The Influence of Feedback Orientation on Feedback Seeking Behaviour: The Perspective of Tait Activation Theory

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Abstract

Based on trait activation theory, this paper attempted to investigate the impact of employees' feedback orientation on their feedback seeking behaviors, and examine the moderating roles of positive and negative feedback. Using hierarchical linear modeling and data collected from 238 Chinese supervisor–subordinate dyads working at a large manufacturing company to verify the above conceptual model and research hypothesis. Empirical findings demonstrated that feedback orientation of employees had positive influence on their feedback seeking behaviors. Besides, positive feedback positively moderated the influence of employees' feedback orientation on their feedback seeking behaviors. And, negative feedback negatively moderated the influence of employees' feedback orientation on their feedback seeking behaviors. The conclusions enrich the theories and practices on how feedback orientation, positive and negative feedback affect feedback seeking behavior.

Keywords: Trait activation theory, Feedback orientation, Feedback seeking behavior, Positive and negative feedback.

INTRODUCTION

In the digital and information age, the internal and external environment of an organization changes rapidly (Steelman & Wolfeld, 2018). How to get sufficient and effective information in time is crucial for employees to actively respond to external challenges, and ultimately promote the development of individuals and organizations. As a key link in interpersonal communication, feedback has become an important channel for individuals to obtain information (Su, Lin, & Ding, 2019). However, relying solely on the traditional top-down feedback has been difficult to meet the needs of employee performance improvement and organizational development (Griffin, Neal, & Parker, 2007). In view of this, Ashford (1986), based on the theory of positive psychology, opened a unique perspective for feedback research pointing out that by actively seeking feedback from their supervisors and colleagues, employees can gain valuable information

for themselves, thus promoting the development of themselves and the organization. Since then, the concept of feedback seeking behavior breaks the disadvantage of traditional top-down feedback, and becomes a hot topic in the field of feedback research (Shen, Yang, He, & Wu, 2019; Sherf & Morrison, 2020).

Among pervious research about the influencing factors of individual feedback seeking behavior, feedback orientation, as a personality characteristic representing individual feedback response differences, has attracted an increasing academic attention in the past decade (Hawass, 2017; Patel, Silva, & Dahling, 2019). Many scholars have pointed out that feedback orientation is more comprehensive and typical than using individual variables such as self-efficacy, and emotional intelligence to explain feedback seeking behavior (Anseel, Beatty, Shen, Lievens, & Sackett, 2015; Dahling, Chau, & O'malley, 2012; Linderbaum & Levy, 2010). However, so far as we know, there are no empirical studies to discuss the effect of individual feedback orientation on his or her feedback seeking behavior, especially in the Chinese context. Hence,

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the first purpose of our study is to investigate the influence of employees' feedback orientation on their feedback seeking behavior.

In addition, from the unique perspective of interactive psychology, Tett and Burnett (2003) proposed Trait Activation Theory to explore the organic connection between external situation and individual internal traits, as well as the predictive influence of such organic connection on individual behaviors. Trait activation is a process in which dormant traits within an individual are awakened in appropriate situations and exhibit specific behaviors (Wihler et al., 2017). It argues that external situations can increase or decrease the influence of practical traits on behavior (Van Hoye & Turban, 2015). That's to say, the effect of individual feedback orientation on his or her feedback seeking behavior might be reinforced or weakened by external factors. Hence, the second purpose of our study is attempt to test boundary conditions of the influence of individual feedback orientation on his or her feedback seeking behavior by introducing positive feedback and negative feedback as moderators.

Above all, our study supplements the existing literatures on feedback and trait activation theory from the following three aspects. Our study is the first empirical study to discuss the relationship between feedback orientation of employees and their feedback seeking behavior, providing a new possible perspective for understanding the driving force of feedback seeking behavior. Besides, by discussing the moderating effects of positive feedback and negative feedback, we attempt to investigate the boundary conditions of the relationship between employee feedback orientation and their feedback seeking behavior. Third, our study provides new evidences for the applicability and validity of trait activation theory in Chinese context and further deepens our understanding of trait activation theory.

