

Voice or Overreach? Age Labels, Supervisor Attribution, and Procedural Safeguards for Intern Voice

Zuhao Zhang *

School of Economics and Management, University of Science and Technology Beijing, Beijing, China

* Corresponding Author Email: 2376285228@qq.com

Abstract. Interns are often the first to spot inefficient processes, yet the same observation can be read by a supervisor as constructive input or dismissed as inexperience and overstepping. Grounded in attribution theory, this paper treats “post-00” not as a stable generational trait but as an identity label that becomes salient when task information is ambiguous, and traces its consequences for supervisor attribution and intern voice. A Pilot Study using the Critical Incident Technique (three interns, six critical incidents) identified the mechanisms of label substitution and information diagnosticity; a Main Study survey of 174 valid responses tested the pathway from perceived age-label salience through psychological safety to voice behavior and defensive silence. Greater perceived label salience predicted lower psychological safety ($r = -0.163$, $p < 0.05$), which in turn predicted more voice ($r = 0.358$, $p < 0.01$) and less defensive silence ($r = -0.330$, $p < 0.01$). Contrary to expectations, structured expression channels strengthened rather than weakened the salience–safety link ($B = -0.215$ vs. -0.061), implying that formal channels protect interns only when substantively used. The paper reframes alleged generational conflict as a problem of information screening and procedural governance, and proposes governance pathways—role specification, feedback templates, tiered supervisory response, and university–employer co-governance—to ground youth workplace development in institutional design.

Keywords: post-00 interns, employee voice, supervisor attribution, psychological safety, procedural safeguards.

1. Problem Statement

Internships bridge university and the workplace, and they are also a critical junction in youth labor market governance. Internship quality shapes not only individual career starting points and human capital accumulation, but also the effectiveness of public-sector youth employment services and the talent pipeline for employers. Yet internship governance has long centered on placement numbers and contract-signing rates, with far less attention paid to the quality of upward information flow between intern and supervisor. Securing an internship placement and having one's voice taken seriously during that internship are two links of the same chain.

From a youth labor market governance perspective, internship management confronts a recurring structural tension: organizations want interns to be proactive, agile, and innovative, yet tend to assign them low-risk, repetitive, peripheral tasks. Interns, for their part, want real learning opportunities and may raise concerns about inefficient workflows, data risks, or tasks that diverge from what was advertised. The supervisor must decide quickly: is this insight, naïveté, or pushback against authority? Internships are short—typically one to six months—and neither side has enough time to accumulate a reliable behavioral record. What is said and who says it enter the supervisor's judgment together, under considerable informational uncertainty. This is precisely the kind of governance problem that sits at the intersection of public youth employment services and organizational human resource management.

Research on employee voice has long documented its dual character. Voice is the act of offering ideas, suggestions, or concerns to someone with the authority to act, with the aim of improving the organization, team, or work situation [1][2][3]. Challenging forms of voice—particularly prohibitive voice—may carry greater improvement potential but are also more likely to be labeled “disloyal” or “low performance” by managers [4][5]. More importantly, speaking up is not the same as being heard.

Burris et al. found that employees and supervisors frequently disagree about the frequency and value of voice [6]. Su et al. showed that supervisors evaluate voice positively only when they attribute it to prosocial and constructive motives [7]. Sherf et al. found that when managers feel they lack the personal control to drive change, they refrain from soliciting voice even when they recognize its merit [8].

The empirical record on generational differences, however, calls for considerably more caution. Ravid et al.'s meta-analysis of generational research—covering 143 samples and over 158,000 individuals—found no evidence of systematic generational differences in work values, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, turnover intentions, work–life conflict, or burnout [9]. An earlier meta-analysis by Costanza et al. likewise found that the relationship between generation and work attitudes was weak, with effect sizes far smaller than public discourse implies [10]. This suggests that "post-00" should not be treated as a stable, homogeneous personality category. It is better understood as an attributional cue that becomes activated under conditions of informational ambiguity—its effects reflecting a cognitive shortcut whose strength varies with the clarity of task-relevant information, rather than an intractable bias.

Taken together, the research streams above point to a question that deserves closer scrutiny: when a speaker's identity information—such as age—enters the supervisor's attributional calculus, does it change the behavioral consequences of challenging voice? The internship context makes this question especially acute. Supervisors lack records of the intern's past performance and behavior (low distinctiveness information) and lack comparison cases from other interns (low consensus information). Under these conditions, might age labels fill the attributional gap, shaping how supervisors judge the motive behind the message and how they respond? That is the question this paper sets out to answer.

The question can be made more concrete: when the value of a suggestion, the role boundaries of the speaker, and the consequences of acting on it are all unclear, do supervisors substitute age labels for substantive assessment of the information itself? Why focus on interns rather than young workers in general? Interns have no performance history, no prior track record for the supervisor to draw on. None of the covariation data needed for case-specific attribution is available. This creates the extreme scenario in which label substitution is most likely to occur. Internships are short—usually one to six months—so even when a misattribution happens, there is no time to correct it. Silence or exit become the intern's default. For new full-time hires, probationary performance, records, and longer-term relationships all supply attributional information; the space for label substitution is far narrower. More fundamentally, internships are an institutional component of practice-based education and youth employment policy. How an intern's voice is received directly shapes their professional socialization and employment prospects. Interns are not merely "younger employees"; they are the group for whom attributional failure is most consequential and for whom policy protections are most needed.

To address these questions, the paper is built around two complementary studies. The Pilot Study uses the Critical Incident Technique to identify attribution mechanisms and boundary conditions from real internship conflicts—answering where the mechanism comes from in practice. The Main Study uses a survey of interns to test how anticipated attribution shapes psychological safety, voice behavior, and defensive silence—answering what behavioral consequences follow from anticipated attribution. The two studies move from mechanism discovery to behavioral testing, forming a progressively deepening chain of evidence.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Foundations

2.1. Employee Voice and Managerial Response

Employee voice refers to the discretionary communication of ideas, suggestions, or concerns intended to improve the organization, group, or work context, directed toward someone with the authority to act [2][3]. Voice is not mere complaining; its purpose is to improve an existing state of affairs. Liang et al. distinguished promotive voice—focused on future improvements—from

prohibitive voice, which addresses errors, losses, or risks that have already occurred or are impending [1]. Both forms can carry value, but prohibitive voice, because it directly challenges current practices or managerial decisions, is more likely to trigger defensiveness or suspicion in supervisors.

Earlier voice research identified key antecedents of speaking up and staying silent, including leader openness, psychological safety, efficacy judgments, power distance, organizational identification, and personal resources [1][14][16][29]. But the organizational value of voice is realized only when it captures managerial attention, earns recognition, and is translated into action. Burris found that supportive voice is more favorably received, whereas challenging suggestions, despite their greater improvement potential, tend to be interpreted as disloyalty or poor performance [4]. Whiting et al. showed that supervisors evaluate suggestions based jointly on message quality, source characteristics, and timing [5]. Burris et al. documented the gap between speaking and being heard, finding systematic discrepancies between employee self-reports of voice and supervisor perceptions of its frequency and value [6].

More fundamentally, supervisory response is an attribution process. Su et al. demonstrated that supervisors give positive performance evaluations only when they attribute voice to prosocial and constructive motives [7]. Sherf et al., approaching the problem from the manager's side, showed that when supervisors feel they lack the personal control to drive change, they refrain from soliciting voice even when they see its merits [8]. Grant and Mayer found that observers distinguish between prosocial and impression-management motives behind organizational citizenship behavior, and that the attributional result determines whether the same behavior earns sharply different evaluations [19]. The implication is clear: voice research cannot stop at whether employees speak up. It must trace how supervisors interpret the speaker's motives, whether they have the capacity to act on suggestions, and why the chain from acknowledgment to trial to implementation so often breaks. Existing work on managerial response provides an essential starting point, but its focus has been on regular employees; the temporary, low-hierarchy, experience-light intern population has received little attention.

2.2. Age Labels and the Internship Context

Age stereotypes in the workplace are real—observers do infer competence, trustworthiness, flexibility, and compliance from age [11]—but using birth-year cohorts to predict work attitudes is a different and riskier move. Ravid et al.'s meta-analysis of generational research, spanning 143 samples and over 158,000 individuals, found no evidence of systematic generational differences in work centrality, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, turnover intentions, work–life conflict, or burnout [9]. Costanza et al.'s earlier meta-analysis similarly found that the generation–work attitude link was weak, with effect sizes far below what public commentary assumes [10].

