limited, crisis communication can meet employees' needs and concerns through the provision of socioemotional resources and maintain beneficial reciprocity. Here, we argue that internal crisis communication which fosters organizational transparency and the perception of organizational support can contribute to this end. While perceptions of organizational transparency and organizational support are both strongly related to internal communication ([Men, 2014](#); [Verčič, 2021](#)), support has received much less attention as a parameter in internal communication. However, especially in difficult times such as a crisis, employees will need not only a transparent but also a supportive organizational environment to cope with the demands of the situation.

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 a wide range of private and public sector organizations in Austria. The paper concludes with a discussion, theoretical and practical implications, limitations and ideas for further research.

Job disengagement as employees' individual reaction to organizational crisis

As [Pincus and Acharya \(1988\)](#) point out, employees can experience an organizational crisis as a stressful and threatening situation at the individual level. In the following, we will elaborate how individual perceptions of job-related uncertainty can result in the self-protecting psychological state of job disengagement, and two specific negative job-related emotions, i.e. anxiety and frustration.

Job-related uncertainty and job disengagement

A crisis is problematic to employees as it entails uncertainty and ambiguity (Ulmer *et al.*, 2018). Yet, the uncertainty is “primarily a self-perception” (Brashers, 2001, p. 478) and consequently not perceived uniformly across stakeholders during a crisis (Frandsen and Johansen, 2011). On the one hand, employees perceive uncertainty about how to perform their job because sufficient information is lacking and/or usual routines are impaired. On the other hand, the uncertainty may be more existential regarding the security of one’s position in the organization and the continuance of one’s salary (Pincus and Acharya, 1988; Frandsen and Johansen, 2011). Undeniably, the COVID-19 pandemic created uncertainty in a number of ways. The focus of this research is on job-related uncertainty that can pose a threat to employees.

Employees’ job-related uncertainty has previously been addressed in the realm of organizational change, which is a comparable organizational context to a crisis in this regard (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010), particularly in the case of an unplanned change (Shaw, 2017). Research shows that during an organizational change, employees’ job-related uncertainty is associated with higher psychological strain (Bordia *et al.*, 2004), lower job satisfaction and higher turnover intentions (Rafferty and Griffin, 2006). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Li *et al.* (2021) found that perceived uncertainty about organizational change was negatively related to the quality of the employee–organization relationship.

One form of employee self-protection from perceived threats is job disengagement, i.e. an internal psychological state where individuals disconnect from their jobs (Kahn, 1990). According to Kahn (1990), disengagement is an intentional response, which results from the absence of meaningfulness, safety and/or availability in the working context. *Meaningfulness* describes the feeling of receiving a return on investment through physical, cognitive or emotional energy, *safety* refers to working without fear or negative consequences in the workplace and *availability* describes a sense of being equipped with relevant physical, emotional and psychological resources to engage (Kahn, 1990). Therefore, when job disengagement occurs, 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” (Kahn, 1990, p. 529). Job disengagement is more than the opposite or absence of engagement (see Saks, 2006) as it has different antecedents and triggers other cognitive, emotional and behavioral outcomes. It is associated with increased turnover intentions, poor work performance, missing extra-role behavior, lower organizational commitment and poorer psychological and physical health (see Afrahi *et al.*, 2021).

This evidence on unfavorable employee reactions to perceived uncertainty and the assumption that job-related uncertainty impairs an employee’s assessment of *meaningfulness*, *safety* and/or *availability*, leads to the following hypothesis:

- H1. An employee’s perception of job-related uncertainty during an organizational crisis is positively related to job disengagement.

Job-related anxiety

Anxiety is an emotion that is often closely linked to uncertainty (Brashers, 2001) and crises (Bordia *et al.*, 2004; Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010; Pincus and Acharya, 1988). Jin *et al.* (2012) conclude in their study that “[a]nxiety could even be argued as the default dominant emotion” (p. 286) in response to organizational crisis. Spielberg *et al.* (1983) define 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). Although negative emotions are not the only response to

uncertain situations, they are the predominant ones when uncertainty is perceived as a threat (Brashers, 2001), which is a likely appraisal in the case of high levels of job-related uncertainty during an organizational crisis.

An employee's assessment of psychological *safety* of his/her working situation should be negatively influenced by a feeling of anxiety. As Bordia *et al.* (2004) conclude, uncertainties during a crisis are the key factor that fosters employees' distress and anxiety. Recent research in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic confirmed a negative influence of state anxiety on job engagement (Hu *et al.*, 2020) and a positive influence on job disengagement (Stranzl *et al.*, 2021). Hence:

- H2. An employee's perception of job-related uncertainty during an organizational crisis is positively related to job-related anxiety.
- H3. An employee's feeling of job-related anxiety during an organizational crisis is positively related to job disengagement.

Job frustration

An emotion that is less often discussed in the literature on crises is job frustration. However, Johansen *et al.* (2012) reported that senior communication managers in Danish organizations perceived increased job frustration among their employees during a crisis. This is plausible insofar as employees regularly experience crises as stressful situations (Frandsen and Johansen, 2011; Pincus and Acharya, 1988) and stressful working conditions can cause significant levels of job frustration (Farr and Ford, 1990). During a pandemic, this emotion becomes even more plausible, as the prolonged and unpredictable nature of the crisis situation places exceptional demands on employees.