THEORETICAL ANALYSIS AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS
Feedback Orientation and Feedback Seeking Behavior

As mentioned previously, feedback orientation is an individual difference, which reflects the overall receptivity of an individual to feedback (London & Smither, 2002). To some extent, it's a multi-dimensional construct, which includes utility, social awareness, accountability and feedback self-efficacy (Dahling et al., 2012; Linderbaum & Levy, 2010) confirmed that employees with high feedback orientation could better deal with their emotional responses to feedback, so as to deal with feedback

more meaningfully and effectively, and finally use feedback to design work goals and promote their performance. Besides, pervious extant literatures have shown that feedback orientation can explain feedback seeking more comprehensively and typically than individual variables (Gregory & Levy, 2012; London & Smither, 2002; Steelman & Wolfeld, 2018). And next, the present study starts from the above four dimensions of feedback orientation to specifically analyze the influence of individual's feedback orientation on his or her feedback seeking behavior.

Utility refers to the degree to which one person's belief that feedback is important and actively use it to improve his or her behavior. Previous studies have confirmed that the perceived utility of feedback has become an important factor affecting individual's motivation to receive and seek feedback (Brett & Atwater, 2001; Makiney & Levy, 1998). Accountability refers to one person's responsibility to use and provide feedback. It is an important precursor of individual subsequent feedback intention (Roch & McNall, 2007), and is related to the feedback process and developmental behavior (Linderbaum & Levy, 2010). Social awareness refers to a person's perception of evaluations from others, which is more likely to be seen as an external pressure to recognize and respond to feedback. Levy, Albright, Cawley, and Williams (1995) have verified the employees with higher social awareness might have stronger desires for feedback and more initial seeking intentions. Feedback self-efficacy is a person's confidence and ability to process feedback effectively, and prior studies have confirmed that an individual's behavior control has a significant effect on his or her behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977; Linderbaum & Levy, 2010). In other words, one person's feedback self-efficacy is positively correlated with his or her feedback seeking behavior. Taken together, it is reasonable to assume that employees' feedback orientation has a positive impact on their feedback seeking behavior. Hence, the following hypothesis is obtained:

H1: Feedback orientation has a positive influence on feedback seeking behavior.

The Moderating Roles of Positive and Negative Feedback

Feedback, in this regard, can be defined as the actions taken by the supervisors to offer their subordinates information regarding working behavior (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Noefer, Stegmaier, Molter, & Sonntag, 2009). Positive feedback refers to a positive evaluation of one person's work behavior, results, or attributes (Evans & Dobrosielska, 2019).

Positive feedback is usually regarded as a valuable strategy for rewarding the subordinates in the workplace (Hamner & Hamner, 1976), and can be applied to change or reinforce certain behaviors of subordinates (Wei & Yazdanifard, 2014). Besides, positive feedback shows that supervisors' recognition, praise and reward of subordinates can bring real benefits to employees and make them realize the value of feedback (Jaworski & Kohli, 1991). As such, positive feedback can affect the activation of individual feedback orientation by enhancing the clues related to individual feedback perception. This is to say, positive feedback from supervisors can effectively activate their subordinates' feedback orientation and further magnify their influence on feedback seeking behavior.

While, negative feedback usually indicates that an individual's work behavior or performance is not up to expectations (Steelman & Rutkowski, 2004). It is often perceived as less accurate and therefore less acceptable to the employees than positive feedback (Domurath, Patzelt, & Liebl, 2020). Prior research has shown that negative feedback can trigger a sense of defensiveness, disapproval, and denial in the recipient (Fedor, Eder, & Buckley, 1989). Individuals are unwilling to receive negative feedback, so they are less likely to make behavioral improvements based on the negative feedback (Pichler, Beenen, & Wood, 2018). In addition, conservation of resources theory points out that resource limitation makes individuals try their best to maintain and protect resources (Hobfoll, 2001). When the supervisor points out the subordinates' mistakes via negative feedback, the subordinates will face the loss of self-esteem, self-confidence and other resources. Once individuals perceive that their resources are damaged, they tend to take measures to prevent further loss of existing resources, which makes it difficult to generate feedback-seeking behavior (Lin, Scott, & Matta, 2019). Therefore, in a sense, negative feedback prevents individuals from seeking feedback,

which means that the influence of individual's feedback orientation on his or her feedback seeking behavior will be further weakened.