Accordingly, this paper rejects both the view of "post-00" as a stable, uniform personality type and the essentialist claim that "post-00s are naturally more outspoken" or that "leaders instinctively reject post-00s." Age label is defined here strictly as an attributional cue under informational uncertainty—not a stubborn cognitive bias, but a cognitive variable whose influence changes with the clarity of task-relevant information. When the content of a suggestion, the boundaries of the speaker's role, and the consequences of implementation are all ambiguous, age labels can serve as a heuristic to fill the information gap. When data, plans, and role information are sufficient, the ambiguous space that labels exploit shrinks, and their marginal effect drops sharply. This position inherits the empirical caution of the generational meta-analyses while embedding the age label within an attribution framework, making it a contextually testable variable rather than a static demographic trait.

Organizational socialization research identifies role clarity, self-efficacy, social acceptance, and organizational knowledge as key elements of newcomer adjustment [13]. Interns, while not formal new hires in the strict sense, face even stronger temporariness and dependence. They know less about informal rules; their exit costs vary sharply depending on whether the internship is required for credit, tied to a certificate, or linked to a potential job offer; and they have more difficulty judging which issues are appropriate to raise and how to raise them.

The study most directly relevant to the present paper is Reissner et al., who used supervisor–newcomer dyadic data to show that supervisors are generally more willing to endorse promotive voice but are substantially more cautious about problem-focused voice from less socialized newcomers [24]. This finding suggests that supervisors are not necessarily rejecting newcomers' input; rather, they need to determine whether the newcomer understands the organizational context well enough, whether the problem they identify is real, and whether the proposed solution can be integrated with existing workflows. Intern suggestions sit precisely in the ambiguous territory between "fresh perspective" and "immature judgment." A supervisor may see a genuine blind spot through fresh eyes, or may dismiss a valid concern prematurely because the intern lacks a full picture of the situation. Short internship durations and limited two-way contact deprive supervisors of the continuity information (no past behavioral record) and consensus information (no comparable peers) needed to assess the reasonableness of a suggestion. These are exactly the conditions under which attribution theory predicts a high risk of label substitution.

Two critical gaps remain in the existing literature. First, age labels and information quality have not been brought together within a single attribution framework. Existing studies focus either on the objective characteristics of voice content or on the identity cues of the speaker; very few examine both simultaneously within a supervisory attribution analysis to test whether information quality can shrink the interpretive space that identity labels occupy. Second, voice outcomes have not been disaggregated into the tiers of acknowledgment, trial, and implementation. Most studies treat voice endorsement as binary, overlooking the breaks between "agreeing the problem exists," "arranging a small-scale pilot," and "formally revising procedures"—breaks that easily confound organizational power constraints with attributional bias.

2.3. Attribution Theory and Research Hypotheses

Attribution theory concerns how observers use limited information to infer the causes of behavior and how these inferences shape subsequent evaluations and actions. Kelley's covariation principle holds that observers draw on three types of covariation information: consensus (whether others behave similarly in the same situation), distinctiveness (whether the actor's behavior is specific to a particular target or task), and consistency (whether the actor behaves similarly across time and situations) [20]. When all three types of information are available, observers can fairly accurately determine whether behavior stems from the actor's internal dispositions or from external circumstances. When one type is missing, attributional accuracy declines. Weiner extended this logic into an attribution–emotion–action chain, showing that attributions evoke specific emotional responses (such as appreciation or anger) which in turn shape the observer's subsequent helping or punishing behavior [21].

Intern voice is a textbook case of attributional information poverty. First, interns lack past performance records and behavioral history, depriving supervisors of consistency information. Second, supervisors typically mentor only one or two interns at a time, without a reference group for comparison, so consensus information is absent. Third, the tasks interns perform differ systematically from those of regular employees. The simultaneous absence of all three covariation information types means that supervisors cannot tell whether a suggestion reflects a genuine discovery or a failure to grasp the bigger picture, and cannot distinguish constructive intent from effort avoidance or role overreach.

This logic leads to the concept of information diagnosticity. Diagnosticity refers not to the quantity of information but to its capacity to discriminate between competing explanations—information is diagnostic when it supports one interpretation while ruling out others. In the absence of diagnostic information, observers typically turn to more readily accessible cues, including the social category characteristics of the actor. This paper terms this process "label substitution": when task-level covariation information is insufficient for accurate attribution, social category labels—age, newcomer status—enter the attribution process as substitute cues.

This reasoning applies directly to intern voice situations. When an intern identifies a problem but does not supply objective evidence that can verify the problem's existence and severity, the supervisor faces a highly opaque attribution context. The scarcity of covariation information forces reliance on the most accessible cues at hand, and the intern's age marker—"post-00"—along with newcomer status are the most readily activated category attributes in that moment. Compounding this, "post-00" carries a cluster of negative connotations in public discourse: immature yet arrogant, distinctive yet deviant. Under informational ambiguity, with no diagnostic information to separate the competing explanations of "constructive motive" and "authority threat," the age label more easily attaches to narratives of inexperience-driven judgment, eagerness to criticize without foundation, or unwillingness to do basic work—raising the tendency toward authority-threat attribution while reducing constructive-motive attribution.

Solution-oriented expression and objective evidence block label substitution from the opposite direction. Solution-oriented expression transforms a comment from "who is wrong" to "how to test an improvement with manageable risk," supplying covariation information by demonstrating understanding of task constraints (distinctiveness) and willingness to invest cognitive resources in finding a fix. Objective evidence provides directly examinable task information, allowing the supervisor to judge based on data rather than on the speaker's person. Both raise information diagnosticity and shrink the explanatory space available to the age label. Hence:

H1: Information diagnosticity—jointly constituted by solution-oriented expression and objective evidence—moderates the effect of age labels on supervisory attribution. Under low diagnosticity, the post-00 age label reduces constructive-motive attribution and increases authority-threat and role-overreach attributions. Under high diagnosticity, the labeling effect approaches non-significance.

Supervisory attribution is the pivotal link between voice content and behavioral response. Su et al. found that prosocial and constructive motive attributions mediated the relationship between promotive voice and performance evaluations [7]. In the internship context, this connection carries even greater weight: a supervisor may agree that a problem exists yet hold different judgments about the speaker's motives, and those judgments determine whether the supervisor will read the suggestion carefully, offer an explanation, pilot a trial, and continue mentoring [30]. This paper further argues that managerial response should be disaggregated into three tiers: acknowledgment (the problem is worth attention), trial (small-scale testing), and implementation (formal revision of procedures). Breaks between tiers can arise from attributional divergence, but also from the supervisor's limited organizational authority—as Sherf et al. noted, when supervisors feel they lack the control to drive change, they may refrain from acting even when they recognize the suggestion's value [8]. "Acknowledgment without authority" is not the same as attributional bias.

H2: Constructive-motive attribution and authority-threat attribution respectively mediate the effects of identity cues and information cues on voice endorsement intentions, with opposite signs.

The attribution lens also illuminates the intern's behavioral calculus. Interns are not passive targets of attribution but active attributors themselves—they form expectations about "how my supervisor will see me if I speak up," based on the supervisor's past response patterns, organizational procedures, and relational cues. In this paper, "perceived age-label salience" refers to the degree to which interns believe their input will be attributed to their age label rather than to its substantive content. The higher the perceived salience, the more interns expect their views to be categorized as "a young person's idea" or "post-00 complaining" rather than judged on content, raising the psychological risk of speaking up. Psychological safety serves here as the outcome variable for anticipated attribution. Edmondson defined psychological safety as a shared team belief that raising questions, admitting errors, or expressing dissenting views will not bring humiliation or unjustified punishment [14][15].

Threats to psychological safety in turn shape behavior. Research on organizational silence shows that employees may withhold critical information for fear of being labeled, damaging relationships, or believing that speaking up is futile [16][27][28][32]. The intern's identity makes this calculus especially punishing: those on credit-bearing internships fear for grades and evaluations; those on self-arranged internships fear for certificates, recommendation letters, and retention offers. Structured

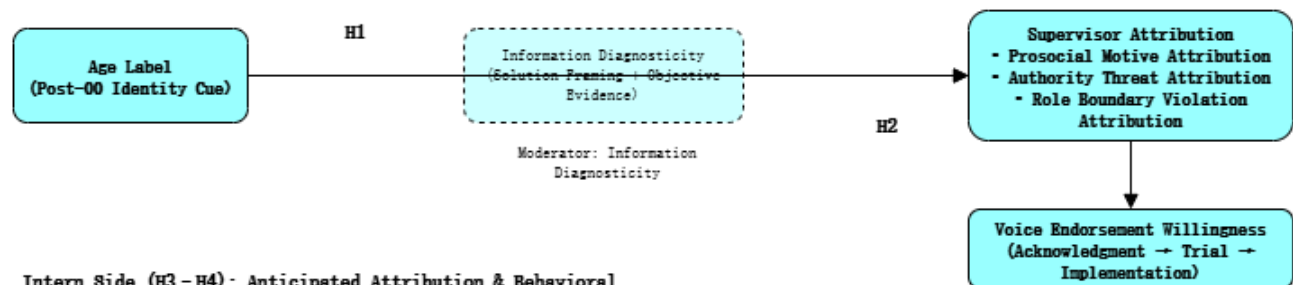
expression channels address this problem at the procedural level. Rather than depending on the supervisor's personal style, they reduce attributional uncertainty for both sides through fixed feedback timelines, designated recipients, processing deadlines, and standardized response formats. For interns, structured channels clarify when to speak, to whom, and with what evidence, reducing defensive silence driven by anticipated attribution risk. For supervisors, channels raise the diagnosticity of incoming information and shrink the attributional space available to identity labels. Accordingly:

H3: Perceived age-label salience negatively affects psychological safety, which in turn reduces voice behavior and increases defensive silence.