Spector (1978) classifies job frustration as a negative emotion which can occur in different situations to different degrees at work (Farr and Ford, 1990). It is a negative response to workplace events (Spector, 1978) when employees are confronted with obstacles or disturbances in their personal work environment. These interruptions result in unsatisfied motivations and needs, as well as negative emotions (Fox and Spector, 1999). Frustration is "both the interference with goal attainment or goal-oriented activity and the interference with goal maintenance" (Spector, 1978, p. 816). High levels of job-related uncertainty, whether about everyday work processes or one's own position in the organization, should interfere with goal attainment and thereby trigger frustration during crisis. Particularly, in contrast to a formal organizational communication that is often dominated by a language of opportunity, efficiency and tenacity (Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2015), an employee's feeling of job frustration may become even more pronounced.

Job frustration, in turn, can be expected to have a negative impact on an employee's assessment of *availability* and *meaningfulness*, which should subsequently promote job disengagement. Looking at other negative outcomes of job frustration, previous research already confirms its relationship to lower job satisfaction, lower job performance and productivity (Liu *et al.*, 2005), emotional exhaustion (McHugh *et al.*, 2011), counterproductive work behaviors (Harold *et al.*, 2016) and increased turnover intentions (McHugh *et al.*, 2011). Taken together, we hypothesize:

- H4. An employee's perception of job-related uncertainty during an organizational crisis is positively related to job frustration.
- H5. An employee's feeling of job frustration during an organizational crisis is positively related to job disengagement.

Socioemotional resources during organizational crisis

According to the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), employee–organization relationships can be interpreted as an exchange of resources. Ideally, this exchange is reciprocal and at a

high level. Then, employees are more satisfied and engaged, show higher levels of commitment and are able to better cope with the challenges of daily work (Tomprou *et al.*, 2020). Importantly, in contrast to purely economic exchanges, social exchanges do not aim at an immediate and definite return, but create more long-term and unspecified obligations, which are primarily valued as symbols of mutual supportiveness and goodwill (Blau, 1964). Particularly in times of crisis, when the demands on employees and the situational strains increase, it is critical that the exchange does not lose its mutuality and that organizations provide their employees with sufficient resources. Otherwise, there is a risk that employees will no longer be fully committed in the relationship, will contribute less and, in the worst case, may even disengage from their work role (Saks, 2006).

In this sense, socioemotional resources, i.e. resources that correspond to a person's social needs and esteem and are more symbolic in nature, move into focus compared to economic resources, i.e. resources that correspond to a person's financial needs and are more tangible in nature (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005; Mitchell *et al.*, 2012; Tomprou *et al.*, 2020). While economic resources do not fall in the scope of internal communication and are usually limited in times of crisis, socioemotional resources can certainly be conveyed through internal crisis communication that "involves all organizational members as communicators in the role of receivers, senders, and sensemakers in a dynamic and continuous communication process" (Mazzei and Butera, 2021, p. 167). These processes can be shaped by strategic internal communication that aims at "managing interdependence and building mutually beneficial relationships between the organization and its employees" (Men and Bowen, 2017, p. 12).

Even though one general function of internal communication is seen in contributing to employees' well-being (Walden, 2021) and responding to their needs (Men, 2021), in a crisis situation internal communicators mainly focus on how employees can contribute to overcome a crisis and how organizations can enable them to do so (e.g. Kim, 2018; Kim and Lim, 2020). Opening up the solely functionalist perspective to internal crisis communication (Heide and Simonsson, 2015), i.e. a focus on initiating beneficial employee behaviors, and adding to internal communicators' responsibilities the prevention of employees' negative emotions and disengagement, completes the overall picture of how an organization can support and care for its employees during a crisis. In the following, we argue that internal crisis communication that fosters organizational transparency and support can contribute to the provision of socioemotional resources during organizational crisis. Both, transparent communication and organizational support have been examined in various contexts for their positive effects, but have not yet been tested in terms of their potential to mitigate negative individual implications and thus exercise a certain level of care toward employees.

Organizational transparency

Transparent internal communication is recognized as an important organizational value (Men and Stacks, 2014). Especially in times of crisis, it is an appropriate way of informing employees (Einwiller *et al.*, 2021) and considered to be a key element for effective goal achievement (Albu and Wehmeier, 2014). It implies the availability of relevant, accurate, timely, balanced and unequivocal information (Men and Stacks, 2014). Generally, there are several conceptualizations for organizational transparency (e.g. Rawlins, 2009; Men and Stacks, 2014; Schnackenberg and Tomlinson, 2016). Rawlins' (2009) conceptualization of transparency comprises three dimensions (substantial information, participation and accountability). However, recent findings (Stranzl *et al.*, 2021) suggest that a narrower conceptualization is better suited to achieve discriminant validity to other constructs that imply some reciprocity between employees and an organization (e.g. trust or organizational support). Schnackenberg and Tomlinson (2016) define transparency narrowly as "the

perceived quality of intentionally shared information from a sender” (p. 1788) meaning the degree of information disclosure, clarity and accuracy, which coincides with Rawlins’ (2009) substantiality dimension.

The literature on organizational transparency in the working context reports various positive effects during stable economic times. Employees’ perception of transparency leads to higher organizational identification (Men *et al.*, 2020a), trust (Schnackenberg *et al.*, 2021; Yue *et al.*, 2019), employee engagement (Jiang and Men, 2017; Men and Hung-Baesecke, 2015), health information sharing intentions (Lee and Queenie-Li, 2020) and strengthens the general relationship between employees and their organizations (Men, 2014; Men and Stacks, 2014; Li *et al.*, 2021). Research furthermore shows that transparency perceptions are a driver of positive employee communication behavior toward external publics (e.g. Kim, 2018).