Furthermore, Trait Activation Theory emphasizes that the external environment plays a significant role in the activation of a person's trait expression (Tett & Burnett, 2003). If there is a trait-situation correlation clue, the trait is more likely to be activated by the external situation. Individual behavior is more influenced by the traits, and their behavior is more likely to be consistent with personality traits. Therefore, employees with high feedback orientation are more likely to show the characteristics of feedback orientation, thus showing more feedback seeking behavior. On the flip side, if there is no clue that the situation is related to the individual trait, the individual trait is not easy to be activated, the individual behavior is more influenced by the situation. When employees perceive negative feedback from their supervisors, they choose to suppress expression and are less likely to actively seek feedback. It is thus quite reasonable to expect that feedback orientation will have a weaker positive influence on feedback seeking behavior among those employees with high perceptions of negative feedback than those with low. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H2: Both positive feedback and negative feedback can moderate the effect of feedback orientation on feedback seeking behavior, such that positive feedback positively moderates this effect, while negative feedback negatively moderates this effect.

Taken together, our study mainly attempts to discuss the influence of employees' feedback orientation on their feedback seeking behaviors. Besides, we also try to investigate the boundary conditions of this influencing process by introducing positive feedback and negative feedback as moderators from the perspective of Trait Activation Theory. The conceptual model of our study was shown in Figure 1.
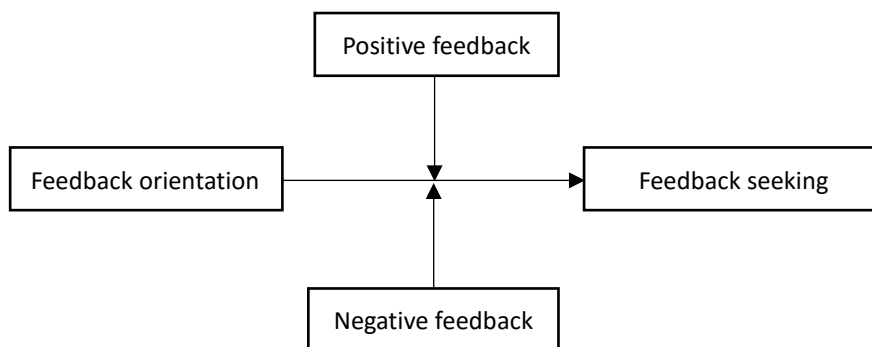

Figure 1. **The proposed conceptual model.**

RESEARCH METHODS
Participants and Data Collection

We collected data from a large manufacturing company located in Shandong, China. With the help of the company's HRD, 300 employees and their direct supervisors were randomly selected to participate in our survey. We also coded each employee and his/her supervisor before distributing questionnaires. Besides, in order to control the illusionary correlation and common method variance of our study, we designed two surveys of data collection. One was the subordinate surveys, which involved their feedback orientation, preconceptions about positive feedback and negative feedback, and demographics. The other was the supervisor surveys, which contained evaluation of their direct subordinates' feedback seeking behavior.

In order to obtain the final sample, we discarded those questionnaires that were incomplete, unclear, and mismatched. After completing this work, the final sample consisted of 238 employees, representing an overall response rate of 79.33%. Of the participating subordinates, 52.1% was male, and the mean tenure with this current supervisor was 19.21 months (SD = 15.37). 68.1% were under 30 years of age, and 91.6% were under 40 years old. Most of the participating employees were well educated, and 89.9% of them held bachelor's degree or above.

Measures

Feedback orientation. We requested employees to evaluate their feedback orientation with Linderbaum and Levy (2010) 20-item scale. Example items include: "Feedback helps me succeed at work" and "Feedback is a critical tool for improving my performance". Scale anchors ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The Cronbach's Alpha of the present study is 0.86.

