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Leader crisis communication and salesperson resilience in face of the COVID-19: The roles of positive stress mindset, core beliefs challenge, and family strain

Luu Trong Tuan
Swinburne Business School, Swinburne University of Technology, Hawthorn, Australia

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ABSTRACT
The resilience of B2B sales forces is crucial in face of severe wide-ranging challenges during a crisis. This study aims to investigate the role of leader communication of the crisis in promoting salesperson resilience during the COVID-19. The data were gathered from 418 salespersons from 36 manufacturing firms in times of the COVID-19. The data were analyzed using multilevel structural equation modeling. The results demonstrated the positive relationship between leader crisis communication and salesperson resilience, mediated by salespersons’ positive stress mindset. Family strain and core beliefs challenge were found to attenuate the positive linkage between leader crisis communication and salespersons’ positive stress mindset. Theoretical and practical implications are presented. This study offers insights to help managers in B2B organizations better understand and implement mechanisms that can foster resilience among their B2B sales forces in the COVID-19 outbreak and other crises.

1. Introduction

During the COVID-19 outbreak, manufacturing has been one of the affected industries, since border closures and lockdowns have created supply chain disruptions as well as serious supply and demand shifts (Hartmann & Lussier, 2020). Such challenges from the market, along with threat of the COVID-19 spread and job insecurity, have exerted negative impacts on sales forces in the B2B context (Cortez & Johnston, 2020). To address challenges, salespersons need to develop resilience, defined as individuals’ capacity to effectively adapt and re-establish equilibrium when facing severe adversity (Cooke, Cooper, Bartram, Wang, & Mei, 2019). Salesperson resilience has been reportedly associated with enhanced sales performance as well as customer service behaviors particularly during a disruption such as the COVID-19 (Good, Hughes, & LaBrecque, 2021; Lussier & Hartmann, 2017).

As a crisis hits, one of the tactical responses that organizations must initiate involves communication (Pedersen, Ritter, & Di Benedetto, 2020). Organizations whose communication channels have been integrated even prior to a crisis have demonstrated higher resilience than its competitors (Pedersen et al., 2020). Salespersons during a critical sales disruption highly value managers who maintain communication to facilitate a supportive work environment (Epler & Leach, 2021). Though Wut, Xu, and Wong’s (2021) review of crisis management research underscored the salience of crisis communication and Hartmann, Weiss, Newman, and Hoegl (2020) review of resilience in the workplace underlined the role of communication in nurturing resilience, the role of managers’ crisis communication in promoting salesperson resilience in times of a crisis such as the COVID-19 has been barely studied. Few recent studies in the general management domain have investigated the impact of communication in general on employees’ well-being (Agarwal, 2021) or affective response during the COVID-19 outbreak (Guzzo, Wang, Madera, & Abbott, 2021). To address this gap, our study examines the relationship between leader crisis communication and salesperson resilience in times of the COVID-19 as well as the mechanisms underlying such a relationship.

To do so, we draw upon the resource-based leader-member exchange (LMX) perspective guided by the conservation of resources (COR) theory (Liao & Hui, 2021), which holds that resources should be invested and exchanged for the development of a relationship between the leader and the member, towards which employees reciprocate by developing favorable attitudes or behaviors. Resilience is a form of reciprocation towards the LMX relationship (Kakkar, 2019). Furthermore, individuals may draw on the LMX relationship as a social resource to develop personal resources (Liao & Hui, 2021), one of which can be positive stress mindset (Huettermann & Bruch, 2019), defined as the mindset that deems stress to be a source of proactive actions and growth (Crum,
Salovey, & Achor, 2013) such as in form of resilience (Malik & Garg, 2020). Therefore, we propose that crisis communication from leaders can provide resources for a LMX relationship to develop, which activates salesperson resilience as a form of reciprocation, through shaping their positive stress mindset in times of a crisis. This proposition is supported by research that has indicated that positive mindset is important and effective in fostering resilience (Chakraborty, Biswas, & Dash, 2021) and positive stress mindset is more relevant to a stressful situation as well as channel the effect of a contextual factor into well-being (Hüettermann & Bruch, 2019).

LMX research indicates that individual characteristics of employees as well as their social networks may influence the LMX effects (Regts, Molleman, & van de Brake, 2019). The COR theory, which guides the resource-based LMX perspective (Liao & Hui, 2021), also indicates that a social factor is subject to individuals’ appraisal (Hobfoll, 1989). In face of a crisis such as the COVID-19, core beliefs challenge, defined as individuals’ inclination to reassess their beliefs of themselves, others, and the future (Cann et al., 2010), is viewed as an important individual characteristic that can influence employees’ appraisal of and responses to contextual factors (Eze, Hoovenga, & Chukwuruj, 2020). Hence, we argue that core beliefs challenge may induce salespersons’ positive appraisal of a crisis situation and their less reliance on resources from the relationship with the leader through crisis communication, thereby attenuating the effect of leader crisis communication on salespersons’ positive stress mindset. Though this moderating role of core beliefs challenge has hardly been examined in prior resilience research, it has been supported by the view that core beliefs can interact with contextual events to predict specific thoughts (Vilá, Grosse Holtforth, & David, 2015). Unpacking the role of core beliefs challenge behind salesperson resilience is relevant to a crisis context in our study, compared to other individual factors such as regulatory profiles, which have been largely examined as individual moderators behind employee resilience in general management contexts (e.g., Kuntz, Connell, & Näswall, 2017).

In addition, our study examines the potentially moderating effect of social networks on the relationship between leader crisis communication and salespersons’ positive stress mindset. Our study responds to recent calls in the literature to consider the importance of social networks in LMX research (Regts et al., 2019) by examining leader crisis communication and salespersons’ positive stress mindset in the perspective of social networks in which they are embedded. In prior research, LMX relationships have tended to be examined in isolation, largely overlooking the fact that employees are engaged in various relationships at work and beyond the workplace (Regts et al., 2019). Compared to relationships in the workplace (e.g., co-workers) (Regts et al., 2019), social relationships outside of the workplace have received less attention in the stream of research on LMX relationships particularly in a crisis situation. To better capture the nature of these exchange relationships, our study focuses on a social relationship beyond the workplace, namely strain from the family. A focus on family strain is crucial since family domain is one of the most important aspects of employees’ life outside their work (Stollberger, Las Heras, Roefcanin, & Bosch, 2019) and family strain tends to increase and drain employees’ resources during a crisis situation such as the COVID-19 (Mahmood, Jafree, Jalil, Nadir, & Fischer, 2021). Strain from the family has been reported to influence employees’ responses to workplace factors (Li, Shaffer, & Bagger, 2015) as well as negatively interact with LMX relationships to predict employee behaviors (Van Dyne, Jehn, & Cummings, 2002). We therefore expect that family strain may attenuate the effect of leader crisis communication and salespersons’ positive stress mindset.

In a nutshell, focusing on sales forces in the manufacturing industry, our study seeks to investigate (1) if leader crisis communication is positively associated with salesperson resilience facing a crisis such as the COVID-19; (2) how positive stress mindset channels leader crisis communication into salesperson resilience; and (3) whether core beliefs challenge and family strain attenuate the relationship between leader crisis communication and salespersons’ positive stress mindset. Addressing these objectives, this study extends the literature in the following aspects.

First, to address the gap in the stream of research on resilience to a crisis such as the COVID-19 in the B2B sector that has focused more on resilience at organizational (Zafari, Biggemann, & Garry, 2020) or industry levels (Remko, 2020), our study examine salesperson resilience and leader crisis communication as its contextual antecedent. Our study advances the B2B sales literature by investigating resilience at the B2B salesperson (i.e., micro) level as well as adding leader crisis communication to the growing body of antecedents of salesperson resilience. Studying how to promote salesperson resilience is crucial and relevant to the B2B sales context especially during a crisis situation such as the COVID-19 because of challenges, adversities, and high sales failure rates in sales positions (Friend, Johnson, Luthans, & Sohi, 2016; Good et al., 2021), critical B2B sales disruptions during the pandemic crisis (Epler & Leach, 2021), and the contribution of salesperson resilience to the resilience of B2B organizations during the crisis (Sharma, Rangarajan, & Paesbrugghe, 2020).

Second, the current study further advances the B2B sales literature by investigating the mediating role of B2B salespersons’ positive stress mindset as a cognitive mechanism underlying the connection between leader crisis communication and salesperson resilience. Third, our study examines both contextual and individual contingencies for the effect of leader crisis communication on salespersons’ positive stress mindset. Our study advances the literature by examining the role of core beliefs challenge as an individual moderator and family strain as a contextual moderator that may attenuate the effect of leader crisis communication. Understanding the moderating role of these factors may help managers better realize how to enhance the effectiveness of crisis communication, thereby further promoting positive stress mindset and resilience among the sales forces.