Most importantly for the research questions to be answered in this research, effective crisis communication is essential to improve employees’ perceptions about uncertainties and to help reduce anxieties (Bordia *et al.*, 2004; Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2011). As Pincus and Acharya (1988) indicate “at no time in an organization’s life is it more critical to communicate openly, sensitively, and quickly with employees than during a major crisis. Employees’ emotional needs for information about the crisis and how it may threaten their personal situations are high” (p. 182). Situational uncertainty can also be exacerbated by deficient crisis communication (Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2015), when organizations fail to deliver accurate and timely information to their employees (Mazzei and Butera, 2021). More importantly, the uncertainty reduction theory shows that in an unknown situation, individuals actively collect information to reduce their uncertainty and alleviate their concerns (Hogg and Belavadi, 2017). Transparent internal communication helps to avoid employees to consult other less reliable sources for crisis information, which “worsen [. . .] the uncertainty of the situation” (Pincus and Acharya, 1988, p. 196) and can leave employees with higher levels of personal uncertainty or anxiety (Brooks and Schweizer, 2011). Stranzl *et al.* (2021) show that transparency perceptions are negatively related to job-related anxiety. Therefore, we propose the following:

H6a. The higher an employee’s perception of organizational transparency, the lower the perception of job-related uncertainty during an organizational crisis.

H6b. The higher an employee’s perception of organizational transparency, the lower the feeling of job-related anxiety during an organizational crisis.

Transparency is also assumed to have an impact on employees’ experience of frustration. Different so-called frustrators (Spector, 1997) or organizational constraints (Peters *et al.*, 1980) can trigger negative behavior and emotions, and impair employees’ well-being (Pindek and Spector, 2016). Based on their metaanalysis, Pindek and Spector (2016) argue that various organizational constraints such as missing job-related information, technology and equipment, and services from others can foster feelings of frustration. As these relevant conditions interfere strongly with effective job performance, organizations play a key role in providing them. Information on what to do is an important resource that employees need during a crisis situation in order to continue with performing their daily work effectively (Heide and Simonsson, 2020). Such information delivered transparently is assumed to be an active antagonist to job frustration as timely, relevant and accurate work information counteracts the interruption of goal attainment (Spector, 1978). Thus, we hypothesize the following:

H6c. The higher an employee’s perception of organizational transparency, the lower the feeling of job frustration during an organizational crisis.

Organizational support

Although perceived organizational support is necessarily associated with internal communication (Verčič, 2021), it is not as present in the discourse and research efforts on internal communication as other constructs (e.g. transparency). Often the construct is attributed stronger to the realm of human resource management, but actually internal communication can make a vital contribution to the perception of organizational support. Perceived organizational support is defined as employees' general beliefs about the degree their organization shows concerns for their well-being and recognizes their contributions (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986). The concept includes the recognition of accomplishments, caring about well-being, considering goals and values, showing concern and willingness to help (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986). Of course, this requires concrete supportive measures by the organization, but internal communication thereof is equally important, as the *enabling* (i.e. communicating about support and care) dimension of charismatic leadership communication illustrates (Men *et al.*, 2020b). From a pragmatic point of view, internal communication can disseminate across the organization which support services are available and also identify employees' concrete needs for support. Beyond that, internal communication messages themselves can evoke a belief that the organization is supportive and cares about its employees' well-being. As Pincus and Acharya (1988) noted, "a sensitive communicator would position messages designed to cater to the employee's (receiver) particular needs, rather than management's (sender)" (p. 182).

Previous research has associated the perception of organizational support with various positive outcomes such as employees' orientation toward the organization and work (e.g. commitment, engagement and trust), behavioral outcomes (e.g. performance and citizenship behaviors), and well-being (e.g. reduced stress/strain and enhanced positive affect) (Eisenberger *et al.*, 2020). When organizations offer support, it can be expected that employees get the cognitive, emotional and physical reserves they need to stay engaged in their job (Saks, 2006). For the context of organizational change, Eisenberger and Stinglhamber credit perceived organizational support with having the effect of reducing employee uncertainty (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber, 2011 as cited in Verčič, 2021). Correspondingly, Cullen *et al.* (2014) report a moderate negative correlation between perceived organizational support and change-related uncertainty in their study. Therefore, organizational support is likely to have the potential to minimize uncertainty during a crisis. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

H7a. The higher an employee's perception of organizational support, the lower the perception of job-related uncertainty during an organizational crisis.

In addition to a general strain reducing effect of perceived organizational support (Eisenberger *et al.*, 2020), recent studies from the COVID-19 context corroborate its potential to reduce anxiety (Reitz *et al.*, 2021; Zhang *et al.*, 2020). Hence:

H7b. The higher an employee's perception of organizational support, the lower the feeling of job-related anxiety during an organizational crisis.

In general, perceived organizational support engenders an enabling and motivating work environment that allows employees to perform well and enhances their well-being (Eisenberger *et al.*, 2020). More specifically to the crisis context, perceived organizational support can "reduce aversive psychological and psychosomatic reactions (i.e. strains) to stressors by indicating the availability of material aid and emotional support when needed to face high demands at work" (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002, p. 702). As such, job frustration, which is a common psychological response to stressful and goal-interfering working situations (Pindek and Spector, 2016), is expected to be lower in the presence organizational support. This leads to the last hypothesis:

H7c. The higher an employee's perception of organizational support, the lower the feeling of job frustration during an organizational crisis.