Positive feedback and negative feedback. Employees were asked to rate their perceptions of positive and negative feedback from their supervisors using Steelman, Levy, and Snell (2004) feedback environment scale. Scale anchors ranged from 1 (never) to 5 (always).4 items were used for positive feedback, and a sample item was "My supervisor usually notifies me when I'm doing well at work". The Cronbach's Alpha of the present study is 0.75. Other 4 items were used for negative feedback,

and a sample item was "When I make mistakes at work, my supervisor tells me". The Cronbach's Alpha of the present study is 0.76.

Feedback seeking behavior. We invited supervisors to evaluate the feedback seeking behavior of their direct subordinates with VandeWalle, Ganesan, Challagalla, and Brown (2000) 4-item scale. Example items include: "How often does this subordinate ask you about his or her overall performance" and "How often does this subordinate ask you about technical aspects of his or her job". Scale anchors also ranged from 1 (never) to 5 (always). The Cronbach's Alpha of the present study is 0.79.

Control variables: Consistent with previous studies (Ding & Yu, 2020; Hawass, 2017; Yongxing, Hongfei, Baoguo, & Lei, 2017), gender, age, education and tenure with this current supervisor of employee was treated as control variables in our study. Specifically, gender was coded: male = 0, female = 1. Age and education were divided into five levels. Tenure with this current supervisor was self-reported in number of months.

Data analysis

Mplus7.2 and SPSS 22.0 were used to test our two hypotheses in this study. The specific steps were as follows. First, we performed four confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) via Mplus7.2 to check the discriminant validity of all four core variables. We then calculated descriptive statistics by SPSS 22.0 for major variables, including means, standard deviations and correlations, to preliminarily test the relationships among them. Finally, the multiple regression analysis was used to test our two hypothesizes.

ANALYSIS OF EMPIRICAL RESULTS
Discriminant Validity

Before testing the two hypotheses we have proposed, we examined the discriminant validity of the entire conceptual model with CFAs (Table 1). Model 4 showed the 4-factors models exhibited an appropriate fit to the sample data ($\chi2$ /df = 2.62 < 3 , RMSEA = 0.07 < 0.08, CFI = 0.91 > 0.9, TLI = 0.90 > 0.9, SRMR = 0.06 0.08). At the same time, Model 4 is better than the other three alternative measurement models. Therefore, we were able to infer the conceptual distinction among feedback orientation, feedback seeking behavior, positive feedback and negative was significant

Table 1. **The CFA results among four core variables**

Models	Factors	χ^2/df	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	SRMR
Model 1	1 factor: FO + PF + NF + FSB	8.49	0.13	0.56	0.53	0.13
Model 2	2 factors: FO, PF + NF+ FSB	6.27	0.11	0.77	0.75	0.01
Model 3	3 factors: FO, PF + NF, FSB	4.38	0.09	0.84	0.82	0.07

Model 4	4 factors: FO, PF, NF, FSB	2.62	0.07	0.91	0.90	0.06

Note. *N* = 238. FO represents feedback orientation; PF represents positive feedback; NF represents negative feedback; FSB represents feedback seeking behavior.

Descriptive statistics

The means, SD and correlations of demographics characteristics, feedback orientation, positive feedback, negative feedback, and feedback seeking behavior were showed in Table 2. In line with our argument, it demonstrated that feedback orientation of employees was positive correlated with their feedback seeking behavior (*r* = 0.22, *p* <

0.01). Besides, positive feedback was also positive correlated with their feedback orientation (*r* = 0.21, *p* < 0.01) and feedback seeking behavior (*r* = 0.17, *p* < 0.01). While, negative feedback was negative related to feedback orientation (*r* = -0.14, *p* < 0.01) and feedback seeking behavior (*r* = -0.31, *p* < 0.01). Taken together, these findings provided prima facie evidence for our hypotheses.