1.1. Conceptual framework

In the sections that follow, we explain our expectations that (1) leader crisis communication is positively related to salesperson resilience, (2) leader crisis communication is positively related to salespersons’ positive stress mindset, which is in turn positively related to salesperson resilience, (3) positive stress mindset mediates the positive association between leader crisis communication and salesperson resilience, (4) salespersons’ core belief challenge weakens the positive effect of leader crisis communication on positive stress mindset, and (5) family strain attenuates such a positive effect. Our study utilizes the resource-based LMX perspective guided by the COR theory (Liao & Hui, 2021) as a theoretical lens to cast light on the relationships in the research model illustrated in Fig. 1.

1.2. Hypothesis development

1.2.1. Resource-based leader-member exchange perspective

1.2.1.1. Conservation of resources (COR) theory. Resources consist of personal resources (e.g., self-esteem), energy resources (e.g., effort), object resources (e.g., material assets), or condition resources (e.g., status in the organization) (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001). COR theory postulates that individuals are motivated to conserve their resources (resource conservation) and acquire resources (resource acquisition) (Hobfoll, 1989). Employees are inclined to protect their resources and/or actively accrue resources since resource loss or threat of resource loss may lead to negative experiences such as stress or job dissatisfaction (Hobfoll, 1989). An ample pool of resources can help employees deal with job demands. COR theory further proposes that the availability of resources and the instrumentality of resource investment may determine
employee investment of resource for acquiring further resources (i.e., resource gain spiral) (Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2015). Individuals with limited resources or threat of resource loss are more inclined to take a defensive strategy to protect their resources and less inclined to invest resources, whereas ones with ample resources to draw on have greater opportunity to invest resources for resource gains (Halbesleben et al., 2014). Employees are also motivated to make resource investment when they find the instrumentality of such an investment such as increasing their self-esteem, self-actualization, or performance (Halbesleben et al., 2014).

1.2.1.2. Leader-member exchange (LMX) theory. LMX indicates the quality of an exchange relationship between a manager and a follower (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Derived from social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), LMX theory posits that managers invest resources, including physical, cognitive, and emotional resources (DiNenno & Liden, 1986), in building exchange relationships with their followers (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Employees in high-quality exchange relationships are likely to obtain more interpersonal (e.g., leader trust) and organizational resources (e.g., information, support) than those in low-quality exchange relationships (DiNenno & Liden, 1986). In the high-quality exchange relationship, employees are more motivated to invest in the exchange relationship with the manager to maintain and enhance such resources (Erdogan & Enders, 2007; Lee, Thomas, Martin, Guillaume, & Marstand, 2019). This motivation is rooted in the norm of reciprocity in the LMX theory. Followers are inclined to demonstrate favorable attitudes, behaviors, and performance as a reciprocation towards the favor that they have obtained from the high-quality LMX relationship. More specifically, meta-analytical reviews by Dulebohn, Bommer, Liden, Brouer, and Ferris (2012) and Martin, Guillaume, Thomas, Lee, and Epitropaki (2016) reported followers’ perceptual (e.g., justice), attitudinal (e.g., commitment), and behavioral (e.g., citizenship behavior, job performance) outcomes as follower reciprocation towards LMX.

1.2.1.3. Resource-based leader-member exchange perspective. Drawing merely upon LMX framework may be not sufficient for including constructs that demonstrates the medium of the exchanges (e.g., leader support) (Liao & Hui, 2021). Some authors have addressed this lacuna by integrating LMX framework with COR theory to elucidate the relationships between LMX and follower outcomes. Specifically, Harris, Wheeler, and Kacmar (2011) employed COR theory to hypothesize and identify LMX as an antecedent of organizational job embeddedness, which in turn nurtures job satisfaction and mitigates turnover intentions and actual turnover. Building on LMX integrated with COR theory, Dong, Jiang, Rong, and Yang (2020) investigated and reported that LMX differentiation influences employee voice behavior through the mediating pathway of trust in leader and the moderating roles of leader reward power and leader coercive power. McLarty, Muldoon, Quade, and King (2021) based on these two theories to examine the negative impact of supervisor-induced hindrance stressors on task performance and organizational citizenship behavior via job neglect as well as the attenuating effect of high-quality LMX on the hindrance stressor–neglect linkage. In their meta-analytical study, Liao and Hui (2021) took a step further to propose a resource-based LMX perspective, guided by conservation of resources (COR) theory, to examine the relationships between leader behavior and follower outcomes.

Since resources should be invested and exchanged for the formation and maintenance of a relationship, the resource approach to LMX holds valid. According to Hobfoll (1989), social relationship (e.g., LMX) itself is also a resource that may promote the development of employees’ favorable attitudes and behaviors. Expressed differently, the resource-based LMX framework can explain the role of resources in cultivating LMX and how LMX may promote employee’s favorable attitudes and behaviors contributing to organizational functioning.

The application of resource-based LMX perspective in our study in the sales domain is supported by prior sales-related studies that have extended the application of LMX perspective and the COR theory to the sales context. For instance, Sok, Sok, Tsarenko, and Widjaja (2021) used LMX theory to explain how leaders create an environment for service-sales frontline employees’ resilience to manifest itself. Habel, Alavi, and Linseemayer (2021) explained the interactive effects of variable compensation with social resources on salesperson health through the lens of the COR theory. Bouzari and Karatepe (2017) utilized LMX theory integrated with the COR theory to link servant leadership to hotel salespersons’ job outcomes via the mediation pathway of psychological capital.

The resource-based LMX framework guided by COR theory provides the theoretical foundation to our research model in various ways. First, “social relations . . . can detract from individuals’ resources” (Hobfoll, 1989, p. 517). Hence, in light of this resource-based LMX perspective, it is plausible to argue that leader crisis communication constitutes valuable resources (job-related, people-related, and organization-related conditions) for forming high-quality LMX relationship.

Second, this theoretical perspective underscores the importance of LMX in transforming resources into employee favorable outcomes through the norm of reciprocity. Meaningful and effective LMX relationship could be an essential resource that can trigger employee reciprocation towards LMX in form of positive attitudes and behaviors towards challenges (Liao & Hui, 2021) such as positive stress mindset and in turn resilience.

Third, COR theory provides guidance on assessing valuable resources in the LMX context. COR theory has been employed to examine how acquiring valuable resources fosters individuals’ ability to cope with challenging situations (Hobfoll, 1989). Individuals are inclined to accrue valuable resources that can improve personal resources or strengths in challenging situations (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001). According to the resource-based LMX perspective (Liao & Hui, 2021), individuals can draw on resources from the environment (e.g., LMX relationship) to cope with the threat of loss (e.g., a crisis situation) as well as make resource investment, which is operationalized as positive mindset or resilience in prior research (Cooke, Wang, & Bartram, 2019). Employees assess leader crisis communication as valuable resources in a crisis such.
as the COVID-19. They tend to accrue such resources, which can help amplify their ability to cope with this challenging situation, which may help them develop positive stress mindset and in turn draw upon this personal resource to develop resilience.

Furthermore, LMX research indicates that the LMX effects can be influenced by employees’ individual factors or their social networks (Regts et al., 2019). It is thus tenable that core beliefs challenge, an individual re-assessment of their beliefs in a crisis situation (Eze et al., 2020), may influence the effect of LMX relationship built through leader crisis communication on salesperson resilience to a crisis. Likewise, factors from social networks, such as strain from the family, may exert a cross-domain effect on the nexus between leader crisis communication and salesperson resilience.

1.2.2. Leader crisis communication and salesperson resilience

Resilience alludes to competence to bounce back from failure, conflict, or adversity (Luthans, 2002). From this view, resilience contains two key elements: positive adaptation and situation of complexity or adversity (Herrman et al., 2011; Malik & Garg, 2020). Resilient individuals develop optimistic and enthusiastic attitude towards work and life (Cooke, Cooper, et al., 2019). They demonstrate openness to new experiences (Cooke, Cooper, et al., 2019), learn proactively, thrive, and conquer challenges (Youssuf & Luthans, 2007). As such, they can effectively and optimally cope with adverse situations such as crises (Raghavan & Sandanapanch, 2019). Resilience is relevant to the sales context and crucial for salespersons’ work (Bande, Fernández-Ferrín, Varela, & Jaramillo, 2015) due to salespersons’ dynamic job profile, high adversity and high sales failure rates in their sales job (Friend et al., 2016; Good et al., 2021), as well as challenges from work-family conflicts (Krush, Agnihotri, Trainor, & Krishnakumar, 2013). Resilience can reduce emotional exhaustion and turnover among salespersons (Bande et al., 2015) and the effect of stress in the sales job on job satisfaction (Krush et al., 2013), foster customer-oriented behaviors, customer satisfaction, and sales performance (Lussier & Hartmann, 2017), as well as contribute to the resilience of organizations particularly during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Sharma et al., 2020).