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 exactly one year after the Austrian government mandated the first lockdown 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 one year in an organization with 250 or more employees, so that respondents' evaluations of their employers' communication during the COVID-19 pandemic were based on a comparable time span. In total, 436 people fulfilled these criteria and completed the questionnaire. Of those, 26 were excluded from the final sample as they qualified as "speeders", i.e. they spent less than 50% of the median response time (= 512 s) 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 respondents' current employment (e.g. tenure and share of remote working during the pandemic) were intended to focus 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 communication with respect to perceptions of organizational transparency and organizational support during this time span. The following section was introduced by a clear instruction that the next questions deal with how respondents feel and think at the moment. In this section, respondents' perceptions of job-related uncertainty, anxiety, frustration and job disengagement were measured. The questionnaire closed with questions on sociodemographics.

Sample

The final sample comprises 410 respondents, of whom 51% identified as female and 49% as male. The average age was 43.7 years (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%, health care 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% 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% were employed with the organization between one and three years, 14.6% for more than three up to five years, 18.1% for more than five up to ten years and 51.5% for more than ten 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 have 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 seven-point rating scales. Detailed information on the wording of questions, scale endpoints and items can be found in [Table 1](#).

Perceived organizational transparency was measured according to previous studies (e.g. [Men and Stacks, 2014](#); [Yue et al., 2019](#)) that had operationalized organizational transparency as a second-order construct comprising the three dimensions substantiality, participation and accountability ([Rawlins, 2009](#)). However, preliminary data analysis raised strong doubts

Construct/Items	SL
<i>Organizational transparency</i>	
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>	
. . . provides information in a timely fashion to people like me	0.86
. . . provides information that is relevant to people like me	0.89
. . . provides information that is complete	0.92
. . . provides information that is easy for people like me to understand	0.85
. . . provides accurate information to people like me	0.90
. . . provides information that is reliable	0.93
. . . provides detailed information to people like me	0.79
<i>Organizational support</i>	
Please tell us, how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements about your organization during the corona time. (Scale from 1 “strongly disagree” to 7 “strongly agree”)	
<i>My organization . . .</i>	
. . . takes pride in my accomplishments	0.88
. . . really cares about my wellbeing	0.92
. . . values my contribution to its wellbeing	0.88
. . . strongly considers my goals and values	0.91
. . . is willing to help me if I need a special favor	0.85
. . . shows little concern for me. (revers)	deleted
<i>Job-related anxiety</i>	
Please tell us how you currently feel 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>	0.87
<i>I feel worried</i>	0.77
<i>Job-related uncertainty</i>	
And how strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your current work situation? (Scale from 1 “strongly disagree” to 7 “strongly agree”)	
<i>My work environment is changing in an unpredictable manner at the moment</i>	0.78
<i>I am uncertain about how to handle my work at the moment</i>	0.92
<i>I am unsure about how corona affects my work</i>	0.76
<i>I am unsure how severely corona will change my work</i>	0.73
<i>I am uncertain about the direction in which my organization is heading</i>	0.80
<i>I am uncertain about the business environment in which my organization will have to exist</i>	0.77
<i>I am uncertain about the future of my position in the organization</i>	0.82
<i>Job frustration</i>	
<i>Trying to get my job done is very frustrating</i>	0.89
<i>Being frustrated comes with my job</i>	0.91
<i>Overall, I experience very little frustration on my job (revers)</i>	0.56
<i>Job Disengagement</i>	
Finally, here are some statements about how you are currently doing with your work. Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement. (Scale from 1 “strongly disagree” to 7 “strongly agree”)	
<i>At the moment I can hardly concentrate on my work</i>	0.80
<i>I often think of other things when doing my job</i>	0.72
<i>I am not very productive at my job at the moment</i>	0.74
<i>I often look for tasks that distract me from the actual work I should be doing</i>	0.77
<i>I feel detached from my job</i>	0.77
<i>I feel numb at work</i>	0.81

Table 1.
Measurement model

Note(s): SL = standardized loading; all loadings are significant at the 0.001 level

about the discriminant validity between the transparency dimensions participation and accountability, and more seriously, between these two dimensions and perceived organizational support. Such violations represent a severe issue for model testing that may call into question the validity of statistically significant parameters (Voorhees *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, we decided to limit the operationalization of transparency to a narrow conceptualization (Schnackenberg and Tomlinson, 2016) in order to ensure discriminant validity in our measurement model. The final operationalization comprises those items from Rawlins' substantiality dimension plus one item from the dimension participation ("My organization provides detailed information to people like me"), which together best reflect organizational transparency in the sense of perceived information disclosure, clarity and accuracy.

Organizational support was measured with the six-item scale by Eisenberger *et al.* (2001). To measure employees' perceptions of job-related uncertainty, we followed Li *et al.* (2021) and adapted the scale for psychological uncertainty during organizational change (Rafferty and Griffin, 2006) to the context of the COVID-19 crisis. Furthermore, we added and adapted three items from Bordia *et al.* (2004) to sufficiently reflect employees' perceived uncertainty about their individual work and their organizational environment. Job-related anxiety was measured with three items from the short form of the Spielberger state-trait anxiety inventory (Marteau and Bekker, 1992), and job frustration with the instrument by Peters *et al.* (1980) that has been used in several other studies on job frustration (e.g. Avey *et al.*, 2015). Taking the limited body of empirical research on job disengagement (Aslam *et al.*, 2018; Manning, 2015) as a starting point, we measured job disengagement with six suitable items that reflect its cognitive, affective and physical components (Kahn, 1990).