Table 2. **The results of correlation among variables**

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1.Gender	1.53	0.25	1						
2.Age	2.33	0.66	0.04	1					
3.Education	2.85	0.93	0.08	0.22**	1				
4.Tenure	19.21	15.37	0.06	0.25**	0.09	1			
5.Feedback orientation	4.03	0.44	-0.09	-0.01	-0.03	-0.10	1		
6.Positive feedback	3.93	0.42	-0.12	0.11*	-0.02	-0.01	0.21**	1	
7.Negative feedback	2.49	0.63	0.18**	-0.02	0.24**	-0.08	-0.14*	-0.31**	1
8. Feedback seeking	4.21	0.41	-0.15*	-0.08	-0.24**	0.04	0.22**	0.17**	-0.11*

Note. N = 238. *p < 0.05. **p < 0.01.

Hypotheses testing

The results of multiple regression analyses were presented in Table 3. As shown in Model 2, after controlling for the control variables, feedback

orientation of employees has a positive influence on their feedback seeking behavior (*β* = 0.21, *p* < 0.001), providing support for Hypothesis 1.

Table 3. **The results of multiple regression analyses**

	Feedback seeking behavior			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Gender	-0.13*	-0.11*	-0.10	-0.12*
Age	-0.04	-0.05	-0.06	-0.05
Education	-0.23**	-0.23***	-0.24***	-0.23**
Tenure	0.08	0.11*	0.10	0.11*
Feedback orientation		0.21***	0.17**	0.20**
Positive feedback			0.13*	
Interactor 1			0.15*	
Negative feedback				-0.14*
Interactor 2				-0.12*
R^2	0.08	0.13	0.16	0.15
ΔR^2		0.05	0.03	0.02
F	5.09**	6.59***	8.175***	7.843***

Note. *N* = 238. Interactor 1 represents Feedback orientation x Positive feedback. Interactor 2 represents Feedback orientation x Negative feedback. ***p < 0.001. **p < 0.01. *p < 0.05.

As shown in Model 3, positive feedback can positive moderate the influence of feedback orientation on feedback seeking behavior (*β* = 0.15, *p* < 0.05). According to Preacher, Curran, and Bauer (2006) suggestions, we calculated the significance test and plotted the simple slope at 1 SD above and

below the mean for positive feedback to ascertain the precise form of this moderating effects, which as shown in Figure. 2. It indicated the magnitude of the positive association between employees' feedback orientation and their feedback seeking behavior as discernibly stronger for those with high perception

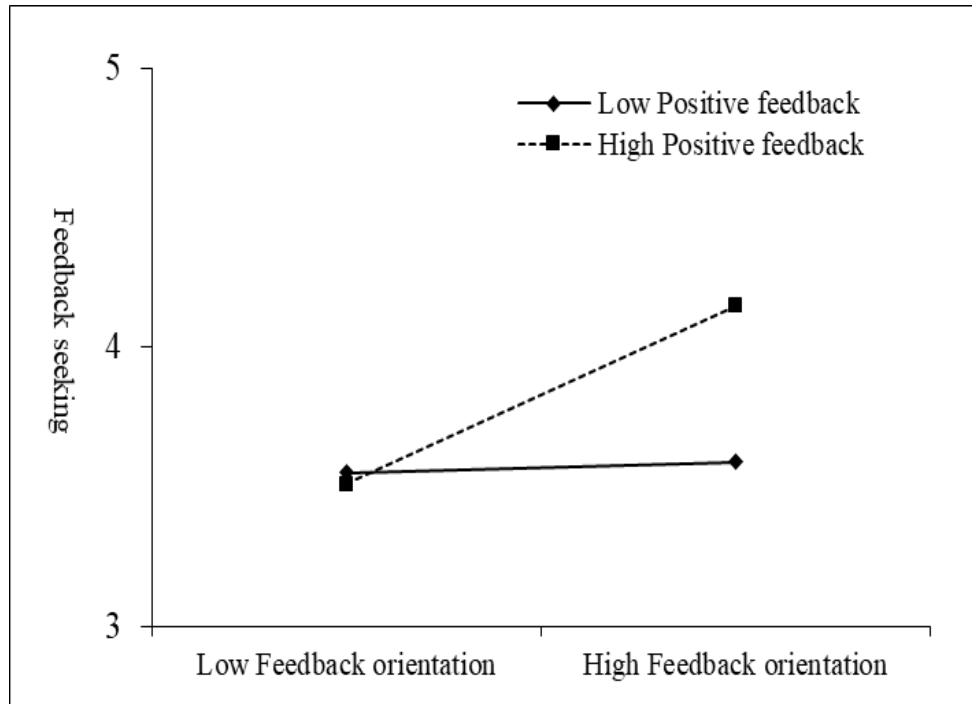of positive feedback relative to employee with low   perception.