The management literature has highlighted the magnitude of communication in general and manager communication in times of a crisis such as the COVID-19 (Agarwal, 2021; Guzzo et al., 2021). In a crisis, effective communication can disseminate accurate information, reshape individuals’ thoughts and perceptions, alleviate negative impacts of the crisis on them, and encourage them to behave appropriately (Liu-Lastres, Schroeder, & Pennington-Gray, 2019). Managers can utilize crisis communication activities to (b) correct imprecise information about crisis-related policies of the firm, (a) connect with workers, and (c) gain information about workers’ situation in times of a crisis (Spialek & Houston, 2018). As such, crisis communication from managers can provide employees with job-related resources (i.e., understanding employees’ situation during the crisis and providing support for them), people-related resources (i.e., connecting with them), and organization-related resources (i.e., providing accurate information about the organization’s crisis-related policies).

Through crisis communication from the leader, employees can build transparent understanding of their firm’s crisis-related policies and obtain care and support (Spialek, Houston, & Worley, 2019). Hence, in light of the resource-based LMX perspective guided by COR theory (Liao & Hui, 2021), LMX relationship can develop from leader crisis communication. Employees may feel urged to reciprocate towards this relationship by adapting to a situation of complexity or developing resilience in such a situation. Furthermore, according to this LMX perspective, LMX relationship built through crisis communication can serve as a social resource, on which workers can draw to build their resource pool such as cognitive balance and positive affect (Lianchao & Tingting, 2020). Positive experience and affect can contribute to sources of resilience, including psychological capacity and thought-action skills (Cooper, Wang, Bartram, & Cooke, 2019; Malik & Garg, 2020). Employees with a social support resource incline to engage in networking-oriented resilient actions, such as proactively connecting with others and constructing the supportive network (Kuntz et al., 2017). Such networking-oriented behaviors can contribute to addressing challenges and developing resilience (Kuntz et al., 2017). Expressed differently, in light of the resource-based LMX perspective guided by COR theory (Liao & Hui, 2021), LMX relationship formed through leader crisis communication can further serve as a social support resource that contributes to the development of resilience among salespersons.

Regardless of no studies conducted into the direct connection between leader crisis communication and salesperson resilience, prior works in the general management domain have offered certain empirical implications. For example, Malik and Garg (2017) concluded the link between efforts in dialogue and inquiry and the development of resilience among Indian information technology employees. Guzzo et al. (2021) reported employees’ effective responses to manager communication in times of the COVID-19 and Agarwal (2021) found communication during the COVID-19 as one of the factors fostering employee well-being. The above reasoning along with some empirical evidence leads to the ensuing hypothesis:

H1. Leader crisis communication is positively related to salesperson resilience.

1.2.3. Mediating path of positive stress mindset

In addition to the direct relationship between leader crisis communication and salesperson resilience as earlier discussed, mediation mechanisms are viewed as potentially relevant in the link between LMX and employee outcomes (Gupta & Sharma, 2018) as well as can partially mediate the LMX-employee resilience linkage (Kakkar, 2019). Our study investigates positive stress mindset as one pathway through which leader crisis communication, which may build LMX relationship, may relate to salesperson resilience. This partial mediating role of positive stress mindset is suggested by prior studies that have reported the role of positive stress mindset in mediating the effect of contextual factors on employee well-being (e.g., Huettermann & Bruch, 2019). Besides, research has considered trust or affective commitment as a mediator for the link between LMX and employee performance as reflected in Martin et al.’s (2016) meta-analytic review and some prior studies (Casimir, Ng, Wang, & Ooi, 2014). Trust has also been reported as a mediator for the nexus between leader communication style and employee work outcomes (Yang, Kuria, & Gu, 2020). Nonetheless, our study takes a step further to examine positive stress mindset as a mediator for the link between leader crisis communication and salesperson resilience due to the relevance of positive mindset to resilience in a stressful situation (Chakraborty et al., 2021) as further discussed below.

Stress mindset alludes to an individual’s view of how stress impacts his or her life and how he or she reacts to stress (Crum et al., 2013). Drawing on evidence regarding positive consequences of stressful experiences such as enhanced physiological and mental functioning (Park & Helgeson, 2006), Crum et al. (2013) introduce and deem positive stress mindset to be individuals’ view of stress as bearing beneficial consequences in relation to their performance, well-being, and growth. Experiencing an event as stressful, an individual still may hold the mindset with reference to the positive outcomes of such a stressful event (Crum et al., 2013; Huettermann & Bruch, 2019). As a meta-cognitive perception of the positive outcomes of stress, positive stress mindset potentially acts as a mental context for making sense of stressful events, selecting or formulating coping actions, and becoming resilient (Chakraborty et al., 2021; Huettermann & Bruch, 2019).

Through crisis communication, leaders provide employees with accurate information about organizational crisis-related policies (i.e., organization-related resource), connect with them (i.e., people-related resource) and support them in their work during the crisis (i.e., job-related resource) (Spialek & Houston, 2018). In light of the resource-based LMX perspective (Liao & Hui, 2021), leader crisis
communication constitutes valuable resources for forming a high-quality LMX relationship. From this perspective, meaningful and effective LMX relationships can transform employee potentials into their competence and positive attitudes (Liao & Hui, 2021) such as positive stress mindset.

Moreover, leaders may influence how employees assess a situation and respond to it (Herman, Troth, Ashkanasy, & Collins, 2018). Due to high clarity, reciprocity, and support in crisis communication (Spialek & Houston, 2018), a high-quality LMX relationship is formed and encourages employees’ positive assessment of the crisis situation. Through crisis communication (Spialek & Houston, 2018), leaders can frame the situation in a fashion that renders it not problematic but challenging (Kakkar, 2019). Haver, Akerjordet, and Furunes (2014) reported that reappraisal of a situation may contribute to changing mindsets among employees. Hence, influencing employees to positively appraise the crisis, leaders can help them cope psychologically with it in a more effective way (Kakkar, 2019) and develop positive stress mindset. The role of LXM relationship as well as leader communication is underscored in adverse situations in which employees look towards leaders for reassuring and sustaining positivity (Fredrickson, 2001). The ensuing hypothesis is consequently formulated:

H2a. Leader crisis communication is positively related to salespersons’ positive stress mindset.

In light of the COR perspective guiding the resource-based LMX perspective (Hobfoll, 2001; Liao & Hui, 2021), positive stress mindset may serve as employees’ personal resource that they can draw on to develop further resources. With a mindset that a stressful event can be a source of well-being and growth, individuals tend not to perceive a crisis such as the COVID-19 as a sheer threat to their resources, but as an opportunity for them to proactively accrue new resources to enhance their personal mastery and life appreciation. Moreover, with positive stress mindset as a resource of growth (Crum et al., 2013; Huettermann & Bruch, 2019), individuals incline to act proactively (Halbesleben et al., 2014) such as finding new relationships, new life paths, or new opportunities.

Moreover, changing a mindset precedes change in behaviors among employees (Wang, Guchait, & Pasamehmetoglu, 2020). Employees’ mindset of positivity may lead to positive behaviors (Haver et al., 2014). Employees with positive mindset are inclined to take active and functional coping strategies, which help them develop constructive thinking and perseverance (Chakraborty et al., 2021). These help them bounce back from a crisis situation with enhanced responsibility (Chakraborty et al., 2021). They become more open to new experiences, more flexible in response to a changing situation, and more active in seeking opportunities from it (Kaspárková, Vaculík, Procházka, & Schaufeli, 2018). In line with this reasoning, research has reported that positive mindset can be conducive to resilience (Chakraborty et al., 2021).

In other words, positive stress mindset may facilitate salesperson resilience to a crisis such as the COVID-19. In conjunction with hypotheses H1 and H2a, crisis communication from the leader can be presumed to have a positive indirect link with salesperson resilience partially mediated by their positive stress mindset:

H2b. Positive stress mindset is positively related to salesperson resilience.

H2c. Positive stress mindset partially mediates the positive relationship between leader crisis communication and salesperson resilience.

1.2.4. Moderating role of core beliefs challenge

Core beliefs refer to a set of beliefs that an individual has about the world, his or her place in it, and how it works (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013). Core beliefs help decipher the underlying causes of events and guide actions (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Activating the re-assessment of the assumptive world, core beliefs challenge may lead to the cognitive processing of an event (Lindstrom, Cann, Calhoun, & Tedeschi, 2013) and function as the deviation in the growth process (Eze et al., 2020). Experiencing challenge to their core beliefs, people rebuild their basic beliefs about the life and world, others, and the self, leading to positive changes (Eze et al., 2020).

Through the lens of the resource-based LMX perspective (Liao & Hui, 2021), the effects of LMX relationship on members’ attitudes are potentially contingent on members’ characteristics or perspectives. LMX research has also reported the boundary conditions of employee characteristics for LMX effects (Regts et al., 2019). Research found that employees with high levels of some cognitive characteristics (e.g., metacognition) may be less reliant on their relationship with the leader (Le, Jiang, & Radford, 2020). Therefore, we argue that core beliefs challenge, as employees’ cognitive processing in response to a challenging situation (Eze et al., 2020), may serve as a moderator that attenuates the relationship between leader crisis communication and employee positive stress mindset. We consider core beliefs challenge as a moderator for two reasons. First, research has provided implications for the importance of core beliefs and the adaptation of them in crisis preparation (Ghaderi, King, & Hall, 2021). Second, in a challenging situation, different individuals may develop different levels of core beliefs challenge (Cann et al., 2010), which may influence their responsiveness to crisis communication from the leader.