H4: Structured expression channels weaken the negative relationship between age-label salience and psychological safety.

Figure 1 presents the integrated theoretical model. The upper path captures the supervisor side, where information diagnosticity moderates the effect of age labels on supervisory attribution (H1) and attribution in turn shapes voice endorsement (H2); the lower path captures the intern side, where perceived age-label salience undermines psychological safety and thereby suppresses voice while increasing defensive silence (H3), with structured expression channels as a boundary condition (H4).

Supervisor Side (H1 – H2): Attribution & Endorsement



Intern Side (H3 – H4): Anticipated Attribution & Behavioral Consequences

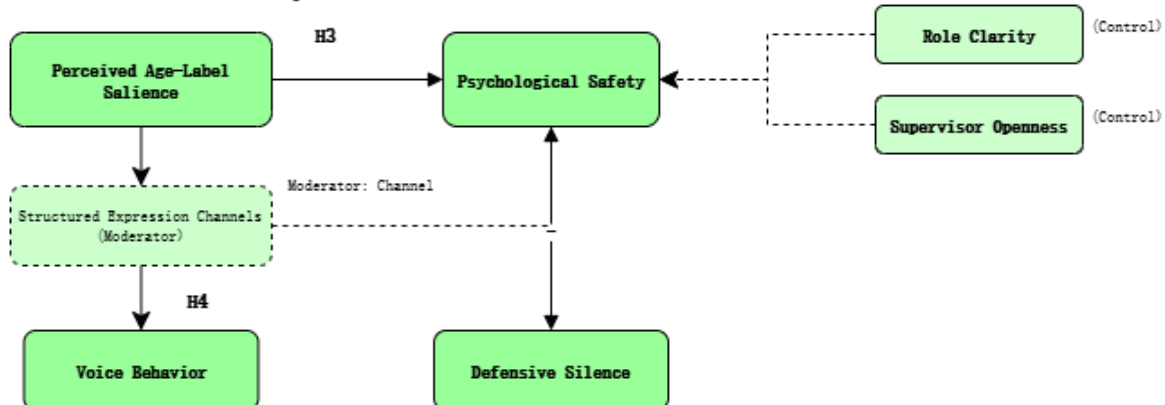


Fig. 1 Theoretical Model: Age Labels, Information Diagnosticity, and Intern Voice

3. Overall Study Design

The paper comprises two complementary studies. The Pilot Study uses the Critical Incident Technique, having completed interviews with three post-00 university students with genuine internship experience, yielding six positive and negative critical incidents. It provides initial identification of where attribution mechanisms come from in practice (addressing H1 and H2). The Main Study uses a survey design, having collected 200 responses (174 valid) from post-00 interns, to test the effects of anticipated attribution on psychological safety, voice behavior, and defensive silence (addressing H3 and H4). The overall design of the Pilot Study and Main Study is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Division of Work and Data Sources for the Pilot Study and Main Study

Phase	Data Type	Sample & Source	Focus	Timeline
Pilot Study	Qualitative interviews	3 post-00 interns completed	H1–H2 mechanism exploration	Jul–Aug 2026 (ongoing)
Main Study	Quantitative survey	200 collected, 174 valid (post-00 interns)	H3–H4 hypothesis testing	July 2026 (completed)
Future design	Research protocol	Future design	H1–H2 causal verification	Follow-up study

All interviewees and survey respondents participated voluntarily with informed consent. The Main Study's online survey included a privacy statement page; respondents confirmed consent before proceeding to the items. Data were anonymized by numeric codes and used only in aggregate form for academic writing.

4. Pilot Study: Critical Incident Interviews

4.1. Sample and Data Collection

The Pilot Study employed the Critical Incident Technique (CIT), inviting post-00 university students with genuine internship experience to recall specific instances in which they raised a concern or suggestion and received a clear response from their supervisor. The CIT's advantage is that it grounds abstract attitudes and attribution judgments in concrete behavioral sequences. Interviewees recount what happened, how they expressed their concern, how the supervisor responded, and what the outcome was—a specific behavioral chain—rather than making abstract judgments about whether they felt labeled. This makes it possible to identify, from the action sequence itself, the connections among label substitution, authority constraints, information diagnosticity, and response outcomes.

Inclusion criteria were: (1) birth year 2000 or later; (2) cumulative internship duration of at least one month; (3) a relatively stable mentoring supervisor during the internship; and (4) internship placements spanning both private-sector firms and public-sector organizations, to enhance contextual diversity. Complete interview data were collected from three interviewees: an internet company operations intern (S1, 3 months, self-arranged, non-credit), a public institution administrative intern (S2, 2 months, university-assigned, credit-bearing), and a small-to-medium manufacturing firm HR-administration intern (S3, 4 months, self-arranged, non-credit). Each provided one positive and one negative critical incident, producing a database of six incidents.

Each interviewee was asked to recall one incident in which their suggestion was affirmed, explained, or adopted by the supervisor (including cases where the suggestion was not adopted but an acceptable explicit reason was given), and one incident in which it was dismissed, shelved, rejected, or led to relational tension. The interview followed a semi-structured format, with main questions covering: (1) the task and work content at the time; (2) what problem was identified and under what circumstances it was raised; (3) what the supervisor specifically said and did; (4) how the matter was ultimately handled; (5) whether and why the interviewee's willingness to raise similar concerns changed afterward; and (6) whether the outcome might have been different if they had approached it differently—for instance, by providing data or checking with colleagues first. The interview did not directly ask whether the interviewee had experienced age discrimination; inferences about age labels were deferred to the coding stage and extracted indirectly from the supervisor behaviors and language that the interviewees reported.

4.2. Analytical Approach

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis with three-level coding. Open coding focused on four categories: expression form (whether the concern was stated directly or accompanied by data and proposed solutions), the discursive style of the supervisor's response (e.g., "you young people shouldn't just come in and dismiss things," "that's a sharp observation"), the action

sequence following the response (adoption and trial, shelving, outright rejection), and the expression channel (informal conversation, work group chat, formal meeting). Axial coding organized the open codes into five broad categories—information diagnosticity, age-label activation, expression mode, channel type, and change in willingness to voice—and selective coding was organized around the core chain of "information ambiguity → label substitution → response outcome," while also identifying counterexamples and boundary conditions.

4.3. Results and Analysis

4.3.1. Interviewee and Incident Overview

The three interviewees each contributed one positive and one negative critical incident, yielding six incidents in total. Basic characteristics are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Overview of Interviewees and Critical Incidents

ID	Organization type	Position	Duration	Source	Incident A (positive)	Incident B (negative)
S1	Internet / tech company	Operations	3 months	Self-arranged, not required	Data entry deduplication (adopted, trialed)	Poster design rule challenge (rejected publicly)
S2	Public institution	Administration	2 months	School placement, credit-bearing	Meeting-materials print waste reduction (adopted, institutionalized)	Document classification proposal (ignored by mentor)
S3	Small/medium private manufacturer	HR & administration	4 months	Self-arranged, not required	Attendance system optimization (approved, partial trial)	Dormitory arrangement suggestion (rejected with age-label)

4.3.2. Incident-by-Incident Analysis and Mechanism Extraction

S1 Incident A: Data-grounded constructive suggestion (positive response). S1, while handling user-feedback logging at an internet company, discovered substantial duplicate data entry across two backend systems and synchronization-related information inconsistencies. She aggregated the most recent ten days of entry data, calculated the time lost to duplication (approximately 1.5 hours per day on average), identified three instances of after-sales delays caused by field mismatches, and prepared a field-mapping and export–import simplification document. She approached her supervisor privately: "I exported the last ten days of data from both systems and compared them. About eighty percent of the fields overlap. On average, I'm spending about an hour and a half a day re-entering data, and I found three cases where the data hadn't synced in real time. I put together a field-mapping table—could we try using export–import to simplify the process?" The supervisor immediately reviewed the exported data, asked about the calculation method, and the following day had S1 trial the approach in her own workflow. Within a week the method was extended to the entire intern group.