Results

In accordance with Kline (1998), we executed a two-step structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis using AMOS 26 software under maximum likelihood (ML) estimation. 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 Hu and Bentler (1999) served as a reference point for the evaluation of the data-model fit. To establish robustness against possible violations of the normality assumption of SEM, we additionally used the bootstrapping procedure ($N = 2,000$ samples) and report 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals (95% BC-BCI) for the estimates of all path coefficients in addition to the ML estimates (Byrne, 2016).

Measurement model

The final measurement model shows a good model-data fit ($\chi^2 = 860.212 [p < 0.001]$; degrees of freedom (df) = 417; comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.960; Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = 0.955; root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.051 [90% confidence interval (CI): 0.046, 0.056] and standardized root mean squared residual (SRMR) = 0.054). Standardized factor loadings are reported in Table 1 and exceed with the exception of two reverse-worded items the ideal threshold of 0.70 (Chin, 1998). In the case of job frustration, we decided to keep the lower-loading indicator, because the construct measurement comprises only three items and shows overall a satisfactory reliability and convergent validity; in the case of perceived organizational support the lower-loading item was excluded from the final measurement, which still left five indicators for this construct. For all constructs, strong reliability and convergent validity is indicated (see Table 2): Cronbach's alpha scores range from 0.82 to 0.96 and composite reliabilities from 0.84 to 0.96, all exceeding the minimum threshold of 0.70.

Table 2.
Reliability and validity
of construct
measurements

	α	CR	AVE	MSV	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
(1) Organizational transparency	0.96	0.96	0.77	0.55	<i>0.88</i>	0.74	0.23	0.30	0.43	0.28
(2) Organizational support	0.95	0.95	0.79	0.55	0.74	<i>0.89</i>	0.18	0.31	0.44	0.21
(3) Job-related uncertainty	0.93	0.92	0.64	0.45	-0.24	-0.20	<i>0.80</i>	0.64	0.55	0.50
(4) Job-related anxiety	0.84	0.84	0.65	0.59	-0.30	-0.32	0.67	<i>0.81</i>	0.78	0.51
(5) Job frustration	0.82	0.84	0.64	0.59	-0.40	-0.41	0.60	0.77	<i>0.80</i>	0.67
(6) Job disengagement	0.90	0.90	0.59	0.50	-0.28	-0.22	0.54	0.52	0.71	<i>0.77</i>

Note(s): α = Cronbach's alpha; CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted, MSV = maximum shared variance, diagonal and italic 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 heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations values. All bivariate correlations are significant at the $p < 0.001$ -level

Also, all average variance extracted (AVE) scores are above the cutoff criterium (> 0.50) for convergent validity (Hair *et al.*, 2009). For a rigorous assessment of discriminant validity, we applied two techniques: the common Fornell–Larcker criterion (Fornell and 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 is fulfilled and the HTMT ratio is below the conservative threshold of 0.85, which indicates discriminant validity across all measurements (see Table 2). In summary, the constructs exhibit sound measurement properties.

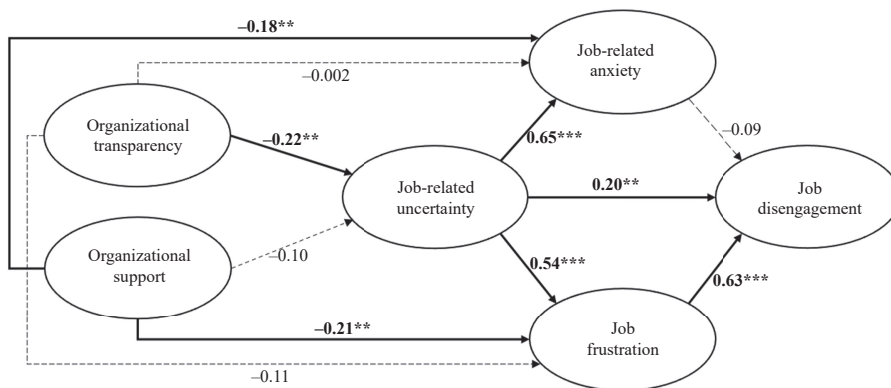
Structural model

Based on the extant literature (e.g. Rafferty and Griffin, 2006; 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. Hence, the share of time working from home due to the pandemic was included as a further control variable in the structural model (significant effects of the control variables are reported in the annotations of Figure 1). Overall, the structural model demonstrates a good fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 1142.570$ [$p < 0.001$]; $df = 570$; CFI = 0.949; TLI = 0.941; RMSEA = 0.050 [90% CI: 0.045 to 0.054] and SRMR = 0.054).