Compared to employees with low levels of core beliefs challenge, employees with high levels of core beliefs challenge are less reliant on leader crisis communication in two respects. First, in light of the resource-based LMX perspective (Liao & Hui, 2021), LMX relationship can serve as a social resource for employees. According to the COR theory in such a perspective, employees tend to protect against the threat of resource loss (Hobfoll, 1989). Thus, if employees are low in core beliefs challenge in a crisis situation, to protect against resource loss, employees are inclined to rely on resources from the relationship with the leader through leader crisis communication. On the contrary, if employees are high in core beliefs challenge, they have the propensity to rely on core beliefs challenge, as a proximal resource, to proactively cope with the crisis (George, Park, & Chaudoir, 2016). Accordingly, they may be less reliant on resources from the leader, which leads to a less pronounced relationship between leader crisis communication and positive stress mindset.

Second, individuals who are high in core beliefs challenge develop cognitive balance and problem-solving coping behaviors (Eze et al., 2020). Individuals with cognitive balance are more proactive in ruminating on the clues of a situation and cultivating the meaning from it (Zhou, Wu, Fu, & An, 2015). Therefore, high in core beliefs challenge, employees are inclined to develop cognitive balance and base on it to regain the control of the situation, more than on resources from the leader through crisis communication. This leads to a less pronounced effect of leader crisis communication for employees with high core beliefs challenge. In contrast, employees with low core beliefs challenge may let their thoughts of a situation invade their cognitive world against their volution (Eze et al., 2020). Thus, a support resource from leader crisis communication may exert a stronger effect on employees with low core beliefs challenge since it helps them regain the control of the situation. In light of the above discussion, we propose that:

H3a. Core beliefs challenge weakens the positive relationship between leader crisis communication and positive stress mindset.

Along with the mediation argument in hypotheses H2a-c, we expect that core beliefs challenge moderates the indirect nexus between leader crisis communication and salesperson resilience via positive stress mindset. At low levels of core beliefs challenge, the indirect effect should be stronger since salespersons are more inclined to rely on resources from leader crisis communication to develop positive stress mindset and in turn resilience. On the contrary, when salespersons are high in core beliefs challenge, they may rely more on their own resources than on resources from leader crisis communication, leading to a more
pronounced indirect relationship between leader crisis communication and salesperson resilience. The following hypothesis is consequently formulated:

H3b. Core beliefs challenge weakens the indirect relationship between leader crisis communication and salesperson resilience through positive stress mindset.

1.2.5. Moderating effect of family strain

In addition to the moderating effect of individual factors, LMX research has indicated the role of social networks on the LMX effects (Regts et al., 2019). Therefore, besides the moderating effect of core beliefs challenge as earlier discussed, our study examines if factors from social networks outside the workplace moderate the relationship between leader crisis communication and salespersons’ positive stress mindset. From the cross-domain perspective, research has highlighted the influence of family domain, a specific social network outside of the workplace, on employee attitudes and behaviors in the work domain (Ford, Heinen, & Langkamer, 2007; Nohe, Meier, Sonntag, & Michel, 2015; Zhang, Xu, Jin, & Ford, 2018).

While the beneficial effects of family support during a crisis such as the COVID-19 has been observed in the literature (Agarwal, 2021; Nisar, Haider, Ali, Naz, & Ryu, 2021), family strain imposed on workers in a crisis has been given less attention (Arslaner & Boylu, 2017; García-Cabrera, Lucia-Casademunt, Cuéllar-Molina, & Padilla-Angulo, 2018). Studying family strain is important since it is likely to increase and drain employee resources during a crisis situation such as the COVID-19 (Mahmood et al., 2021). Strain from the family exerts the negative impact on worker well-being (García-Cabrera et al., 2018) or their work behavior (Arslaner & Boylu, 2017) particularly in a crisis such as the COVID-19 (Mahmood et al., 2021). In addition to such direct impacts of family strain on workers’ work-related attitudes and behaviors, strain from the family has been reported to negatively interact with LMX relationship to predict employee behaviors (Van Dyne et al., 2002). It is thus tenable to presume the role of family strain in negatively interacting with leader crisis communication to predict salespersons’ positive stress mindset.

From the resource-based LMX perspective (Liao & Hui, 2021), LMX relationship built through leader crisis communication can function as a social resource for workers to develop positive stress mindset during a crisis such as the COVID-19. Meanwhile, family strain not only drains employees’ resources but also indicates lack of resources from the family domain, which employees need in order to cope with a crisis situation (Li et al., 2015). Experiencing family strain, employees not only lack emotional support from family members but are also exposed to negative emotions from them (Amstad & Semmer, 2011). Under family strain, employees are less likely to receive resources such as information and assistance from their family members (Li et al., 2015). Family strain is thus a disadvantageous position for accruing additional resources from family members. Accordingly, in face of family strain, employees lack these additional resources while these resources can add to their efforts to reciprocate LMX relationship in form of positive stress mindset. In other words, the relationship between leader crisis communication and positive stress mindset becomes less pronounced at high levels of family strain. Conversely, at low levels of family strain, employees can add some resources from family members to their endeavors in reciprocating their LMX relationship, leading to a more pronounced effect of leader crisis communication on positive stress mindset. For instance, if strain in the family is low, their family members may provide them with some emotional support or information on how to deal with the crisis at work, with which they can enhance their efforts to reciprocate the favor from leader crisis communication and further develop positive stress mindset.

Furthermore, according to the resource-based LMX perspective (Liao & Hui, 2021), leader crisis communication provides a supportive resource to cultivate a resource pool among employees in face of a crisis, whereas family strain may threaten to drain such a resource pool from the cross-domain perspective (Mahmood et al., 2021; Nohe et al., 2015). Hence, drained by family strain, their resource pool may be translated into a lower level of positive stress mindset. Put differently, the effect of leader crisis communication on positive stress mindset may be less pronounced among salespersons under strain from family members:

H4a. Family strain weakens the positive relationship between leader crisis communication and positive stress mindset.

The hypothesis above, together with the assumption on the indirect connection between leader crisis communication and salesperson resilience through the mediating role of positive stress mindset, indicates that the indirect linkage between leader crisis communication and salesperson resilience is contingent on the degree of family strain. We expect that leader crisis communication promotes salesperson resilience through the mediation channel of positive stress mindset, which is more likely to emerge in case of low family strain. Under such conditions, salespersons’ development of positive stress mindset and in turn resilience tends to be more influenced by resources from leader crisis communication than under conditions of high family strain:

H4b. Family strain weakens the indirect relationship between leader crisis communication and salesperson resilience through positive stress mindset.

1.3. Research methods

1.3.1. Sampling

Early measures in responses to the COVID-19 outbreak were conducted in Vietnam since its report of first two confirmed cases early January 2020 (Vietnamplus, 2020). With growing confirmed cases in the following months, a complete national lockdown was implemented on 1 April 2020 (Vietnamplus, 2020). The process of data collection occurred from mid-March to mid-August 2020 when relaxations were applied to different provinces depending on the number of local confirmed cases.

Our study recruited manufacturing companies through the snowball sampling approach. Through a researcher’s relationships with some manufacturers, we built further connections with other companies. We received the approval for surveys from 43 manufacturers. We garnered the employee list from HR managers and emailed employees the survey link and invited their participation. In each survey wave, participants were assured in a cover letter of the survey linked and invited their participation. In each survey wave, participants were assured in a cover letter of the survey link that their participation was voluntary and could be withdrawn at any time without any consequences. They were also assured that their responses would be treated anonymously and confidentially and utilized solely for academic purposes.

This study gathered data over three measurement waves with a two-month lag (Katsikeas, Auh, Sypoupolou, & Menguc, 2018). Despite collecting data in a multi-wave measurement process, it was a cross-sectional study design with time-lagged outcomes, rather than a longitudinal study design since it did not address the data prescriptions for running a longitudinal model (Bolander, Dugan, & Jones, 2017). The measurement waves were designed to separate the independent construct from the mediator (wave 2) and separate the mediator from the outcome variable (wave 3). This temporal separation could reduce the possibility that participants would use cues from previous scale items of the independent variable to respond to the items in the ensuing scale items of the dependent variable, thereby diminishing common method variance (CMV) bias (Podsakoff, Mackenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012). This multi-wave measurement process could also resonate with Cole and Maxwell’s (2003) suggestion regarding the estimation of mediation mechanisms via a survey wave different from survey waves for the independent variables (wave 1) and outcome variables (wave 3).

The first measurement wave (T1) collected the data on leader crisis communication, family strain, and core beliefs challenge. This survey wave also collected the data on control variables. The second survey
wave (T2) garnered data on positive stress mindset from salespersons who participated in T1. In the third measurement time (T3), salespersons partaking in T2 were asked to respond to resilience scale items. Following Li (2018), each respondent was assigned a four-digit code at T1 and asked to record this code, which enabled us to match the T1 data of each respondent to the data of the ensuing survey waves.