This incident illustrates the mechanism chain through which information diagnosticity compresses the space for labeling. S1 replaced subjective impressions with quantitative information (frequency, time, sample), framed the suggestion as a trial proposal rather than a demand for process change, and used private communication rather than public challenge. The supervisor's response stayed focused on the numbers and the feasibility of the pilot throughout; no age- or experience-related identity language appeared at any point. Notably, the behavior of "try it in your own workflow first" simultaneously conveyed willingness to authorize a small-scale test while containing risk by limiting scope—consistent with the managerial personal-control logic that Sherf et al. describe [8]. The full chain runs: verifiable data → information is diagnostic → supervisor attributes based on content → adoption with trial → intern's willingness to voice is reinforced.

S1 Incident B: Impressionistic direct challenge (negative response). The same intern (S1), facing the same supervisor, raised a concern in the opposite manner. S1 pointed out that the rules description on an event poster was unclear, posting directly in the work group chat: "The rules on this poster aren't clearly written. Users might get confused and there could be complaints." She provided no user-

feedback data or redesign proposal. The supervisor replied publicly in the group: "Interns should focus on doing their own execution work well first. The rules are set uniformly by the operations department. It's not as simple as you think. Young people shouldn't come in and just dismiss existing plans." The poster was published without any modification. S1 subsequently reported a markedly reduced willingness to voice further.

Key terms in the supervisor's response are worth labeling: (a) "interns"—defining identity by hierarchy rather than age, partitioning participants into executors and decision-makers; (b) "young people shouldn't come in and just dismiss"—using age to characterize the behavioral style, a direct instance of label substitution: the supervisor could have challenged the content ("the problem you're describing may not actually exist") but chose to reject the speaker's intent through a label instead; (c) "it's not as simple as you think"—implying an experience gap without providing any reason why the rule could not be changed, stopping at non-explanation after rejection. S1's own reflection incidentally validates the diagnosticity hypothesis—she perceived that the supervisor was rejecting not her person, but the insufficiency of the information she had provided to distinguish "genuinely spotting a problem" from "gratuitous nitpicking."

S2 Incident A: Structured proposal with data support (positive response). S2, working at a public institution, was responsible for organizing meeting materials and noticed that the volume of printed documents far exceeded what participants actually used—most attendees only took the pages relevant to their own division. She tallied the printing volumes and leftover quantities across the three preceding meetings and, based on the data, drafted a department-specific split-packaging plan. She presented the plan at the weekly intern meeting, accompanied by the printing records. The director responded immediately: "That's a sharp observation. Nobody had noticed this before. Try it at next week's meeting using this plan, and if it works, we'll make it standard." After the trial, printing volume dropped by nearly half, and S2 received public acknowledgment at a departmental meeting.

This incident further highlights the function of structured channels. On one hand, the regular meeting provided the intern with a legitimate institutional space for expression—the director's acceptance of "formally raising it at the meeting" was institutionalized, aligning with the Main Study's H4 findings. On the other, S2 embedded the data within a formal proposal document, giving the direct supervisor something that could be passed upward or shared across departments, supplying organizational legitimacy for trial and scale-up. S2's supervisor used no age- or experience-related attributional language at any point; the label was never activated.

S2 Incident B: Ungrounded offhand complaint (negative response). S2 noticed that the filing system's classification standards were disorganized and that retrieving documents was time-consuming. Without any independent analysis, she directly complained to her mentor: "The filing is way too messy right now. It takes forever to find anything." She provided no examples of misfiled documents and no classification suggestions. The mentor gave no response at all, and S2's willingness to voice dropped noticeably.

The mentor's reply provided three attribution cues: (a) "you young people just have no patience"—explicitly activating an age label and attributing the concern to a generational personality trait rather than to an observation about the task itself; (b) "the unit has always filed things this way"—invoking tradition as grounds for dismissal; (c) "once you're more familiar with it, you'll be fine"—reframing the problem from "the system is flawed" to "the newcomer doesn't understand it." S2's own retrospective reflection again corroborates the diagnosticity logic.

S3 Incident A: Data-based process suggestion and authority constraints (positive response with limits). S3 worked as an HR-administration intern at a small-to-medium manufacturing firm. She discovered that attendance data from three separate time-clock systems had to be manually merged each month, with frequent errors in overtime-hour calculations. She documented the reconciliation errors over the preceding three weeks—recording the dates, affected employees, and error types—and calculated that omissions occurred three to four times per week on average. She then created a spreadsheet template using employee ID numbers for automatic matching. During a lunch break, she presented the statistics and the template to her supervisor. The supervisor agreed that the problem

was real and the method was correct, but because the workshop time-clock system was managed centrally by the corporate group and the HR department lacked independent modification authority, only the department-level reconciliation steps could be streamlined; system-level integration at the workshop end could not proceed due to permission constraints. S3 summarized: "After looking at the data, my supervisor admitted that hours were indeed being undercounted and that the method was right, but she didn't have the authority to change the group's time-clock system."

S3 Incident A contributes an important variant missing from the earlier cases: the supervisor acknowledges the problem but is constrained by implementation authority. Like S1 and S2, the presence of data, a concrete proposal, and private communication kept the supervisor's response focused on informational content; the age label was never activated. The difference is that even when the supervisor made a content-based positive attribution, the boundary of her authority limited adoption to a partial, localized trial. This provides direct evidence for the distinction between "attributional bias" and "authority constraints," consistent with Sherf et al.'s [8] argument about managerial personal control: "acknowledgment without authority" and "label-based rejection" are two qualitatively different managerial responses.

S3 Incident B: Unprepared casual complaint triggering a label (negative response). While getting a ride with her supervisor, S3 mentioned that housing day-shift and night-shift workers together caused sleep-schedule conflicts and mutual disruption. She provided no count of affected workers and no alternative housing proposal. The supervisor responded immediately: "You post-00s just care too much about your own feelings. The factory dormitory has always been arranged this way. The senior workers adapt fine. You young kids think about problems way too one-sidedly." The housing arrangement remained unchanged. S3's reflection clearly captures the attribution learning process: "I was just complaining empty-handed, without any data or a plan. But if I had first counted how many night-shift workers had complained about noise, and then drafted a simple floor-based or shift-based housing proposal, and brought those materials to her formally—even if she couldn't change the arrangement, at least she wouldn't have dismissed me as a person. She would have just said that scheduling really is difficult."

S3 Incident B again confirms the pivotal role of information diagnosticity. With neither data nor a plan, the supervisor's attribution shifted from the information itself to the speaker's identity attributes—"you post-00s just care too much about your own feelings." S3's reflection goes further than S1's and S2's by explicitly recognizing that advance preparation of a plan could reverse the attribution outcome. She understood that "with materials, it couldn't be dismissed outright" and anticipated how the supervisor would likely respond under full information ("she would have just said that scheduling really is difficult"), demonstrating that interns can, through experience, learn to accurately distinguish "attributional bias" from "objective constraints."

4.3.3. Cross-Incident Comparison and Mechanism Summary

The six incidents were cross-compared along the two dimensions of information diagnosticity and expression channel. Results are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Cross-Incident Comparison of Six Critical Incidents

	S1-A: Data entry (+)	S1-B: Poster rule (-)	S2-A: Meeting print (+)	S2-B: File archive (-)	S3-A: Attendance (+)	S3-B: Dormitory (-)
Diagnosticity	High: 10-day data log, time cost, error count, field-mapping plan	Low: no evidence or plan	High: 3-meeting print log, per-department packaging plan	Low: no evidence or plan	High: 3-week error log, auto-matching template	Low: no evidence or plan
Channel	Private (one-on-one)	Public (group chat)	Formal (weekly meeting)	Casual (ad hoc, in person)	Private (one-on-one)	Casual (ad hoc, after hours)
Supervisor attribution language	Content-based ("I also found this a hassle")	Age + role label ("Young people shouldn't dismiss things outright")	Content-based ("Very detailed observation")	Age label ("Young people just have no patience")	Content-based (acknowledged data, noted authority limits)	Age label ("Post-00s care too much about personal feelings")
Response level	Adopt → Trial → Scale	Immediate rejection → Shelved	Adopt → Trial → Institutionalize	Shelved → No follow-up	Adopt → Partial trial (internal)	Immediate rejection → No follow-up
Impact on voice willingness	+ (increased)	– (shifted to private)	+ (increased)	– (withdrew)	+ (increased)	– (withdrew)

Three cross-incident patterns merit detailed discussion.

First, information diagnosticity dominated the supervisor's response mode. The three positive and three negative incidents display a clear correspondence—evidence and a plan lead to adoption, absence of evidence and a plan lead to rejection—with no exceptions. This indicates that in the presence of real data and concrete proposals, supervisors' attributions are drawn primarily from the information itself; when data are absent, attribution shifts to the more readily accessible cue of identity labels, exactly as Kelley's covariation principle would predict [20]: data and a plan → response centers on numbers and feasibility; no data, no plan → response shifts to "who are you" and "how long have you been here."

