

The effects of illegitimate tasks on employee silence and voice behavior: moderated mediation model

Effects of
illegitimate
tasks on
employees

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Abstract

Purpose – Based on conservation of resources (COR) theory, this study aims to examine the impact of daily illegitimate tasks on employees' daily silence and daily voice behavior, as well as the mediating role of daily ego depletion and the moderating role of trait mindfulness.

Design/methodology/approach – Through daily diary approach, 81 employees were followed for 10 consecutive workdays. Multilevel analysis was employed to examine the hypothesized relationships.

Findings – The results showed that daily illegitimate tasks are positively related to daily silence behavior and negatively related to daily voice behavior; daily ego depletion plays a mediating role in these relationships. Trait mindfulness moderates the effect of daily illegitimate tasks on daily ego depletion and the indirect effect of daily illegitimate tasks on daily silence and daily voice.

Practical implications – Managers should be mindful of minimizing the assignment of illegitimate tasks. Additionally, it is recommended that the organization provide training courses for employees to help them reduce ego depletion. Finally, organizations should focus on fostering high levels of mindfulness among their employees.

Originality/value – This study contributes to the existing literature by investigating the immediate impact of illegitimate tasks on employee voice and silence at within-person level. By doing so, it enhances comprehension of the consequences associated with illegitimate tasks. Meanwhile, this study offers additional insights into the underlying mechanisms and boundary conditions of the effect of illegitimate tasks from a resource perspective.

Keywords Illegitimate tasks, Ego depletion, Silence, Voice, Trait mindfulness

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Illegitimate tasks are tasks that fall outside one's expectations and should not be performed (Semmer *et al.*, 2007). There are two categories of illegitimate tasks: unreasonable tasks and unnecessary tasks (Semmer *et al.*, 2015, 2019). Unreasonable tasks can be defined as tasks that fall outside the scope of one's occupational role or do not match their professional skills (Omansky *et al.*, 2016). For example, employees may be requested to take managers' children to school or experienced employees are asked to complete tasks that beginners usually do. Unnecessary tasks refer to tasks that are unnecessary or do not make any sense (Omansky *et al.*, 2016). Such tasks includes organizing documents that are unlikely to be read by anyone.

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Illegitimate tasks are a common occurrence in the workplace, with approximately one-third of daily tasks being illegitimate (Semmer *et al.*, 2010). Given that illegitimate tasks are associated with disrespect and unfairness, employees may feel insulted, leading to various issues such as a decrease in proactive serving behavior (Zhao *et al.*, 2022a), organizational citizenship behavior (Fein and McKenna, 2022) and an increase in counterproductive work behavior (Zhou *et al.*, 2018).

While previous studies have shed light on the negative outcomes associated with illegitimate tasks, there remains a gap in understanding the connection between illegitimate tasks and constructive voice and silence. The impact of illegitimate tasks on employees' voice and silence deserves more attention. On the one hand, amidst an economic recession, it is imperative for organizations to encourage their employees to provide constructive suggestions that can assist the organization in overcoming the challenges it faces (Wee and Fehr, 2021). Whereas if employees choose to withhold their ideas, it can have detrimental effects on organizations, potentially resulting in organizational failures (Morrison, 2014). By examining the relationship between them, this study will provide practical value for the intervention of employee's voice and silence. On the other hand, stressors such as perceived unfairness and disrespect have been found to be associated with employees' voice and silence (De Clercq and Pereira, 2023; Khan *et al.*, 2022). Since illegitimate tasks convey unfairness and disrespect information (Schulte-Braucks *et al.*, 2019; Semmer *et al.*, 2015), it may be potentially related to employees' voice and silence. Unfortunately, the relationships between them have not been systematically examined in previous studies (Koçak and Ünal, 2022; Zhou *et al.*, 2023).

This study builds on conservation of resources (COR) theory and introduces ego depletion to explain the connection between illegitimate tasks and voice and silence from control resource perspective. According to COR theory, job demands lead to a depletion of resources, and individuals may utilize their resources to cope with this situation (Halbesleben *et al.*, 2014; Hobfoll, 2001). Illegitimate tasks convey disrespect and violate one's expectations of their professional role, resulting in psychological strain (Semmer *et al.*, 2015). Employees need to exert self-control in order to regulate themselves, which can result in ego depletion and subsequently impact their behavior in resource regulation, such as voice and silence (Ng and Feldman, 2012; Xu *et al.*, 2015). Previous studies have taken a between-person approach, indicating that illegitimate tasks can lead to ego depletion over time and further impact work engagement (Dong and Zhang, 2022; Zong *et al.*, 2022). However, the relationship between illegitimate tasks and voice and silence, and the mediating role of ego depletion on within-person level, have not been paid enough attention. Filling this research gap is important because the COR theory emphasizes the need to study resource fluctuations (Halbesleben *et al.*, 2014). The within-person approach provides a short-term dynamic perspective on the depletion effects of illegitimate tasks. On certain days, individuals may receive an increased number of illegitimate tasks than usual, which can temporarily deplete their control resources and affect their resource conservation behavior (Schulte-Braucks *et al.*, 2019; Zhou *et al.*, 2018). Research has shown that the core variables (ego depletion, voice and silence) may vary on a daily basis (Baumeister and Vohs, 2007; Madrid *et al.*, 2015; Schmitt *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, within-person approach provides additional insights into illegitimate tasks and its consequences in daily work situations.