Hypothesis testing

H1–5 address the negative implications that a crisis can have on employees. In support of H1, the study results show a positive relationship between an employee's perception of job-related uncertainty and job disengagement ($\beta = 0.20$, $p < 0.01$, [95% BC-BCI: 0.05 to 0.36]). Furthermore, job-related uncertainty is also strongly and positively associated with job-related anxiety ($\beta = 0.65$, $p < 0.001$, [95% BC-BCI: 0.54 to 0.73]), which supports H2. However, the results indicate no significant relationship between job-related anxiety and job disengagement ($\beta = -0.09$, $p = 0.15$, [95% BC-BCI: -0.23 to 0.06]); thus, H3 must be dismissed. With respect to an employee's feeling of job frustration during crisis, the data reveal a strong positive relationship between uncertainty and frustration ($\beta = 0.54$, $p < 0.001$, [95% BC-BCI: 0.43 to 0.63]) and a strong positive relationship between frustration and job disengagement ($\beta = 0.63$, $p < 0.001$, [95% BC-BCI: 0.50 to 0.74]), supporting H4 and H5.

H6a–c address the attenuating effects of perceived organizational transparency. The data reveal a significant and negative impact of organizational transparency on an employee's perception of job-related uncertainty ($\beta = -0.22$, $p < 0.01$, [95% BC-BCI: -0.38 to -0.05]), but



Note(s): $\chi^2 = 1,142.570$ [$p < 0.001$]; $df = 570$; $CFI = 0.949$; $TLI = 0.941$; $RMSEA = 0.050$ [90% CI: 0.045 to 0.054], $SRMR = 0.054$. Job-related uncertainty: $R^2 = 0.16$; job-related anxiety: $R^2 = 0.52$; job frustration: $R^2 = 0.48$; job disengagement: $R^2 = 0.57$. The following significant effects emerged for the control variables: organizational tenure \rightarrow job-related uncertainty: $\beta = -0.13^*$; working from home \rightarrow job-related uncertainty: $\beta = 0.14^{**}$; age \rightarrow job-related uncertainty: $\beta = -0.15^*$; working from home \rightarrow job disengagement: $\beta = 0.08^*$; $*p < 0.05$, $**p < 0.01$, $***p < 0.001$; dashed arrows represent non-significant paths ($p > 0.05$)

Figure 1. The structural model with standardized path coefficients

no direct influences on an employee's feeling of job-related anxiety ($\beta = -0.002$, $p = 0.98$, [95% BC-BCI: -0.14 to 0.15]) and job frustration ($\beta = -0.11$, $p = 0.09$, [95% BC-BCI: -0.25 to 0.04]). This supports H6a, but not H6b-c.

H7a-c address the attenuating effects of perceived organizational support. In contrast to H7a, perceived organizational support is not associated with job-related uncertainty ($\beta = -0.10$, $p = 0.18$, [95% BC-BCI: -0.28 to 0.06]). Yet, the data shows a significant negative effect of perceived organizational support on job-related anxiety ($\beta = -0.18$, $p < 0.01$, [95% BC-BCI: -0.37 to -0.03]) and job frustration ($\beta = -0.21$, $p < 0.01$, [95% BC-BCI: -0.36 to -0.06]), which supports H7b-c.

R-square values for the endogenous variables are as follows: for job-related uncertainty $R^2 = 0.16$, for job-related anxiety $R^2 = 0.52$, for job frustration $R^2 = 0.48$ and for job disengagement $R^2 = 0.57$.

An additional descriptive analysis shows that a non-negligible part of the employees in our sample experienced negative crisis implications. Taking the scale midpoint ($= 4$) as the cut-off criterion, 27.1% scored higher than that for job-related uncertainty, 33.7% for job-related anxiety, 25.6% for job frustration and 16.1% for job disengagement.

Specific indirect effects

Even though no explicit mediation hypotheses were formulated, in a final analysis step all specific indirect effects within the model were tested for their significance by means of the bootstrapping procedure ($N = 2,000$ samples). As depicted in Table 3, 95% bias-corrected bootstrapping intervals not containing zero indicate significance for the following specific indirect effects: Organizational transparency shows a negative indirect effect on anxiety mediated through uncertainty ($\beta = -0.14$, $p < 0.01$, [95% BC-BCI: -0.23 to -0.05]), a negative indirect effect on frustration mediated through uncertainty ($\beta = -0.12$, $p < 0.01$, [95% BC-BCI: -0.15 to -0.03]), a negative indirect effect on disengagement mediated through uncertainty ($\beta = -0.04$, $p < 0.01$,

Specific indirect effect	95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals		Standardized estimate
	Lower limit	Upper limit	
OT → UNC → ANX	-0.228	-0.052	-0.143**
OT → UNC → ANX → DIS	-0.002	0.037	-0.013
OT → UNC → FRU	-0.147	-0.033	-0.119**
OT → UNC → FRU → DIS	-0.120	-0.026	-0.075**
OT → UNC → DIS	-0.096	-0.012	-0.044**
OT → ANX → DIS	-0.013	0.015	0.000
OT → FRU → DIS	-0.141	0.008	-0.069
OS → UNC → ANX	-0.160	0.016	-0.065
OS → UNC → ANX → DIS	-0.001	0.027	0.006
OS → UNC → FRU	-0.102	0.009	-0.054
OS → UNC → FRAU → DIS	-0.084	0.007	-0.034
OS → UNC → DIS	-0.061	0.000	-0.020
OS → ANX → DIS	-0.001	0.060	0.016
OS → FRU → DIS	-0.215	-0.058	-0.132**
UNC → ANX → DIS	-0.122	0.020	-0.059
UNC → FRU → DIS	0.235	0.381	0.340***

Note(s): OT = organizational transparency, OS = organizational support, UNC = job-related uncertainty, ANX = job-related anxiety, FRU = job frustration, DIS = job disengagement

Table 3.
Specific indirect effects

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$

[95% BC-BCI: -0.10 to -0.01]) and a negative indirect effect on disengagement serially mediated through uncertainty and frustration ($\beta = -0.08, p < 0.01, [95\% \text{ BC-BCI: } -0.12 \text{ to } -0.03]$), whereas organizational support shows a negative indirect effect on disengagement mediated through frustration only ($\beta = -0.13, p < 0.01, [95\% \text{ BC-BCI: } -0.22 \text{ to } -0.06]$).