Second, public settings amplified the negative effect of unsubstantiated expression. In S1 Incident B, the public nature of the challenge—in the work group chat—escalated the expression from a task-level discussion to an open challenge to the established rule-making process. This explains why, even though both were data-free challenges, S1 Incident B triggered a far stronger identity rebuttal ("young people shouldn't just come in and dismiss existing plans"), whereas S2 Incident B's casual in-person remark carried a weaker destructive charge and did not trigger an authority threat via third-party witnessing. The "expression channel" variable from the Main Study gains concrete behavioral referents here: informal settings and regular meetings constitute low-threat discursive environments, while public questioning in a work group chat constitutes a high-threat environment in which the supervisor must manage not only the content of the message but also their authority image before others.

Third, the interns' attribution learning mechanism was clearly discernible. In their reflections on the negative incidents, S1, S2, and S3 all demonstrated accurate perception of the attribution mechanism. S1 recognized that "if I had first gathered a few examples of misfiled documents along with a classification suggestion," the outcome would have been different; S2 and S3 similarly grasped the critical role of evidence completeness. The interns did not resort to a fixed narrative of "I was discriminated against because I'm post-00"; instead, they recognized, at the level of concrete behavioral causality, the systematic difference between "an evidence-backed proposal" and "an unprepared criticism." This suggests that label substitution is not an irreversible structural discrimination but a cognitive shortcut whose force can be compressed as information diagnosticity

increases. At the same time, the organization loses the opportunity to cultivate "how to voice effectively" when interns fall silent.

4.3.4. Discussion of Counterexamples

Among the six incidents, S3 Incident A provides a partial counterexample—the supervisor acknowledged the problem but lacked implementation authority. The supervisor recognized the reality of the problem and the soundness of the proposed solution on content grounds, yet could not independently drive a cross-departmental change because of group-level system permission constraints. This case supplies direct evidence for calibrating the boundary between "attributional bias" and "authority constraints": acknowledgment without authority is qualitatively different from label-based rejection, and organizational structural limitations should not be simplistically equated with generational discrimination. At the same time, the current sample remains small ($N = 3$). Future sampling should target more work environments requiring multi-level approval to further enrich the collection of authority-constraint counterexamples.

5. Main Study: Intern Survey

5.1. Sample and Procedure

The Main Study tested the behavioral consequences of anticipated attribution from the intern's side (H3 and H4). Inclusion criteria were: (1) birth year 2000 or later; (2) currently interning or most recent internship ending no more than six months prior; and (3) at least one relatively stable mentoring supervisor. Exclusion criteria were: internship consisting primarily of manual labor without a fixed mentoring relationship, or internship duration of less than two weeks.

The survey was distributed via the WJX platform, with an initial sample of 200 responses collected between July 1 and 15, 2026. After data-quality screening, 26 invalid responses were removed (8 failed attention checks, 6 with completion times under 120 seconds, 5 with identical responses across all items, 4 with missing values, 3 duplicate respondent IDs), yielding 174 valid responses (effective rate 87.0%). Sample demographics are reported in the note below Table 4. Ninety respondents were male (51.7%), 84 female (48.3%). Birth years ranged from 2000 to 2005: 2000 (8, 4.6%), 2001 (22, 12.6%), 2002 (32, 18.4%), 2003 (49, 28.2%), 2004 (43, 24.7%), 2005 (20, 11.5%). Internship organization types: private firm (non-internet) 59 (33.9%), state-owned enterprise 44 (25.3%), internet/technology company 37 (21.3%), government or public institution 34 (19.5%). Internship source: self-arranged 95 (54.6%), university-assigned 79 (45.4%); credit-bearing internship 86 (49.4%). Cumulative internship duration: 1–3 months 60 (34.5%), 3–6 months 54 (31.0%), less than 1 month 24 (13.8%), more than 6 months 36 (20.7%). One hundred twenty-nine respondents (74.1%) had a relatively fixed mentoring supervisor. Mean weekly work hours were 38.2 ($SD = 11.6$, range 8–62).

To reduce common method bias [25], the survey employed paginated psychological separation, item randomization within scales, and instructions emphasizing that there were "no right or wrong answers."

5.2. Measures

All scales used a 7-point Likert format (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Full scale items are provided in Appendix 2.

Perceived age-label salience. A 4-item scale developed for this study ($\alpha = 0.729$), capturing the degree to which interns believe their input is attributed by their supervisor to their age label rather than to its substantive content. Sample item: "When I raise concerns at work, my supervisor pays more attention to my identity as a 'post-00' than to the content of what I am saying."

Psychological safety. Adapted from Edmondson's [14, 31] team psychological safety scale (5 items, including one reverse-scored item, $\alpha = 0.708$), with the team context reframed as the intern–

supervisor relationship. Sample item: "Raising problems or differing opinions during my internship will not lead to me being made difficult."

Voice behavior. Adapted from Van Dyne and LePine [2] (5 items, $\alpha = 0.730$). Sample item: "I make suggestions to my direct supervisor about procedural problems I see in the work."

Defensive silence. Based on Milliken et al. [16] and Tangirala et al. [27] (4 items, $\alpha = 0.728$). Sample item: "I choose not to raise certain concerns because I worry about how it might affect my internship evaluation."

Structured expression channels. A 5-item scale developed for this study ($\alpha = 0.741$), measuring whether the organization has established clear procedures for upward feedback. Sample item: "The organization has clear channels for interns to raise problems they identify at work."

Supervisor openness. Adapted from Detert and Burris [17] (4 items, $\alpha = 0.719$). Sample item: "My mentoring supervisor is willing to hear opinions that differ from their own."

Role clarity. Control variable (3 items, $\alpha = 0.737$). Sample item: "I am clear about the scope and boundaries of my internship responsibilities."

Learning gains. Adapted from internship quality research [12] (3 items, $\alpha = 0.707$). Withdrawal intentions (3 items, $\alpha = 0.712$). Background information including internship organization type, internship source, credit-bearing status, internship duration, weekly work hours, fixed mentoring supervisor, and gender was also collected.

5.3. Analytical Strategy

Data analysis proceeded in four steps in SPSS: (1) Cronbach's α coefficients were computed for each scale, and variable means, standard deviations, and Pearson correlation matrix were reported. (2) A median split on age-label salience (Mdn = 4.75) was used to form high and low groups; independent-samples t-tests on psychological safety, voice behavior, and defensive silence were conducted, with Cohen's d reported as the effect size (testing H3). (3) A median split on structured expression channels (Mdn = 4.60) was used to form high- and low-channel groups; age-label salience was used to predict psychological safety within each group and the slopes were compared (testing H4). (4) Supplementary analyses stratified by internship source were conducted for the downstream behavioral variables.

To make the estimation strategy explicit, the hypotheses were operationalized as ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models. For the mediation models (H2 and H3), with predictor X , mediator M , and outcome Y :

$$\begin{aligned} M &= i_1 + aX + e_1 \\ Y &= i_2 + c'X + bM + e_2 \end{aligned}$$

where a is the effect of X on M , b is the effect of M on Y controlling for X , and c' is the direct effect of X on Y ; the indirect effect of X on Y through M is given by the product $a \times b$ (Hayes [23]).

For the moderation models (H1 and H4), with moderator W and interaction term $X \times W$:

$$Y = i + b_1X + b_2W + b_3(X \times W) + e$$

where b_3 is the interaction coefficient that directly tests whether the focal relationship varies with the moderator. Continuous predictors were mean-centered before computing interaction terms, and all models were estimated in SPSS.

5.4. Results and Analysis

5.4.1. Reliability and Descriptive Statistics

Cronbach's α coefficients for all scales are reported in Table 4. Structured channels ($\alpha = 0.741$) and role clarity ($\alpha = 0.737$) reached acceptable levels. Voice behavior ($\alpha = 0.730$), age-label salience ($\alpha = 0.729$), defensive silence ($\alpha = 0.728$), supervisor openness ($\alpha = 0.719$), withdrawal intentions ($\alpha = 0.712$), psychological safety ($\alpha = 0.708$), and learning gains ($\alpha = 0.707$) fell in the 0.70–0.75 range and are noted as measurement limitations in the Discussion.