Figure 2. Interaction of feedback orientation and positive feedback on feedback seeking

Likewise, as shown in Model 4, negative feedback can negative moderate the influence of feedback orientation on feedback seeking behavior (β = -0.12, $p < 0.05$). we also calculated the significance test and plotted the simple slope at 1 SD above and below the mean for negative feedback to ascertain the precise form of its moderating effects, as shown in Figure. 3.

It indicated the magnitude of the positive association between feedback orientation and feedback seeking behavior as discernibly stronger for employees with low perception of negative feedback relative to employee with high perception. Hence, Hypothesis 2 was supported.
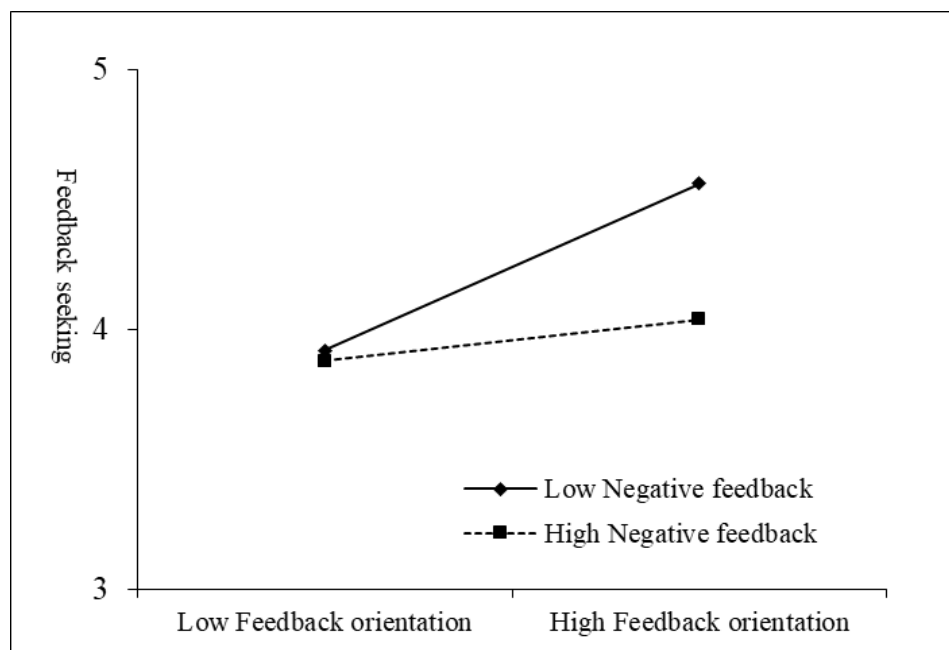

Figure 3. Interaction of feedback orientation and negative feedback on feedback seeking

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

From the perspective of trait activation theory, we aimed to explore the influence of employees' feedback orientation on their feedback seeking behaviors. We also introduced positive feedback and negative feedback as moderators to discuss the boundary conditions of this influence process. Data from a matched sample of 238 Chinese employees and their direct supervisors supported our two major hypotheses. It demonstrated that employee's feedback orientation has a positive influence on his or her feedback seeking behavior. Furthermore, both positive feedback and negative feedback can moderate this influence. Specifically, for individuals with high perceptions of positive feedback from their supervisors, the effect of their feedback orientation on feedback seeking behavior is more obvious. While, for individuals with low perception of supervisor negative feedback, this influence is more obvious.