Responses from manufacturing firms in which the number of participating salespersons were under five (Chuang & Liao, 2010) were eliminated since aggregate score biases tend to dwindle with groups of five or more respondents (Norden-Hagg, Sexton, Kalvemark-Sporrong, Ring, & Kettis-Lindblad, 2010). As a result of this data elimination, the sample of salespersons who completed the three measurements encompassed 418 salespersons (response rate: 60.2%) from 36 companies (83.7%). Salespersons’ (55.3% female) average age was 31.9 years (SD = 5.7) and average tenure with their organization was 6.2 years (SD = 2.1).

1.3.2. Measures

We followed the back-translation procedure (Schaffer & Riordan, 2003) to develop the survey questionnaire in English, translated it to Vietnamese, and then translated it back to English and resolved conceptual equivalence issues. All measurement items are displayed in Table 1.

Adapted from event citizen disaster communication scale (Spialek & Houston, 2018), leader communication in relation to the COVID-19 crisis was assessed through ten items (e.g., “The manager looked for information to find out what was going on for his or her employees during the COVID-19 crisis”) (1 = never; 5 = always). Positive stress mindset was gauged through eight items from Crum et al. (2013) (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree) (e.g., “Experiencing stress improves my health and vitality”). Walen and Lachman’s (2000) four-item scale was employed to assess family strain (e.g., “How often do family members (i.e., parents, siblings, spouse, children) get on your nerves”) (1 = never; 5 = often). Nine items from Cann et al. (2010) were used to examine core beliefs challenge (e.g., “Because of the event, I seriously examined my beliefs about my relationships with other people”) (1 = not at all; 5 = to a very great degree).

Following Cooke et al. (Cooke, Cooper, et al., 2019; Cooke, Wang, & Bartram, 2019), 36 items from Wang, Cooke, and Huang’s (2014) were utilized to estimate salesperson resilience (e.g., “When an unwelcome change involves me, I can usually find a way to make the change benefit myself”) (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The unidimensionality of this construct was supported on account of the adequate model fit in the CFA results as reflected in the measurement models section below (Gerbing & Anderson, 1988). The construct unidimensionality was further warranted since loadings on the construct exceeded 0.60, cross-loadings with other constructs did not surpass 0.40 (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010; Zaim, Muhammed, & Tarim, 2019), and the first eigenvalues ranged between 2.17 and 2.41, exceeding the 1.0 cutoff point (Rencher, 1995).

Due to the association of demographic attributes with employee responses (Fu & Deshpande, 2014), this research controlled for employees’ gender, age, education, marital status, tenure with organization, and family size.

1.3.3. Data analysis strategy

The current study adopts a 2–1–1 design (Preacher, Zhang, & Zyphur, 2011), with the impact of a level 2 construct (leader crisis communication) on a level 1 outcome construct (salesperson resilience) mediated by a level 1 variable (positive stress mindset). From Preacher et al.’s (2011) view, by virtue of the data nested within managers, multilevel structural equation modeling (MSEM) was implemented through MPlus 7.2. This approach has been previously used in sales-related studies, particularly regarding sales leadership (e.g., Luu, 2020; Varela, Bande, Del Rio, & Jaramillo, 2019). Compared to alternative multilevel techniques, using MSEM indicates several advantages. By partitioning the

**Table 1** Measurement items.

| Constructs and items                                                                 | Standardized loading | t value |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|---------|
| **Leader crisis communication (α = 0.80; CR = 0.81; AVE = 0.67)**                   |                      |         |
| The manager corrected rumors about the company’s policies related to the COVID-19 crisis. | .82                  |         |
| The manager encouraged us not to spread rumors about the COVID-19 crisis and the company’s policies related to the crisis. | .85                  | 11.76   |
| The manager encouraged us to correct inaccurate information about the COVID-19 crisis and the company’s policies related to the crisis. | .80                  | 9.69    |
| The manager corrected inaccurate information about the COVID-19 crisis and the company’s policies related to the crisis. | .78                  | 8.84    |
| The manager talked to us to explore how we experienced the crisis.                  | .83                  | 11.32   |
| The manager talked to us to see if we were safe.                                    | .81                  | 10.91   |
| The manager talked to us to confirm whether reports about the COVID-19 crisis were true. | .79                  | 8.56    |
| The manager talked to us to see if we were OK during the COVID-19 crisis.            | .86                  | 11.62   |
| The manager comforted us during the COVID-19 crisis.                                 | .80                  | 9.48    |
| The manager looked for information to confirm whether we received its crisis-related reports. | .84                  | 11.27   |
| The manager looked for information to find out what was going on for his or her employees during the COVID-19 crisis. | .82                  | 10.83   |
| The manager looked for information to confirm whether we received an event warning. | .85                  | 10.32   |
| **Salesperson resilience (α = 0.85; CR = 0.85; AVE = 0.70)**                        |                      |         |
| I know what I have to do to achieve my aspirations in life.                          | .87                  |         |
| I have a strong determination to achieve certain things in my lifetime.              | .83                  | 11.96   |
| I have what I want to achieve during my lifetime.                                   | .81                  | 9.75    |
| My current work is a step towards achieving certain things in my lifetime.           | .84                  | 12.71   |
| I know I have to do to achieve my aspirations in life.                               | .88                  |         |
| I am ambitious to achieve certain things during my lifetime.                         | .84                  | 11.59   |
| I have a get up and go approach to life.                                             | .77                  | 9.62    |
| I know what to do in most situations.                                                | .85                  | 11.47   |
| I have a powerful self-interest in achieving what I want.                            | .80                  | 10.28   |
| I enjoy the company of other people most of the time.                               | .82                  | 9.94    |
| I have a unique personal brand that I frequently project to others.                  | .84                  | 11.36   |
| I always listen to and try to understand what others are talking to me about.        | .81                  | 9.55    |
| I have a curiosity about people.                                                     | .86                  | 12.07   |
| I share my innermost secrets with a selected number of friends.                     | .79                  | 9.74    |
| I have a strong relationship with those who can help me achieve what I want.         | .88                  | 12.41   |
| I have got friends to provide me with the emotional support I need.                  | .82                  | 10.52   |
| I see myself as self-sufficient.                                                     | .85                  | 11.25   |
| I enjoy challenge and solving problems.                                              | .80                  | 10.19   |
| I really enjoy exploring the causes of problems.                                     | .77                  | 9.62    |
| I can solve most problems that challenge me.                                         | .83                  | 11.48   |
| I help others solve the problems and challenges they face.                          | .78                  | 10.06   |
| I like to plan out my day and write down my list of things to do.                    | .85                  | 11.61   |
| I plan my holidays well in advance.                                                  | .27                  | 3.28    |
| I tackle big tasks in bite sizes.                                                    | .86                  | 11.96   |
| I review my achievements weekly.                                                     | .83                  | 10.14   |
| I know how to tackle most challenges I face.                                         | .80                  | 9.52    |
| I like taking the lead.                                                              | .77                  | 9.39    |
| I feel comfortable in new situations.                                                | .81                  | 10.47   |
| I know I’m a great person.                                                           | .24                  | 3.16    |
| I approach a new situation with an open mind.                                        | .84                  | 11.38   |
| I am able to adjust to changes.                                                      | .85                  | 12.62   |
| (continued on next page)
level 1 and level 2 associations, MSEM approach can enable a more robust estimates by concurrently estimating multiple endogenous parameters (Preacher et al., 2010).

2. Results

2.1. Pilot test results

To assess the survey scales, the pilot test was implemented on 60 salespersons from manufacturing companies that differed from those in the main study. Similar to the confirmatory data collection, these respondents were contacted using the snowball sampling approach and sent a participatory invitation with a survey link. In addition to being invited to respond to the measurement items, the pilot test participants were requested to provide suggestions for the items. 52 valid responses were collected for the pilot test. Preliminary validation of the scales was conducted through content validity and reliability tests. As the measurement items were adapted from the established scales in light of recommendations from scholars and practitioners, their content validity was warranted. Moreover, the participants indicated that the contents of the constructs were appropriately represented by the survey items. The pilot test results are demonstrated in Table 2.

2.2. Attention checks as metrics for data quality and their results

Participant data quality was assessed using attention check questions inserted disperedly across the survey questionnaire (Smith, Roster, Golden, & Albua, 2016), which included: (1) “Tran was the first dynasty in the Vietnamese history,” (2) “I have never heard of X-ray,” and (3) “The Moon rotates around the Sun.” Participants’ attentiveness to each of these items was reflected through their response on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Instructional manipulation check (IMC) was the other attention check metric designed to assess participants’ caution in reading the questionnaire instructions (Oppenheimer, Meyvis, & Davidenko, 2009). Adapted from the previous study (Goodman, Cryder, & Cheema, 2013) to our sales context, our IMC was: Studies have shown that when responding to questions, people prefer to reduce their effort as much as they can. If you are reading this item, please choose ‘none of the above’ and the next one. The next question was “What was this study about?” and the four alternative answers to it comprised “Salesperson responses during the COVID-19”, “Time management”, “Food delivery apps”, and “None of the above”.