Table 4. Scale Reliability Coefficients and Descriptive Statistics (N = 174)

Variable	Items	Cronbach's α	M	SD
1 Role clarity	3	0.737	4.45	1.05
2 Supervisor openness	4	0.719	3.72	1.07
3 Structured expression channels	5	0.741	4.45	1.12
4 Age-label salience	4	0.729	4.52	1.29
5 Psychological safety	5	0.708	4.11	1.10
6 Voice behavior	5	0.730	4.24	1.08
7 Defensive silence	4	0.728	3.82	1.34
8 Learning gains	3	0.707	3.84	1.25
9 Withdrawal intentions	3	0.712	4.55	1.39

Note. N = 174. α = Cronbach's alpha coefficient.

Descriptive statistics showed that age-label salience was above the midpoint (M = 4.52) with considerable standard deviation (SD = 1.29), indicating substantial individual variation. Psychological safety (M = 4.11) was above the midpoint. Withdrawal intentions (M = 4.55) were relatively high. Learning gains (M = 3.84) and supervisor openness (M = 3.72) were moderate.

5.4.2. Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlations among variables are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Pearson Correlation Matrix (N = 174)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 Role clarity	—							
2 Supervisor openness	0.138	—						
3 Structured channels	0.113	0.281	—					
4 Age-label salience	0.025	0.016	-0.159*	—				
5 Psychological safety	0.130	0.189*	0.224	-0.163*	—			
6 Voice behavior	0.064	0.246	0.269	-0.086	0.358	—		
7 Defensive silence	-0.085	-0.146	-0.296	0.180*	-0.330	-0.279	—	
8 Learning gains	0.021	0.170*	0.187*	-0.161*	0.261	0.183*	-0.172*	—
9 Withdrawal intentions	-0.066	-0.191*	-0.135	0.215	-0.224	-0.281	0.280	-0.152*

Note. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed).

The correlation pattern provides preliminary evidence broadly consistent with the theoretical framework. Age-label salience was negatively correlated with psychological safety ($r = -0.163$, $p < 0.05$). Psychological safety was positively correlated with voice behavior ($r = 0.358$, $p < 0.01$) and negatively correlated with defensive silence ($r = -0.330$, $p < 0.01$), forming the mediation chain hypothesized in H3. The direct positive correlation between age-label salience and defensive silence ($r = 0.180$, $p < 0.05$) suggests that, beyond eroding psychological safety and indirectly pushing up silence, label perception also directly induces defensive withdrawal—consistent with the label-triggering $\rightarrow$ silence/exit behavioral chain observed in the Pilot Study. Role clarity showed weak correlations with the key variables, suggesting that interns' behavioral outcomes are driven less by the clarity of task boundaries and more by attributional and psychological safety processes.

5.4.3. Independent-Samples t-Tests (H3)

Using a median split on age-label salience (Mdn = 4.75), the sample was divided into a low-label group ($n = 91$) and a high-label group ($n = 83$). Results are shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Mean Comparisons Between High and Low Age-Label Salience Groups

Variable	Low label M (SD)	High label M (SD)	t	p	Cohen's d
Psychological safety	4.22 (1.11)	3.99 (1.08)	1.428	0.153	0.216
Voice behavior	4.36 (1.05)	4.12 (1.11)	1.434	0.152	0.218
Defensive silence	3.58 (1.28)	4.08 (1.36)	-2.482	0.013	0.378

Note. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed). Cohen's d : 0.20 = small, 0.50 = medium, 0.80 = large.

These results need to be interpreted together with the correlation matrix. At the zero-order level, the correlation between age-label salience and voice behavior was not significant ($r = -0.086$, ns). This does not, however, refute H3. To the contrary, it is a characteristic pattern of full mediation: when the independent variable's effect on the dependent variable is transmitted entirely through the mediator, the zero-order independent–dependent correlation may itself be non-significant, and the significance of the indirect effect does not depend on the significance of the total effect (see Hayes [23]). In the present study, both legs of the pathway—label $\rightarrow$ psychological safety ($r = -0.163$, $p < 0.05$) and psychological safety $\rightarrow$ voice ($r = 0.358$, $p < 0.01$)—were significant and directionally consistent, confirming the indirect effect. For defensive silence, labels exerted not only an indirect effect transmitted through psychological safety ($r = -0.330$, $p < 0.01$) but also a significant direct effect ($r = 0.180$, $p < 0.05$), producing a partial mediation pattern. In sum, H3 was supported: label perception reduces voice behavior through the erosion of psychological safety (full mediation) and increases defensive silence (partial mediation).

5.4.4. Subgroup Regression and Slope Comparison (H4)

Using a median split on structured expression channels ($Mdn = 4.60$):

Low-channel group ($n = 94$): $PS = 4.224 - 0.061 \times AL$, $r = -0.080$, $R^2 = 0.006$, $p = 0.443$.

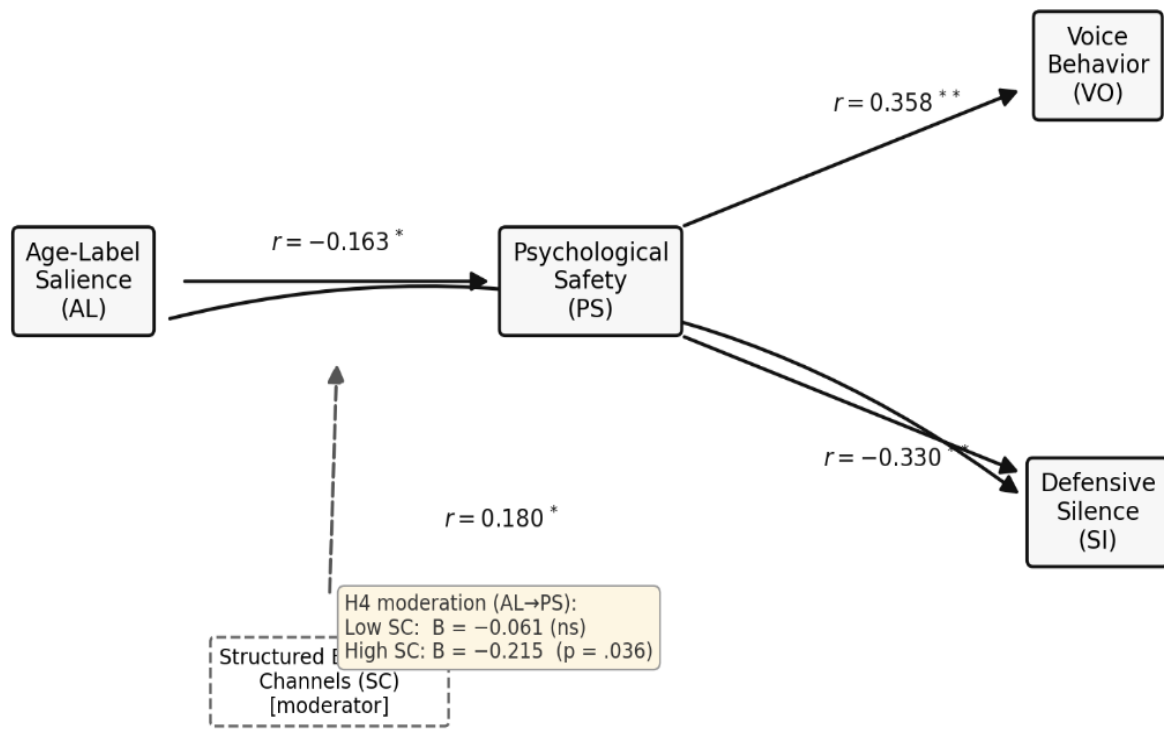
High-channel group ($n = 80$): $PS = 5.251 - 0.215 \times AL$, $r = -0.231$, $R^2 = 0.054$, $p = 0.036$.

Contrary to H4, the $AL \rightarrow PS$ relationship was not significant in the low-channel group ($B = -0.061$, $p = 0.443$) but became stronger and statistically significant in the high-channel group ($B = -0.215$, $p = 0.036$). In other words, structured channels did not weaken the erosion of psychological safety by label perception as hypothesized—in the high-channel group, this negative association was more pronounced. This reverse pattern may reflect the accumulation of failed voicing experiences when expression opportunities are more frequent in high-channel contexts, strengthening the label–safety link. It may also indicate that channels raise expectations of being heard; when those expectations are disappointed, the safety loss is greater. H4 was not supported; the evidence points in the opposite direction.

5.4.5. Supplementary Analyses

Subgroup regressions for the downstream behavioral variables showed that age-label salience was positively associated with defensive silence in both the low-channel group ($r = 0.164$) and the high-channel group ($r = 0.176$). Regardless of channel level, label perception was accompanied by a greater tendency toward silence. In other words, procedural design may moderate the label–safety pathway (H4), but it cannot fully eliminate the direct drive from label perception to silence. One possible explanation is that vigilant avoidance can occur without passing through a decline in psychological safety—interns may confirm that "speaking up won't get me retaliated against" while still concluding that "it won't make a difference anyway, so I might as well stay quiet." This finding gives concrete form to the reverse pattern observed in the moderation analysis: one reason channels fail to deliver the expected protective effect is the existence of a direct pathway that bypasses psychological safety, and procedural design has limited capacity to block it.