Theoretical Implications

First, our results show that feedback orientation of employee has a positive influence on his or her feedback seeking behavior. By testing the direct influence of employees' feedback orientation on their feedback seeking behavior, this conclusion further confirms the central role of personality traits in promoting his or her behavior (Judge & Zapata, 2015; Shkoler, Rabenu, Tabak, & Lebron, 2019; Wihler, Meurs, Wiesmann, Troll, & Blickle, 2017). Besides, the current study is the first to discuss the role of individual's feedback orientation in promoting feedback seeking behavior in Chinese employees, which responds the calls for further research in this field (Gregory & Levy, 2012; London & Smither, 2002; Steelman & Wolfeld, 2018). It deepens our understanding of feedback orientation, and enriches the existing literatures in the field of feedback by demonstrating that feedback orientation- representing an important personality trait- has a direct positive effect on employee feedback seeking.

Second, the present study provided new supporting evidences for the moderation roles of positive and negative feedback from supervisor in the relationships between feedback orientation on feedback seeking behavior. While no scholars, to our knowledge, have directly probed the relationship, there is evidence that feedback plays an important moderating role in stimulating a person's personality. For example, Zhou (2003) found that developmental feedback could moderate the effect of creative

personality on creativity. Noefer et al. (2009) verified that feedback from supervisor moderated the influence of individual creative thinking abilities on their innovative behavior. Consistent with these studies, our findings show that positive feedback positively affects the influence of individual's feedback orientation on his or her feedback seeking behavior, while negative feedback negatively affects this effect, which to some extent revealed the boundary conditions of this influence mechanism.

Third, to get a better understanding of the effect of feedback orientation on feedback seeking behavior, we employed the trait activation theory as a useful explanatory framework for the present study. Trait activation theory states that external situation is a significant motivating factor in the activation of individual trait expression (Tett & Burnett, 2003; Van Hoye & Turban, 2015). In line with this, the present study attempted to introduce Trait Activation Theory into the relationship among feedback orientation, feedback seeking behavior, positive and negative feedback for the first time. The results suggested that individuals' perceptions of positive and negative feedback could moderate the effect of their feedback orientation on their feedback seeking behavior, which provided new evidences for the applicability of Trait Activation Theory in Chinese context. This also deepen our understanding of Trait Activation Theory, and further enriched the researches about Trait Activation Theory, especially in Oriental situation.

Practical Implications

The present study also makes some practical implications. On the one hand, along with previous research, this study provides empirical evidence that feedback orientation is usually defined by academics as a relatively stable individual difference, and it has a significant influence on feedback seeking behavior. Therefore, in recruiting and training employees, enterprises should pay attention to the candidates' sense of responsibility, self-confidence and other qualities related to feedback orientation. On the other hand, based on existing literature, the specific roles of positive feedback and negative feedback in feedback orientation and feedback seeking behaviors are determined in this study. Besides, according to the current conclusions, In the context of high positive feedback and low negative feedback, feedback orientation has a greater positive impact on feedback seeking behavior. Hence, supervisors are recommended to adopt a personalized feedback

paradigm to cultivate a feedback climate at daily work, and finally achieve orientation-behavior congruence (Evans & Steptoe-Warren, 2018). In addition, we also suggest that managers pay more attention to giving employees positive feedback and less negative feedback, which is conducive to the improvement of employees.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The sample of this study was collected from a large manufacturing company in the Chinese context. It is worth noting that there are huge cultural differences between China and the Western world (Liu, Liu, Yang, & Wu, 2019), and such difference can affect individual feedback seeking (Shen et al., 2019). Further research is needed in the future to test the cross-cultural applicability of our conclusions. Besides, individual feedback orientation was evaluated using a unidimensional scale in this study. This can explain feedback seeking more fully and typically than a single variable. However, it would be very interesting for future scholars to separately examine the influence of feedback orientation's four sub-dimensions on feedback seeking. Furthermore, from the perspective of trait activation theory, this study investigated the main influence of individual's feedback orientation on his or her feedback-seeking behavior，and the moderating effect of positive feedback and negative feedback, but whether it might be affected by other mediators? Hence, we suggest that more exploration and research on the medium mechanism of this relationship is needed in the future.

Acknowledgements
None.

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