The results of attention checks indicated that participants strongly disagreed with the three attention check items in terms of the Tran dynasty, X-ray, and the Moon through their means of 1.17, 1.09, and 1.64 respectively. Through 96% correct answers to the IMC, participants agreed with the three attention check items in terms of the Tran dynasty. X-ray, and the Moon through their means of 1.17, 1.09, and 1.64 respectively. Through 96% correct answers to the IMC.

2.3. Confirmatory factor analysis results

Table 2 Summary of measurement results in the main study and the pilot test.

| Construct                  | Mean | SD   | Cronbach’s α | Range of item-to-total correlations |
|----------------------------|------|------|---------------|-------------------------------------|
| Leader communication       | 3.58 | 0.62 | 0.80 (0.77)   | [0.57, 0.82] ([0.49, 0.74])         |
| Salesperson resilience     | 4.21 | 0.65 | 0.85 (0.79)   | [0.70, 0.88] ([0.53, 0.76])         |
| Positive stress mindset    | 3.82 | 0.51 | 0.86 (0.72)   | [0.68, 0.83] ([0.57, 0.69])         |
| Core beliefs challenge     | 3.69 | 0.56 | 0.84 (0.81)   | [0.62, 0.85] ([0.56, 0.80])         |
| Family strain              | 3.53 | 0.57 | 0.81 (0.70)   | [0.54, 0.79] ([0.48, 0.67])         |

Note: Entries in the parentheses are pilot test results.
2.3. Common method variance (CMV)

This study adopted procedural and statistical remedies to mitigate the potential impact of CMV. Procedural a priori remedies comprise reducing scale item ambiguity through back translation procedure, warranting participatory anonymity in the data collection, gathering data through multi-wave measurements, and utilizing reverse-coded items and different anchors for measurement items (Podsakoff et al., 2012). Statistical remedies were implemented to further address the CMV impact on the data. First, we conducted the full collinearity test proposed by Rock (2015) by estimating variance inflation factors (VIFs) for all latent variables. VIF value was 3.16 for leader crisis communication, 3.08 for positive stress mindset, 2.43 for resilience, 2.84 for core beliefs challenge, and 3.21 for family strain, which were under the 3.3 threshold (Rock, 2015). Second, we adopted Lindell and Whitney’s (2001) marker variable technique to address CMV bias since a marker variable can be utilized as a surrogate for method variance to partial out method bias (Wang, Tajvidi, Lin, & Hajli, 2020). This technique has been employed in prior sales studies such as Hallikainen, Savinaki, and Luukkanen (2020), Jaramillo, Mulki, and Boles (2011), and Lussier and Hall (2018). Attitude towards social media usage was added as a marker to the questionnaire due to no theoretical association of this marker with other constructs. The correlation matrix with the marker variable is housed in Table 3 and the correlation matrix with the marker variable removed is displayed in Table 4. As presented in Table 3, the marker variable was not significantly associated with other key variables. Comparing Table 3 and Table 4 indicates that the elimination of the marker did not affect the significance of all significant zero-order correlations. Third, the significant interactive effects further indicated that CMV bias was too weak to deflate the effects (Siemens, Roth, & Oliveira, 2010). The above results indicated that CMV bias is not a major concern in this study.

2.4. Measurement models

A decent model-data fit was reflected through confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) ($\chi^2$/df = 708.31/367 = 1.93 < 2, TLI = 0.95, IFI = 0.95, CFI = 0.94, SRMR within = 0.043, SRMRbetween = 0.091; RMSEA = 0.047 [0.038, 0.055]) (Table 5). This was a better fit than those of models that amalgamated some variables, in support of discriminant validity. Further support was lent to discriminant validity due to the heterotrait-monotrait ratios of correlations (HTMT) (Voorhees, Brady, Galantone, & Ramirez, 2016) ranging between 0.17 and 0.68, below 0.85 as Kline’s (2011) criterion. Discriminant validity was also achieved on account of correlations of each construct’s square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) in excess of its associations with the other constructs (see Table 4) (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

2.5. Hypothesis testing

Table 6 indicates that the positive and significant coefficient ($B = -0.31, p < .01$) lent support for hypothesis H1 in terms of the positive linkage between leader crisis communication and salesperson resilience. The significantly positive coefficient ($B = 0.34, p < .01$) supported hypothesis H2a regarding the positive relationship between leader crisis communication and salespersons’ positive stress mindset. Hypothesis H2b on the positive impact of positive stress mindset on resilience was substantiated through the positive and significant coefficient ($B = 0.41, p < .001$).

As displayed in Table 7, the indirect linkage between leader crisis communication and salesperson resilience via positive stress mindset as a mediating path was 0.13 (SE = 0.06, p < .01). The Monte Carlo test finding pointed out that 95% confidence interval (CI) ranged between 0.05 and 0.37 with zero not being captured in the range. These results, together with the abovementioned results for hypotheses H1, H2a, and H2b, provided support for hypothesis H2c on the role of positive stress mindset in partially mediating the leader crisis communication-salesperson resilience relationship.

Hypothesis H3a was supported on account of the marginally significant and negative interaction term ($B = -0.15, p < .10$) for the interactive effect of leader crisis communication and salespersons’ core beliefs challenge on their positive stress mindset. The slope graph (Fig. 2) revealed that leader crisis communication was less positively associated with positive stress mindset when core beliefs challenge was at high levels (simple slope = 0.13, $p > .10$) than at its low levels (simple slope = 0.41, $p < .05$).

The interactive effect of leader crisis communication and family strain on positive stress mindset (hypothesis H4a) demonstrated a significant and negative term ($B = -0.25, p < .01$). The slope graph, as displayed in Fig. 3, demonstrated that leader crisis communication enhanced positive stress mindset to a lesser degree when family strain was perceived high (simple slope = 0.19, $p < .05$) than when it was perceived low (simple slope = 0.67, $p < .01$). Hypothesis H4a was accordingly endorsed through these results.

As presented in Table 7, the findings in relation to conditional indirect effect demonstrated that at low levels of core beliefs challenge,

Table 3

| Variable                      | 1   | 2   | 3   | 4   | 5   | 6   | 7   | 8   | 9   | 10  | 11  | 12  |
|------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 1 Employee age               |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| 2 Employee gender            | 0.00|     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| 3 Marital status             | 0.05| 0.08|     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| 4 Employee education         | 0.03| 0.02| -0.01|     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| 5 Employees’ organizational tenure | 0.03| 0.06| 0.06| -0.01|     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| 6 Family size                | 0.04| 0.01| 0.04| -0.01| 0.03|     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| 7 Leader crisis communication| 0.02| 0.03| 0.04| 0.04| 0.01| 0.02| (0.82)|     |     |     |     |     |
| 8 Salesperson resilience     | -0.09| 0.05| 0.08| 0.06| 0.03| 0.04| 0.33**| (0.84)|     |     |     |     |
| 9 Positive stress mindset    | -0.12*| 0.07| 0.04| 0.07| 0.01| 0.05| 0.37***| 0.43***| (0.88)|     |     |     |
| 10 Core beliefs challenge    | -0.07| 0.07| 0.05| 0.08| 0.03| 0.03| 0.14| 0.18*| -0.11| (0.86)|     |     |
| 11 Family strain             | 0.03| 0.02| 0.01| -0.02| 0.01| 0.03| -0.07| -0.20*| -0.18*| 0.14*| (0.81)|     |
| 12 Attitude towards social media usage (marker variable) | -0.06| 0.11| 0.04| 0.07| 0.03| 0.04| 0.06| 0.09| 0.10| 0.08| 0.05| (0.82)|

| Mean            | 33.92| 0.35| 6.17| 5.1| 3.58| 4.21| 3.82| 3.69| 3.53| 3.72|     |     |
| SD              | 6.71| 0.18| 2.14| 1.6| 0.62| 0.65| 0.51| 0.56| 0.57| 0.62|     |     |
| CCR             | 0.81| 0.85| 0.87| 0.84| 0.62| 0.83|     |     |     |     |     |     |
| AVE             | 0.67| 0.70| 0.77| 0.73| 0.65| 0.67|     |     |     |     |     |     |

CCR = Composite construct reliability, AVE = Average variance extracted. Values in parentheses exhibit the square root of the average variance extracted. Standardized correlations reported * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. 

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leader crisis communication indicated a significant indirect effect on salesperson resilience via positive stress mindset (estimate = 0.14, SE = 0.05, 95% CIs [0.04, 0.41], p < .01), whereas at high levels of core beliefs challenge, the indirect effect of leader crisis communication on salesperson resilience was not significant (estimate = 0.01, SE = 0.02, 95% CIs [−0.06, 0.08], p > .10). Such results corroborated hypothesis.