Discussion

Following two overarching research interests, the current study elaborates an employee-centric perspective on negative crisis implications and internal crisis communication.

First, it demonstrates that on an individual level the perception of job-related uncertainty during a crisis situation can evoke negative emotions (i.e. anxiety and frustration) in employees and ultimately result in job disengagement as a self-protective mechanism. Specifically, in line with the theoretical assumptions, the empirical results show that an employee's perception of job-related uncertainty during a crisis directly influences employees' job disengagement as the assessments of meaningfulness, safety and availability are impaired (Kahn, 1990). This effect is partly mediated by employees' feeling of job frustration, but not by job-related anxiety as anxiety has no effect on job disengagement. This finding is contrary to previous results by Stranzl *et al.* (2021) and suggests that disengagement is a protection mechanism against crisis situations, in which employees feel frustrated rather than anxious. Here, the consideration of frustration as another crisis-relevant emotion, which in comparison to anxiety has received rather little attention so far, enables a differentiated assessment of the emergence of disengagement. Although not related to employees' job disengagement, strong feelings of anxiety resulting from their uncertainty perceptions, as shown in our study, can produce other detrimental effects: On the individual level anxiety means stress and interferes with employee well-being and on the organizational level strong negative emotions can interfere with essential sensemaking processes during crisis (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010).

Second, the study shows that both perceived organizational transparency and organizational support can contribute to the alleviation of negative crisis implications for

employees and the prevention of job disengagement, although the processes differ. Internal communication that fosters transparency primarily has an effect through the cognitive assessment of job-related uncertainty during the crisis. The results show that perceptions of organizational transparency have mitigating effects on negative emotions and job disengagement, each mediated through a reduction of job-related uncertainty. Internal communication that assists the perception of organizational support produces its effects on the emotional level. The results show that perceived organizational support has a direct negative effect on the employees' feelings of job-related anxiety and job frustration, and a negative indirect effect on job disengagement, which is mediated through a reduction of job frustration.

Theoretical and practical implications

Ulmer *et al.* (2018) state, that “[in] organizations, values concerning profitability and economic gain often conflict with values concerning the well-being of employees or the environment” (p. 174) and “crises often create the need to balance competing values” (p.175). The first and overarching contribution of our study to the research on internal crisis communication lies in this area of tension, as it takes an employee-centric perspective and focuses on the negative effects of a crisis on employees. Thereby, the study aims at overcoming a purely functionalistic understanding of internal crisis communication (e.g. Heide and Simonsson, 2015), which concentrates rather on employees' role in protecting the reputation of an organization than employees' individual affectedness by the crisis. Acknowledging negative crisis effects on employees' well-being and investigating how internal communication can contribute not only to boost employees' supportive behavior for the organization but can also ensure employees' well-being, also accounts for the ethical responsibility of an organization to take care of its community.

The second contribution lies in the specific negative implications which were brought together in the research model. Whereas uncertainty perceptions and the emotional state of anxiety have been addressed in previous research on organizational crisis (e.g. Charoensukmongkol and Phungsoonthorn, 2021; Hu *et al.*, 2020; Jin *et al.*, 2012; Kim *et al.*, 2019; Li *et al.*, 2021; Yeomans and Bowman, 2021), broader findings on job frustration and employees' self-protective mechanism of job disengagement are scarce. Particularly, the study of employees' job disengagement as a separate construct is important, as an employee's withdrawal from his/her work role goes beyond a mere absence of employee engagement. Thereby, the extant findings on employees' job engagement (e.g. Einwiller *et al.*, 2021; Hu *et al.*, 2020; Men *et al.*, 2020a; Saks, 2006) are not necessarily elucidating on employees' potential withdrawal in reaction to crisis. Here, our study complements previous research and makes a relevant contribution to research about job disengagement (Afrahi *et al.*, 2021) and particularly to internal crisis communication as the propensity of disengagement rather increases with demanding and threatening conditions such as organizational crisis. In the same sense, the consideration of frustration, which evolved as a strong driver of disengagement, contributes to the current literature on the importance of employees' emotions during a crisis situation (e.g. Charoensukmongkol and Phungsoonthorn, 2021; Kim *et al.*, 2019; Yeomans and Bowman, 2021).