The COR theory suggests that individuals with more initial resources are less susceptible to resource loss (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). Trait mindfulness is often seen as a valuable personal resource since it can assist employees in managing stress and reaching their goals (Grover *et al.*, 2017; Kroon *et al.*, 2015). Individuals with high trait mindfulness tend to focus on current events and feelings, viewing them as temporary experiences. This ability allows them to separate their self-concept from these events (Glomb *et al.*, 2011). Thus, mindfulness played a crucial role in buffering the negative effects of self-concept threats (Long and Christian, 2015; Lyddy *et al.*, 2022). Illegitimate tasks convey unfairness and disrespect information which can

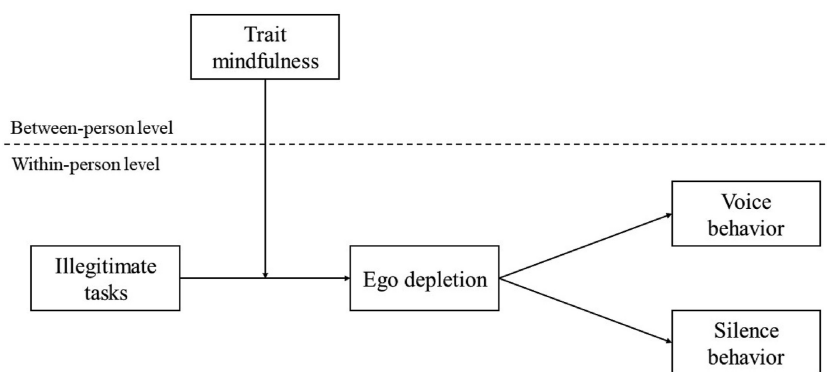
threaten one's self-concept and result in negative feelings (Semmer *et al.*, 2007). However, whether trait mindfulness can mitigate the depletion effects of daily illegitimate tasks remains unknown. This study aims to explore the moderating effect of trait mindfulness and enhance our understanding of the boundary conditions of illegitimate tasks.

This study makes several contributions to the existing literature. First, this study contributes to a systematic understanding of the relationship between illegitimate tasks and constructive voice and silence, thereby expanding the existing literature on the outcomes of illegitimate tasks. Second, based on the COR theory, this study investigated the mediating role of ego depletion and provides a resource-based perspective to explain the relationship between illegitimate tasks and silence and voice behavior. Third, by investigating the moderating role of trait mindfulness, this study not only expands the understanding of the boundary conditions of illegitimate tasks, but also enriches the principle of the initial resource effect of COR theory. Finally, daily diary approach was used to examine the short-term effects of illegitimate tasks on voice and silence through ego depletion on within-person level, which contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamic relationship between them. The conceptual model is shown in Figure 1.

Theoretical background and hypotheses development

Effects of illegitimate tasks on employee silence behavior and voice behavior

Silence behavior means intentionally hiding information from others (Dyne *et al.*, 2003; Tangirala and Ramanujam, 2008). Voice behavior refers to communicating ideas, suggestions or concerns about work, with the aim of benefiting the organization (Morrison, 2011). Although silence is related to voice (Morrison, 2014), it is a relatively independent concept (Sherf *et al.*, 2021). Employees may not frequently communicate ideas due to withholding or lack of ideas. Similarly, employees who frequently communicate ideas may deliberately withhold other problems (Sherf *et al.*, 2021). Given that voice and silence are relatively independent concepts (Sherf *et al.*, 2021), examining voice and silence at the same time will help to increase the comprehensive understanding of their relationship. From the perspective of COR theory, silence and voice represent resource-protecting behavior (Xu *et al.*, 2015) and resource-consuming behavior (Ng and Feldman, 2012), respectively. Silence protects remaining resources through withdrawal (Xu *et al.*, 2015), whereas voice requires resource investment such as time and energy. Furthermore, voice behavior means challenging the status quo, which brings additional risks to individuals, and thus voice can be regarded as a risky use of existing resources (Morrison, 2014). Based on the principle of resource conservation,