Table 4
Correlation matrix (with marker variable partialed out).

| Variable 1 | Variable 2 | Variable 3 | Variable 4 | Variable 5 | Variable 6 | Variable 7 | Variable 8 | Variable 9 | Variable 10 | Variable 11 |
|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|-------------|------------|
| 1 Employee age | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... |
| 2 Employee gender | 0.00 | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... |
| 3 Marital status | 0.06 | 0.08 | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... |
| 4 Employee education | 0.03 | 0.02 | −0.01 | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... |
| 5 Employees’ organizational tenure | 0.04 | 0.07 | 0.06 | −0.01 | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... |
| 6 Family size | 0.03 | 0.01 | 0.04 | −0.01 | 0.03 | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... |
| 7 Leader crisis communication | 0.02 | 0.03 | 0.04 | 0.03 | 0.01 | 0.02 | (0.82) | ... | ... | ... |
| 8 Salesperson resilience | −0.10* | 0.05 | 0.07 | 0.06 | 0.02 | 0.04 | 0.34** | (0.84) | ... | ... |
| 9 Positive stress mindset | −0.11* | 0.06 | 0.04 | 0.08 | 0.01 | 0.04 | 0.36*** | 0.42*** | (0.88) | ... |
| 10 Core beliefs challenge | −0.07 | 0.08 | 0.05 | 0.07 | 0.03 | 0.01 | 0.14 | 0.19* | −0.10 | (0.86) |
| 11 Family strain | 0.03 | 0.02 | 0.01 | −0.02 | 0.01 | 0.02 | −0.07 | −0.20* | −0.18* | 0.15* | (0.81) |
| Mean | 33.92 | 0.35 | 6.17 | 5.1 | 3.58 | 4.21 | 3.82 | 3.69 | 3.53 | 0.65 |
| SD | 6.71 | 0.18 | 2.14 | 1.6 | 0.62 | 0.65 | 0.51 | 0.56 | 0.57 | 0.57 |

CCR = Composite construct reliability, AVE = Average variance extracted.
Values in parentheses exhibit the square root of the average variance extracted.
Standardized correlations reported * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.

Table 5
Comparison of measurement models.

| Models | χ² | df | Δχ² | TLI | IFI | CFI | SRMR within | SRMR between | RMSEA [90% CI] |
|--------|----|----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-------------|---------------|----------------|
| Hypothesized five-factor model | 708.31 | 367 | | 0.95 | 0.95 | 0.94 | 0.043 | 0.091 | 0.047 [0.038, 0.055] |
| Four-factor model: Leader crisis communication and core beliefs challenge combined | 842.19 | 371 | 133.88** | 0.92 | 0.90 | 0.91 | 0.089 | 0.118 | 0.092 [0.084, 0.098] |
| Three-factor model: Leader crisis communication, core beliefs challenge, and family strain combined | 946.22 | 374 | 237.91** | 0.85 | 0.86 | 0.86 | 0.106 | 0.134 | 0.108 [0.101, 0.114] |
| Two-factor model: All antecedent variables combined | 1011.48 | 376 | 237.91** | 0.85 | 0.86 | 0.86 | 0.106 | 0.134 | 0.108 [0.101, 0.114] |
| One-factor model: All variables combined | 1089.53 | 377 | 381.22** | 0.69 | 0.69 | 0.70 | 0.142 | 0.187 | 0.139 [0.132, 0.147] |

** p < .01.

Table 6
Path analysis results.

| Outcomes | Positive stress mindset | Resilience |
|----------|-------------------------|------------|
| Predictors | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 | Model 5 | Model 6 |
| Individual level | | | | | | |
| Employee age | −0.12* (0.07) | −0.11* (0.06) | −0.10* (0.06) | −0.10* (0.05) | −0.10* (0.06) | −0.08 (0.04) |
| Employee gender | 0.08 (0.04) | 0.07 (0.04) | 0.07 (0.02) | 0.05 (0.03) | 0.06 (0.03) | 0.04 (0.02) |
| Marital status | 0.05 (0.03) | 0.05 (0.02) | 0.04 (0.03) | 0.03 (0.02) | 0.07 (0.03) | 0.05 (0.03) | 0.04 (0.02) |
| Employee education | 0.09 (0.05) | 0.09 (0.04) | 0.08 (0.03) | 0.07 (0.03) | 0.01 (0.00) | 0.02 (0.01) | 0.02 (0.00) |
| Employees’ organizational tenure | 0.04 (0.01) | 0.02 (0.01) | 0.01 (0.00) | 0.01 (0.00) | 0.01 (0.00) | 0.01 (0.00) | 0.01 (0.00) |
| Employees’ family size | 0.05 (0.04) | 0.03 (0.02) | 0.03 (0.01) | 0.02 (0.01) | 0.06 (0.03) | 0.04 (0.02) |
| Positive stress mindset | | | | | | | −0.13 (0.04) |
| Family strain | | | | | | | −0.17* (0.06) |
| Core beliefs challenge | | | | | | | | 0.41*** (0.10) |
| Group level | | | | | | | | |
| Leader crisis communication × Core beliefs challenge | | | | | | | | −0.18* (0.09) | −0.15 (0.08) |
| Leader crisis communication × Family strain | | | | | | | | −0.26** (0.10) | −0.25** (0.12) |
| R² | 0.12 | 0.14 | 0.19 | 0.26 | 0.27 | 0.38 |
| Pseudo R² | 0.09 | 0.11 | 0.13 | 0.17 | 0.08 | 0.14 |
| Leader crisis communication | 0.37*** (0.08) | 0.36** (0.09) | 0.34** (0.12) | 0.31** (0.09) |
| R² | 0.19 | 0.22 | 0.26 | 0.33 | 0.16 | 0.29 |
| Pseudo R² | 0.22 | 0.24 | 0.27 | 0.31 | 0.12 | 0.17 |

Standard errors are presented in parentheses.
† p < .10; * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.
Table 7
Indirect and conditional indirect effects.

| Indirect effects | Estimates | 95% CIs |
|------------------|-----------|---------|
| Indirect effect of leader crisis communication on salesperson resilience through positive stress mindset | 0.13** | [0.05, 0.37] |

Conditional indirect effect of leader crisis communication on salesperson resilience at:
- Low core beliefs challenge: 0.14** [0.04, 0.41]
- High core beliefs challenge: 0.01 (0.02) [-0.06, 0.08]

Conditional indirect effect of leader crisis communication on salesperson resilience at:
- Low family strain: 0.17** [0.07, 0.46]
- High family strain: 0.03 (0.01) [-0.02, 0.11]

** p < .01. Standard errors are presented in parentheses.

3. Discussions

3.1. Discussion of the results

First, support is provided for hypothesis H1 that postulates the positive association between leader crisis communication and salesperson resilience in times of the COVID-19 crisis. This result is partially in line with Agarwal’s (2021) finding on the link between communication during the COVID and employee well-being as well as with Guzzo et al.’s (2021) finding regarding manager communication in times of the COVID-19 and employee affective responses. Second, our results are in support of hypothesis H2a on the positive association between leader crisis communication and salespersons’ positive stress mindset, hypothesis H2b on the positive connection between positive stress mindset and salesperson resilience, and hypothesis H2c on the role of positive stress mindset as a mediator that channels leader crisis communication into salesperson resilience. While evidence has not been established for the association between communication and stress mindset in the literature, the finding for hypothesis H2b is partially in line with Casper, Sonnentag, and Tremmel’s (2017) finding on the association between positive stress mindset and approach coping efforts, as well as the finding for hypothesis H2c is also partially in line with Huettermann and Bruch’s (2019) evidence for the role of positive stress mindset in mediating the link between a contextual factor (i.e., health-related HR practices) and employee well-being.

Third, our results provide support for hypotheses H3a and H3b in relation to the role of core beliefs challenge as a negative moderator for the positive link between leader crisis communication and positive stress mindset as well as for the indirect link between leader crisis communication and resilience respectively. These results differ from prior studies that have inclined to investigate the direct positive connection between core beliefs challenge and resilience to disasters (e.g., Eze et al., 2020). Fourth, our results provide evidence for hypotheses H4a and H4b regarding the attenuating effect of family strain for the positive association between leader crisis communication and positive stress mindset as well as for the indirect link between leader crisis communication and resilience respectively. Our findings on the moderating effect of family strain differentiates our study from previous works with a major focus on the direct negative relationship between family strain and worker well-being (García-Cabrera et al., 2018). Nonetheless, our supplementary analyses demonstrate the direct positive relationship between core beliefs challenge and resilience (B = 0.19, p < .05) as well as the direct negative link between family strain and resilience (B = -0.22, p < .05), which are consistent with the findings of Eze et al. (2020) and García-Cabrera et al. (2018) respectively.

3.2. Theoretical implications

This study can advance the B2B sales literature in the following respects. As the first contribution, this research expands research regarding salesperson resilience to a crisis by unfolding how to foster B2B salesperson resilience in the face of the COVID-19 outbreak. This
fills a gap in the existing research, which has mainly delved into macro-level resilience to crises such as industry resilience (Remko, 2020) or organizational resilience (Zafari et al., 2020) rather than salesperson resilience (Peasley, Hochstein, Britton, Srivastava, & Stewart, 2020).