As a third contribution, the study shows how internal communication, by fostering organizational transparency and organizational support, can help to mitigate the negative crisis impacts on employees and can thereby assist organizations in demonstrating care for employees' well-being. Importantly, the study contributes to the scarce findings on the importance of perceived organizational support in a crisis context to reduce negative emotions such as job frustration and job-related anxiety (e.g. Zhang *et al.*, 2020). Organizational support has received much attention as a precondition for employees'

well-being and engagement in the normal work context (Eisenberger *et al.*, 2001, 2020) but is rarely considered explicitly in internal crisis communication. Here, the focus tends to be on informing employees quickly and accurately (Mazzei and Butera, 2021), but our findings suggest that internal communication must also serve a supportive function in terms of investing in relational communication (Einwiller *et al.*, 2021) in order to increase the feeling of care in employees and minimize the risk of frustration and disengagement. Overall, employees' perceptions of organizational transparency and organizational support contribute both to prevent the risk of job disengagement; however, the processes how these effects evolve differ. Whereas organizational transparency works on the cognitive level and reduces employees' perceptions of uncertainty, organizational support shows its effect on the emotional level. The study not only corroborates the importance of transparent organizational crisis communication pronounced in previous studies (e.g. Kim, 2018; Strandberg and Vigso, 2016; Stranzl *et al.*, 2021), but stresses also that communication approaches that go beyond a solely informing strategy and demonstrate care and support are better suited to bolster employee well-being comprehensively. Particularly, negative emotions that not only result from the situational uncertainty but also other factors can be addressed when internal communication promotes a supportive organizational environment.

For practice, this is also the most important extension of the view of internal communication, because the concept of organizational support is strongly associated with the field of human resources (Eisenberger *et al.*, 2020). However, our results urge internal communicators to invest their efforts equally in transparent information during crisis and in the creation of a supportive climate within their organization, as both help to buffer negative emotions and prevent disengagement. Internal communication as a facilitator within the organization can ensure that employees feel cared for and supported through various measures; some of them fall in the realm of their core functions (Men, 2021) and others broaden the spectrum and indicate a potential and need to stronger integrate the functions of internal communication and other departments, especially human resources. In the scope of relational communication (Einwiller *et al.*, 2021; Men, 2021), listening to the needs and concerns of employees is an important measure that can directly create a feeling of support among employees and, in a next step, lead to actual support when internal communicators forward the expressed needs to the relevant agents in the organization. Regular surveys or exchange platforms where employees can express their feelings are feasible approaches in this regard. Such measures could have a very general format that provides an open space to be listened, or more specific formats that are set up in cooperation with single departments (e.g. IT) in order to generate support in a very targeted way. Here it becomes already apparent that internal communication must fulfill its role as an enabler to an even greater extent. The enabler function also includes aspects, such as training other departments on how to make their services visible and how to communicate relationally and openly within the organization. Beside actual supportive measures, feeling valued contributes strongly to employees' perception of organizational support (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986). Hence, appreciative communication is another pillar in building a supportive climate within an organization, that internal communication should establish during normal times and even more during demanding ones. Appreciative communication is not only about specific employee achievements, but should also unconditionally value employees as individual beings. Internal communication can embed appreciation in the organization, for example by using the CEO, which is a strong symbol for the organization, more often as a sender of appreciative messages. Besides the challenges of contributing to the perception of organizational support, it is undoubtedly not always easy to communicate transparently under conditions of uncertainty, which proved to be another crucial factor in our study. As long as accurate information is available, management is advised to disclose them timely in

a clear and complete manner, because otherwise essential sensemaking processes may be endangered as employees may fall back on simplistic assumptions and rumors (Strandberg and Vigsø, 2016). However, if such information is missing as it was often the case during the pandemic and can also be the case in other crises, an open and honest communication about uncertainties and ambiguities will demonstrate transparency to employees. Furthermore, opening rooms for discussion about uncertainties can foster employees' perception of being appreciated and cared for.

Limitations and future research directions

The study has several limitations, which need to be addressed. First, the results are limited to a specific crisis situation, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the particular national context of Austria. However, since any crisis is problematic because it inherently produces uncertainty and ambiguity for employees (Ulmer *et al.*, 2018), we can assume that a socioemotional crisis communication approach is valuable also during crises in other contexts and countries to address uncertainty, negative emotions and job disengagement. Here, further research is needed.

Second, as the data were collected at one point in time – in the middle of the third lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2021 – the results represent a snapshot of an elongated crisis period. How the impact of a socioemotional crisis communication differs at the various stages of a crisis cannot be answered. Although we tried to establish some separation through different time references for the measurements of organizational constructs and crisis implications for employees, a rigorous test of causality is not possible by means of the chosen design.

Third, the 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 imply an issue (a single factor accounted for 37% of the variance in the indicators), future research can broaden the basis of data sources in order to gain more nuanced and thorough insights into the effects of organizational transparency and organizational support during a crisis. Specifically, a case study approach would allow for triangulation of self-reported data about employees' cognitive and emotional processes with content analysis data of an organization's communication measures as well as observational data concerning actual job/organizational performance. Furthermore, accompanying one critical case through a whole crisis span would better allow to test causal effects. In terms of the perceptions of organizational support, a qualitative study with employees would help capture what concrete measures of organizational support exist and how they are evaluated. Furthermore, it would clarify the specific roles of the internal communications and the HR department in providing support.

Fourth, job disengagement may have also been caused by other factors serving as stressors at home, including responsibilities for children, home schooling or social isolation. Thus, a subsequent investigation including other factors of a personal crisis in the model can also prove valuable (1) in clarifying private and job-related factors that influence job disengagement and (2) better discussing the responsibilities of organizations to address employees' individual crisis situation. Here, it could also be interesting to consider the role of negative self-conscious emotions (e.g. shame) that can trigger an employee's withdrawal from others (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010) and thereby make it more difficult to reach them with a socioemotional communication approach. Since job disengagement is an underresearched construct, further development of the questionnaire items provides an excellent starting point for future research. Finally, we would like to encourage future research to take a closer look at different kinds of socioemotional crisis communication approaches that stimulate reciprocation in employees in terms of cognitive, emotional and behavioral outcomes.

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