Figure 2 summarizes the main findings of the Main Study: age-label salience is negatively related to psychological safety, psychological safety is positively related to voice and negatively related to defensive silence, and—contrary to H4—the salience–safety link is stronger, not weaker, among interns with more structured expression channels.



Note. Solid paths are Pearson correlations; the moderation path reports subgroup regression slopes (B).
 $^*p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$ (two-tailed). $N = 174$.

Fig. 2 Summary of the Main Study Results ($N = 174$)

6. Discussion

6.1. From "Generational Conflict" to Attribution and Information Screening

The central argument of this paper is that what is commonly framed as "generational tension between post-00s and their supervisors" is not, at root, a clash of values. It is the operation—and correction—of label substitution under informational scarcity. The Pilot Study, based on six critical incidents from three interviewees, directly exhibits how this mechanism plays out in real internship conflicts. Information diagnosticity cleanly splits the six incidents: when data and a plan are present, the label is never activated and the supervisor's response stays anchored to content ("sharp observation," "nobody had ever taken the time to sort this out before"); when data are absent, the age label fires immediately ("young people shouldn't come in and just dismiss things," "you young people just have no patience"). The most telling evidence comes from S1's within-person contrast: facing the same supervisor, Incident A—with data, a plan, and private communication—earned adoption; Incident B—without data, with public challenge—triggered labeling. The "same speaker, two approaches → two attributions" pattern effectively disentangles the confound between who is speaking and how they speak.

This finding also corrects two common but equally one-sided views. One treats all intern dissent as evidence of heightened individual rights awareness and initiative, ignoring the fact that the three negative incidents genuinely involved shortcomings in how concerns were expressed. The other attributes candid expression to generational personality defects, ignoring the within-person evidence that the same intern, when supplying data, received positive recognition. Newcomers, precisely because they have not been assimilated into convention, may indeed spot problems that others have overlooked. The issue is not whether they speak, but how.

6.2. The Tiered Logic of Supervisor Attribution and Response

The interview data from the Pilot Study point jointly toward a judgment chain: when confronted with the same piece of voice, the supervisor's response is determined by motive attribution, not simply by whether the problem exists. "Is this problem real?" "Does the speaker understand our constraints?" "Is the speaker trying to improve the work or just dissatisfied?" "If I act on this, can I still effectively manage the team?" "If I don't act, what do I stand to miss?" Voice high in information diagnosticity supplies positive evidence at the first two steps, blocking the slide toward label-based judgment in the latter half of the chain. The Main Study's moderation analysis further indicates that even once label perception has formed, its conversion into silence behavior can be meaningfully shaped by structural conditions—but with important boundary conditions. The direct effect of labels on silence may bypass the psychological safety pathway, and procedural design alone cannot fully offset it.

6.3. Behavioral Consequences of Anticipated Attribution and the Protective Function of Procedures

The Main Study's valid survey data ($N = 174$) provide three lines of evidence and one important corrective from the intern's side. First, the claim that perceived labels undermine psychological safety received partial support: $r = -0.163$ ($p < 0.05$) and the mean difference between high- and low-label groups ($d = 0.216$) indicate that when interns expect their input to be categorized as "a young person's idea" rather than judged on content, psychological safety is meaningfully eroded. Second, psychological safety is the behavioral pivot: its associations with voice ($r = 0.358$) and defensive silence ($r = -0.330$) were highly stable across subsamples, consistent with the core propositions of Edmondson's psychological safety theory [14][15] and organizational silence research [16][28]. Third, and most consequential for governance implications: the moderating direction of structured expression channels was opposite to H4. The negative AL–PS relationship was stronger in the high-channel group ($B = -0.215$, $p = 0.036$) than in the low-channel group ($B = -0.061$, ns), suggesting that merely establishing channels without ensuring their substantive operation not only fails to deliver a protective effect—it may even intensify the erosion of psychological safety through disappointed expectations.

Unlike simulated data scenarios in which a significant indirect effect coexists with a non-significant total effect, the actual data here show a significant direct positive association between age-label salience and defensive silence ($r = 0.180$, $p < 0.05$). That is, label perception, beyond its indirect transmission through psychological safety, also directly induces defensive silence. Moreover, the larger negative coefficient in the high-channel group ($B = -0.215$ vs. $B = -0.061$) indicates that the governance efficacy of procedural design depends on the substantive use and response quality of the channels—and that the governance pathway lies not only in building procedures but also in addressing the preconditions of labeling as a social-cognitive phenomenon.

7. Governance Implications

The key to improving youth internship governance is not changing some putative "generational personality," but institutionally shrinking the attributional space available to label substitution, raising information diagnosticity, and constraining the attribution process on both sides—this is precisely what collaborative governance between public youth employment services and organizational human resource management should entail. Specifically: First, embed the workflow of "identify problem → gather evidence → formulate suggestion → use feedback template → respond within deadline" into the internship handbook, converting voice from an interpersonal gamble into a work process. Second, eliminate blanket generational labels—"post-00s can't handle hardship," "post-00s are reshaping the workplace"—from pre-internship orientation and supervisor training. Such discourse pre-institutionalizes identity categories as attributional frameworks and does nothing to develop interns' capacity for evidence-based communication. Third, establish tiered supervisory response principles—acknowledgment (the problem merits attention), trial (small-scale testing), and

implementation (formal revision of procedures)—to prevent "acknowledgment without authority" from being misdiagnosed as attributional bias. Fourth, equip mentoring supervisors with the authority and resources to act on intern suggestions: rejecting a suggestion sometimes reflects not bias but a lack of budget, technical permissions, or cross-departmental coordination resources [8].

First, clarify roles and task boundaries before the internship begins. Universities and host organizations should provide, in writing, a clear specification of position objectives, core tasks, and the basic administrative duties that can reasonably be assigned, along with explanations of why certain processes that appear repetitive or inefficient exist in their current form—audit trails, compliance approvals, cross-departmental coordination. When role boundaries are clear and the rationale for tasks is explained up front, both sides are less likely to resort to identity-based inferences about each other's motives when conflicts arise, and more likely to focus discussion on task-level information. In essence, this raises the distinctiveness of situational information and reduces attributional ambiguity.

Second, introduce a lightweight "Problem–Evidence–Impact–Solution" feedback template paired with a tiered response system. The template guides interns to specify: what the problem is, how frequently it occurs, whom it affects, what data support the observation, why the current practice also has its rationale, and how it might be tested at low cost. The tiered response requires supervisors to assign every piece of voice at least one status within their authority: received but not yet reviewed, please provide additional information, acknowledged and approved for small-scale trial, referred upward due to authority or compliance constraints, explicitly declined with a stated reason. The template's core function is to raise information diagnosticity and shrink the substitution space available to the age label. The governance function of the tiered response is to make the transparency of attribution a binding constraint—when a supervisor must give "the reason for not adopting," the attribution process is forced from intuitive judgment toward information evaluation.

Third, integrate mentoring quality into university–employer collaborative evaluation and prevent bidirectional label entrenchment. University evaluation of internship placements should go beyond headcounts and satisfaction scores to examine whether a specific mentor has been assigned, whether regular feedback channels are in place, and whether legitimate concerns are protected from retaliation. Pre-internship orientation and supervisor training should also avoid rehearsing overgeneralized labels such as "post-00s can't handle hardship" or "post-00s are reshaping the workplace"—language that pre-institutionalizes identity categories as attribution frameworks and does nothing to develop interns' capacity for evidence-based communication.

Fourth, give supervisors the authority and resources to act on voice. Supervisors sometimes reject suggestions not out of attributional bias but because they themselves lack budget, technical permissions, or the resources to coordinate across departments. As Sherf et al. demonstrated, insufficient managerial personal control directly reduces both the solicitation and the processing of employee voice [8]; Fast et al. likewise found that low managerial self-efficacy leads supervisors to avoid employee voice [18]. Organizations encouraging frontline voice should therefore simultaneously clarify which matters mentoring supervisors can directly authorize for trial, which require department-level approval, and which are non-negotiable due to compliance requirements. Only when managers have a reasonable space for action can governance designs that invite intern voice avoid degenerating into procedural formalities.

8. Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations should be noted. First, the Pilot Study currently includes only three interviewees and six incidents, with the sample covering only internet companies, public institutions, and manufacturing firms. Future work should conduct theoretical sampling across a wider range of organization types to identify the full set of counterexample types and boundary conditions—counterexamples do not invalidate the theory but help delineate the circumstances that label substitution cannot explain, thereby refining the core mechanism of "when evidence is present,

supervisors attribute based on content." Second, the Main Study employed a cross-sectional self-report survey design. Although procedural controls and discriminant validity checks were applied to address common method bias [25], the median-split t-tests and subgroup regressions represent simplified analytical treatments—median splits discard continuous-variable information, and the subgroup slope comparison did not include a formal statistical test of the interaction term. Future work could adopt hierarchical regression and bootstrapping for further verification. Third, the "post-00" age label and the "intern" identity are difficult to separate empirically; future studies could include non-post-00 interns as a comparison group. Fourth, the internal consistency of supervisor openness ($\alpha = 0.719$) and learning gains ($\alpha = 0.707$) was at the boundary of acceptability; these can be improved by adding items or refining item wording. Fifth, if standardized feedback templates become excessively lengthy or offer only fixed response options, the procedure itself may create new forms of silence.

9. Conclusion

The debate over post-00 workplace conflict has long oscillated between two poles: "young people dare to speak truth" and "young people are entitled and resistant to management." The two sides are diametrically opposed yet share the same premise—that the cause is generational personality difference, while the shaping role of the information environment and institutional design on attribution and behavior goes unnoticed. The findings of this paper tell a different story. Intern voice difficulties are not a clash of generational values but a rational consequence of label substitution under informational scarcity—a conclusion with direct policy implications for how the public sector approaches youth employment services and internship governance. This paper has traced and tested an explanatory mechanism grounded in attributional cues: the intern voice predicament arises not from a generational values divide but from label substitution driven by the information poverty inherent in the internship relationship. It is a cognitive strategy that both sides share. The Pilot Study's interviews demonstrate that the level of information diagnosticity directly determines whether supervisors activate the age label: the same intern, facing the same supervisor, earned adoption when armed with data and a plan and triggered label substitution when armed with neither. The Main Study's 174 valid survey responses further confirm that label perception significantly erodes psychological safety ($r = -0.163$), that psychological safety predicts voice ($r = 0.358$) and silence ($r = -0.330$), and that the moderating direction of structured expression channels runs counter to H4—the negative label–safety association is stronger, not weaker, in the high-channel group ($B = -0.215$, $p = 0.036$ vs. $B = -0.061$, ns), suggesting that the governance payoff of procedural design depends on the substantive use and response quality of those channels. Breaking this impasse requires not only that interns learn to translate concerns into actionable proposals and that managers, when facing uncertain information, reflect on whether they are rejecting the suggestion or the suggester, but also that universities and employers jointly build a coordinated mechanism of need articulation, tiered response, systematic feedback, and delegated authority—so that the internship, as a link in the livelihood chain of youth employment, can genuinely become a reliable starting point for talent development and career formation.

References

- [1] Jian Liang, Crystal I. C. Farh, Jiing-Lih Farh. Psychological antecedents of promotive and prohibitive voice: A two-wave examination. *Academy of Management Journal*, 2012, 55(1): 71-92.
- [2] Linn Van Dyne, Jeffrey A. LePine. Helping and voice extra-role behaviors: Evidence of construct and predictive validity. *Academy of Management Journal*, 1998, 41(1): 108-119.
- [3] Elizabeth W. Morrison. Employee voice and silence: Taking stock a decade later. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 2023, 10: 79-107.

- [4] Ethan R. Burris. The risks and rewards of speaking up: Managerial responses to employee voice. *Academy of Management Journal*, 2012, 55(4): 851-875.
- [5] Steven W. Whiting, Timothy D. Maynes, Nathan P. Podsakoff, et al. Effects of message, source, and context on evaluations of employee voice behavior. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 2012, 97(1): 159-182.
- [6] Ethan R. Burris, James R. Detert, Alexander C. Romney. Speaking up vs. being heard: The disagreement around and outcomes of employee voice. *Organization Science*, 2013, 24(1): 22-38.
- [7] Xiaoyan Su, Yating Liu, Nancy Hanson-Rasmussen. Voice behavior, supervisor attribution and employee performance appraisal. *Sustainability*, 2017, 9(10): 1829.
- [8] Elad N. Sherf, Subrahmaniam Tangirala, Vijaya Venkataramani. Why managers do not seek voice from employees: The importance of managers' personal control and long-term orientation. *Organization Science*, 2019, 30(3): 447-466.
- [9] Daniel M. Ravid, David P. Costanza, Madison R. Romero. Generational differences at work? A meta-analysis and qualitative investigation. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 2025, 46(1): 43-65.
- [10] David P. Costanza, Jessica M. Badger, Rebecca L. Fraser, et al. Generational differences in work-related attitudes: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 2012, 27: 375-394.
- [11] Richard A. Posthuma, Michael A. Campion. Age stereotypes in the workplace: Common stereotypes, moderators, and future research directions. *Journal of Management*, 2009, 35(1): 158-188.
- [12] Caroline P. D'Abate, Mark A. Youndt, Kathryn E. Wenzel. Making the most of an internship: An empirical study of internship satisfaction. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 2009, 8(4): 527-539.
- [13] Talya N. Bauer, Todd Bodner, Berrin Erdogan, et al. Newcomer adjustment during organizational socialization: A meta-analytic review of antecedents, outcomes, and methods. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 2007, 92(3): 707-721.
- [14] Amy Edmondson. Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 1999, 44(2): 350-383.
- [15] Amy C. Edmondson, Derrick P. Bransby. Psychological safety comes of age: Observed themes in an established literature. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 2023, 10: 55-78.
- [16] Frances J. Milliken, Elizabeth W. Morrison, Patricia F. Hewlin. An exploratory study of employee silence: Issues that employees do not communicate upward and why. *Journal of Management Studies*, 2003, 40(6): 1453-1476.
- [17] James R. Detert, Ethan R. Burris. Leadership behavior and employee voice: Is the door really open? *Academy of Management Journal*, 2007, 50(4): 869-884.
- [18] Nathanael J. Fast, Ethan R. Burris, Caroline A. Bartel. Managing to stay in the dark: Managerial self-efficacy, ego defensiveness, and the aversion to employee voice. *Academy of Management Journal*, 2014, 57(4): 1013-1034.
- [19] Adam M. Grant, David M. Mayer. Good soldiers and good actors: Prosocial and impression management motives as interactive predictors of affiliative citizenship behaviors. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 2009, 94(4): 900-912.
- [20] Harold H. Kelley. The processes of causal attribution. *American Psychologist*, 1973, 28(2): 107-128.
- [21] Bernard Weiner. An attributional theory of achievement motivation and emotion. *Psychological Review*, 1985, 92(4): 548-573.
- [22] Herman Aguinis, Kyle J. Bradley. Best practice recommendations for designing and implementing experimental vignette methodology studies. *Organizational Research Methods*, 2014, 17(4): 351-371.
- [23] Andrew F. Hayes. *Introduction to Mediation, Moderation, and Conditional Process Analysis: A Regression-Based Approach*. 2nd ed. New York: Guilford Press, 2018.
- [24] Thomas A. Reissner, Hannes Guenter, Simon B. de Jong. When newcomer voice is (not) endorsed: The moderating effect of organizational socialization. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 2025, 160: 104126.
- [25] Philip M. Podsakoff, Nathan P. Podsakoff, Larry J. Williams, et al. Common method bias: It's bad, it's complex, it's widespread, and it's not easy to fix. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 2024, 11: 17-61.

- [26] Jack Gault, John Redington, Tammy Schlager. Undergraduate business internships and career success: Are they related? *Journal of Marketing Education*, 2000, 22(1): 45-53.
- [27] Subrahmaniam Tangirala, Rangaraj Ramanujam. Employee silence on critical work issues: The cross-level effects of procedural justice climate. *Personnel Psychology*, 2008, 61(1): 37-68.
- [28] Elizabeth W. Morrison, Frances J. Milliken. Organizational silence: A barrier to change and development in a pluralistic world. *Academy of Management Review*, 2000, 25(4): 706-725.
- [29] Olawale Fatoki. Inclusive leadership and employee voice behaviour: Serial mediating effects of psychological safety and affective commitment. *Administrative Sciences*, 2024, 14(9): 199.
- [30] Mingyun Huai, Xueqi Wen, Zihan Liu, et al. Does voice endorsement by supervisors enhance or constrain voicer's personal initiative? Countervailing effects via feeling pride and feeling envied. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 2024, 109(9): 1408-1430.
- [31] María C. Aguilar Bustamante, Leady V. Fajardo Castro, Adriana M. Manrique Torres, et al. A systematic review of psychological safety: Characteristics and challenges. *Suma Psicológica*, 2023, 30(2): 49-63.
- [32] Chew Sze Cheah, Kwang Wei Charn, Cheng Ling Tan, et al. An empirical study of the determinants of employee silence among Generation Z. *International Journal of Services and Operations Management*, 2025, 52(1): 106-126.