Second, our findings lend credence to the role of leader crisis communication in nurturing salesperson resilience during the COVID-19 outbreak (hypothesis H1). Though Wut et al.’s (2021) review of crisis management research highlighted the magnitude of crisis communication and Hartmann et al. (2020) review of resilience in the workplace underscored the role of communication in promoting resilience, the link between leader crisis communication and salesperson resilience in times of a crisis has been barely studied. Most research in the marketing domain has focused on communication and employee performance (Jiménez-Castillo, 2016). In general business discipline, research has examined resilience at the individual level, but tended to concentrate on organizational communication in general as its antecedent. For instance, Kim’s (2016) study reported the impact of organization-level transparent and symmetrical communication on workforce resilience. Malik and Garg (2017) established that employee resilience was promoted by organizational efforts in dialogue and inquiry. The current study distinguishes itself from these works by identifying leader crisis communication during the COVID-19, a fine-grained form of leader communication, as an antecedent of salesperson resilience. This research accordingly advances the stream of worker resilience research in the marketing discipline by adding leader crisis communication to the modest set of contextual antecedents for salesperson resilience.

Third, our study provides validation for the influence of leader crisis communication on positive stress mindset (hypothesis H2a), the impact of positive stress mindset on salesperson resilience (hypothesis H2b), and the mediation channel of positive stress mindset for the connection between leader crisis communication and salesperson resilience (hypothesis H2c). Although a recent meta-analytical study of Mazzola and Desselhorst (2019) regarding the challenge-hindrance model of stress called for investigations into the role of positive stress mindset for resilience in the workplace, positive stress mindset has been modestly examined in the general management literature (Huettermann & Bruch, 2019) and hardly examined in the marketing research. General management research has reported the relationship between positive stress mindset and approach coping efforts (Gasper et al., 2017), and the mediating role of positive stress mindset for the linkage between HR practices (i.e., health-related HR practices) and employee well-being (Huettermann & Bruch, 2019). The current study advances research on salesperson resilience by identifying positive stress mindset as a mediation channel, through which leader crisis communication can activate salesperson resilience. Furthermore, our study extends the mindset research in general and the stress mindset research in particular by adding leader crisis communication to the growing set of the predictors of stress mindset as well as through providing evidence for the role of domain-specific mindsets (e.g., stress mindset) in shaping employee resilience.

The finding in relation to the mediating role of positive stress mindset also provides support for the resource-based LMX perspective (Liao & Hui, 2021), through which, LMX relationship built through leader crisis communication can urge employees to reciprocate towards such a relationship by developing positive stress mindset and transferring positive stress mindset into resilience.

Lastly, this study lends credence to the individual and contextual boundary conditions, namely core beliefs challenge and family strain, through which leader crisis communication influences positive stress mindset (hypotheses H3a and H4a) as well as indirectly influences salesperson resilience via positive stress mindset (hypotheses H3b and H4b). With these findings, our study advances the literature by unpacking both individual and contextual boundary conditions in a single study of salesperson resilience. Though strain from the family has been found to negatively impact employee well-being (García-Cabrera et al., 2018) or work behavior among employees (Arslaner & Boylu, 2017) especially in a crisis such as the COVID-19 (Mahmood et al., 2021), the moderating role of family strain has not been established for the effectiveness of leader communication in general and leader crisis communication in particular on employee resilience. Our findings indicate that salespersons would develop positive stress mindset and resilience when low strain from family was coupled with high levels of leader crisis communication. The current study provides support for the role of social networks (i.e., family in our study) in the LMX perspective (Regts et al., 2019) as well as the effect of family domain on workplace attitudes and behaviors from the cross-domain perspective (Nohe et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2018).

Moreover, core beliefs challenge has hardly been examined in the marketing literature, while core beliefs challenge has been found to relate to certain forms of resilience in the general management literature (Eze et al., 2020). Our study offers an insight into core beliefs challenge as a novel contingency approach to comprehending the influence of leader communication of the crisis on salespersons’ positive stress mindset and in turn their resilience. Our study provides support for the LMX perspective in general and the resource-based LMX perspective in particular by identifying an individual boundary condition for the effect of leader crisis communication on positive stress mindset. The finding on the moderating role of core beliefs challenge further indicates that salespersons are inclined to rely more on their own resources (i.e., core beliefs challenge) than on LMX relationship built through leader crisis communication to develop positive stress mindset particularly in a crisis situation.

3.3. Practical implications

This study provides some practical implications. First, during a crisis such as the COVID-19, sales managers should establish crisis communication since this would help salespersons to develop positive stress mindset and in turn resilience. Sales managers should communicate the firm’s crisis-related policies especially ones in relation to employment and preventive measures against viral spread. They should communicate policies regarding social distancing (e.g., working from home, virtual meetings), personal hygiene for both salespersons and customers (e.g., face mask wearing, hand sanitizing), environmental hygiene (e.g., disinfecting offices and public areas), and contingency arrangements for salespersons being infected by the COVID-19 in line with the government’s guidelines. Managers should clearly communicate policies on employment such as job rotation and adjustments to working hours. They should also correct rumors about these policies, as well as regularly connect with salespersons to understand their situations, concerns, and anxiety.

Second, due to the mediation mechanism of positive stress mindset, sales managers should not only take necessary actions to enhance the communication of crisis-related policies to salespersons as earlier discussed, but also build salespersons’ positive stress mindset for crises. It is advisable that manufacturing firms foster positive stress mindset among salespersons by incorporating HR practices that concentrate on helping workers with recovery from psychological issues (Huettermann & Bruch, 2019) or promoting their positive psychology (Su, Tra, Huynh, Nguyen, & O‘Mahony, 2021).

Third, due the moderating role of core beliefs challenge, especially in a crisis, sales managers should provide training to shape core beliefs challenge among salespersons so that they can rely on this resource to develop positive stress mindset and resilience in confronting stressful situations. In addition, experiences of adapting core beliefs in the face of challenges or crises should be shared via the application of the mentor-mentee system.

Fourth, since family strain may attenuate the effect of sales managers’ crisis communication on the development of positive stress mindset and in turn resilience among salespersons, managers should closely work with and encourage salespersons to find ways to reduce or eliminate strain from family members. Salespersons should be
encouraged to care about their family and share thoughts and issues with their family members on a regular basis (Zhang, Xu, Zhang, & Liu, 2019). Such close interactions can build strong ties and harmony with their family, which may lead to less strain and more support from family members.

3.4. Limitations and paths for future research

Our study acknowledges some limitations. Though certain constructs, such as resilience, positive stress mindset, and core beliefs challenge, should be gauged through self-reports since they pertain to the psychological construct context (Conway & Lance, 2010), our findings were susceptible to CMV bias, which self-report data might induce (Podsakoff et al., 2012). By means of the marker variable approach, the interactive effect tests, and the multi-wave surveys, the CMV threat was mitigated. Future research should further alleviate CMV bias through a cross-lagged procedure (Kasl & Jones, 2003). Longitudinal cross-lagged designs or experimental designs can also address a limitation regarding the failure of time-lagged approach to draw the causality of the construct relationships (Bolander et al., 2017; Kasl & Jones, 2003).

Experience sampling methodology (ESM), a self-assessment technique that can capture individuals’ depiction of experience when it takes place within the daily life context (Heckner, Schmidt, & Cäskensmihali, 2007, p. 32), should be used to retest our research model for some reasons. This method can be utilized to examine within-person resilience as suggested by Edwards and Ashkanasy (2018). It has been used in studies of performance (Zhang, Zhang, Wang, & Zheng, 2020) and well-being (Shi, Gordon, & Tang, 2021). Additionally, as a repeated-measures design, this approach can mitigate concerns for CMV bias due to its advantage of each individual functioning as its own control (Wijewardena, Härter, & Samaratunga, 2017).

More mechanisms should be examined to expand the current research model. An extension of this research may involve unfolding other forms of social support as an antecedent of salesperson resilience than leader crisis communication. Future research should also detect the mediating path of affective processes (e.g., emotional regulation, positive affect) in addition to the cognitive process (i.e., positive stress mindset) as an influence channel of leader crisis communication in our study. This research direction is based on the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001; Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh, & Larkin, 2003), positing the role of positive emotions in broadening affective processes and thereby activating employee resilience. Further investigations should be conducted into the role of positive stress mindset and resilience as moderators for the impact of leader crisis communication on other outcomes among salespeople in the face of a crisis.

Declaration of Competing Interest

Authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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Luu Trong Tuan is currently a senior lecturer at Swinburne Business School, Swinburne University of Technology, Hawthorn, Australia. He received his master’s degree from Vietnam University, Australia and PhD degree in management from Asian Institute of Technology (AIT), Thailand. His research interests include organizational behavior, human resource management, and healthcare management in both private and public sector. Widely published his research has appeared in refereed academic journals such as Journal of Business Ethics, Public Management Review, Personnel Review, Group & Organization Management, Journal of Business Research, Knowledge Management Research & Practice, Tourism Management, International Journal of Hospitality Management, Journal of Sustainable Tourism, International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management, Marketing Intelligence & Planning, among others.