Source(s): Authors' own creation

Figure 1.
Research model

employees will take appropriate actions to protect resources when they suffer resource loss (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). Research has shown that illegitimate tasks can increase employees' destructive voice (Zhao *et al.*, 2022b). However, destructive voice emphasizes excessive criticism of organizations rather than provide constructive advice (Maynes and Podsakoff, 2014). Hence, we still have limited understanding of whether illegitimate tasks could affect constructive voice behavior. Unlike previous studies using between-person designs, this study will provide evidence of short-term effects of illegitimate tasks on employees' voice and silence on within-person level. According to COR theory, illegitimate tasks will lead to resource loss or put resources at risk of loss, and individuals tend to show more silence and less voice to protect their resources on a given day when they receive more illegitimate tasks than average days.

First, illegitimate tasks are tasks that should be done by others or are completely unnecessary (Omansky *et al.*, 2016; Semmer *et al.*, 2015). These tasks place high demands on employees, requiring them to invest more time and energy resources. This can result in a loss of resources. Employees may reduce resource investment and adopt defensive behavior to protect resources (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). In other words, employees will exhibit less voice and more silence on days when they are assigned more illegitimate tasks than usual.

Second, illegitimate tasks are often assigned by supervisors (Björk *et al.*, 2013; Semmer *et al.*, 2007), and supervisors' attitudes toward subordinates can be expressed through task assignments (Wan *et al.*, 2021). Illegitimate tasks convey information of social devaluation (Schulte-Braucks *et al.*, 2019; Semmer *et al.*, 2015), and employees feel undervalued and disrespected by their supervisors. Thus, employees' resources, such as their work positions and the support of their leaders, are at risk of potential loss. Since voice behavior challenges the status quo, employees worry about being treated as troublemakers by leaders, which will bring further resources loss such as interpersonal relationship with supervisors (Morrison, 2011; Ng and Feldman, 2012). In contrast, silence is a safe way to protect resources (Xu *et al.*, 2015). Employees will choose more silence and less voice to avoid potential resource threats when supervisors do not respect them (Khan *et al.*, 2022).

Third, employees can obtain resources, such as help from managers or coworkers, through voice behavior (Ng and Feldman, 2012). However, in the context of China's high-power distance culture, employees often show deference to individuals in positions of authority and are reluctant to challenge them (Knoll *et al.*, 2021). Thus, even if employees are aware of issues with task assignments, they are more likely to accept them rather than speak up (Lam and Xu, 2019). Previous studies using a between-person design have found that illegitimate tasks are associated with silence and destructive voice behavior (Koçak and Ünal, 2022; Zhao *et al.*, 2022b; Zhou *et al.*, 2023). However, the short-term effects of daily illegitimate tasks on daily voice and daily silence on within-person level remain unclear. Based on the discussion, this study argues that on days when employees received higher illegitimate tasks than usual days, they were more likely to be threatened by resources loss, and individuals tend to exhibit more silence and less voice to protect resources on that day. Therefore, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

- H1a.* Daily illegitimate tasks are positively associated with employees' daily silence behavior.
- H1b.* Daily illegitimate tasks are negatively associated with employees' daily voice behavior.

The mediating role of ego depletion

Ego depletion is the state of exhaustion of self-control resources (Baumeister *et al.*, 1998; Baumeister and Vohs, 2007). This study suggests that daily ego depletion mediates the

relationship between daily illegitimate tasks and daily voice and daily silence. First, COR theory suggests that individuals may utilize resources to cope with stressors (Halbesleben *et al.*, 2014; Hobfoll, 2001). Illegitimate tasks are extra duties, and employees may feel that “it is not my job” and may be reluctant to perform (Zong *et al.*, 2022). As a result, more resources are required for behavior control in order to carry out these tasks. Furthermore, when individuals are assigned illegitimate tasks that others should do or tasks that are completely unnecessary (Semmer *et al.*, 2015), they are unable to receive rewards as compensation for their efforts in completing these tasks (Omansky *et al.*, 2016; Ping *et al.*, 2021). This exacerbates employees’ ego depletion. Second, illegitimate tasks violate employees’ expectations and create cognitive conflicts and ambiguities about their work roles (Munir *et al.*, 2017); thus, they temporarily aggravate employees’ cognitive load. Individuals must mobilize resources to cope with this additional burden. Third, illegitimate tasks convey disrespect and unfairness (Ahmed *et al.*, 2018; Munir *et al.*, 2017). Employees may experience more negative emotions, such as anger and depression, on days when they received more illegitimate tasks than usual (Ahmed *et al.*, 2018; Zhou *et al.*, 2018). Individuals must mobilize resources to manage their negative emotions, which can lead to temporary ego depletion. Prior research using a between-person design suggests that employees who are assigned illegitimate tasks may experience increased ego depletion over a period (Dong and Zhang, 2022; Zong *et al.*, 2022). However, the short-term relationship between them on within-person level is largely ignored. The COR theory suggests that resources can undergo dynamic changes (Halbesleben *et al.*, 2014), and an individual’s ego depletion can fluctuate in the short term (Baumeister and Vohs, 2007; Zhan *et al.*, 2022). Based on this discussion, daily illegitimate tasks can lead to a temporary increase in ego depletion.

Daily ego depletion will lead to reduced daily voice and increased daily silence. The COR theory suggests that individuals are more concerned about resource loss than resource acquisition (Hobfoll, 1989). A resource loss spiral can occur when individuals use their self-control resources to deal with illegitimate tasks (Halbesleben *et al.*, 2014; Hobfoll, 2001). To prevent the resource loss spiral from expanding, individuals are more inclined to engage in resource conservation behavior rather than resource consumption behavior in order to protect their remaining resources (Halbesleben, 2010; Hobfoll, 1989). Ego depletion resulting from illegitimate tasks will affect individuals’ resource regulation behaviors (Baumeister and Vohs, 2007) and lead individuals to protect resources through withdrawal behaviors (Lyddy *et al.*, 2021; Trougakos *et al.*, 2015). Keeping silence is a natural and safe way to protect resources (Xu *et al.*, 2015). Whereas voice requires individuals to invest resources such as time and energy, which can further deplete their available resources (Morrison, 2014). At the same time, voice challenges the status quo, potentially damaging relationships with leaders and colleagues and posing a threat to one’s resources (LePine and Van Dyne, 1998). Therefore, while voice may bring additional resource benefits (Ng and Feldman, 2012), when an employee experiences more ego depletion than usual, he/she will pay more attention to protect the remaining resources rather than taking risks to invest in them (Hobfoll, 1989). According to COR theory, illegitimate tasks can result in changes to one’s resources, which, in turn, motivates individuals to take action to protect those resources (Halbesleben, 2010; Hobfoll, 1989). Empirical studies have confirmed that external stressors will affect voice and silence through ego depletion (Yu *et al.*, 2023; Xia *et al.*, 2020). This study will examine the relationship between them at the within-person level and propose the following hypotheses:

- H2a.* Employees’ daily ego depletion plays a mediating role in the relationship between daily illegitimate tasks and daily silence behavior.
- H2b.* Employees’ daily ego depletion plays a mediating role in the relationship between daily illegitimate tasks and daily voice behavior.

The moderating role of trait mindfulness

Trait mindfulness refers to an individual's tendency to maintain awareness and attention on the present moment (Brown and Ryan, 2003). According to COR theory, individuals with greater initial resources are less likely to experience resource loss, while those who lack resources are more vulnerable to such loss (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). As a personal resource, trait mindfulness can help employees effectively manage work stress (Grover *et al.*, 2017; Kroon *et al.*, 2015). Trait mindfulness is characterized by three features: (1) decoupling oneself from emotions and experiences, (2) decreased use of automatic mental processes and (3) nonjudgmental attentiveness to the present moment (Brown and Ryan, 2003; Glomb *et al.*, 2011). Trait mindfulness can assist individuals to separate self-concept from specific events, thereby improving cognitive flexibility and executive function (Glomb *et al.*, 2011).

This study suggests that trait mindfulness can mitigate the impact of daily illegitimate tasks on daily ego depletion. First, individuals with high trait mindfulness are able to separate themselves from negative feelings caused by illegitimate tasks. They tend to view daily illegitimate tasks from a bystander perspective, minimizing threats to their self-worth and reducing unnecessary self-protective responses (Glomb *et al.*, 2011). As a result, their self-control resource consumption is reduced on days when they experience illegitimate tasks more than usual. Second, when employees reduce their automatic response tendency, they can regulate their cognitive and emotional processes more flexibly (Glomb *et al.*, 2011; Grover *et al.*, 2017). This can effectively prevent excessive resource consumption caused by daily illegitimate tasks. Finally, individuals with high trait mindfulness have the ability to focus their attention on the present moment with a nonjudgmental attitude. This enables them to concentrate on solving current problems rather than engaging in rumination (Brown and Ryan, 2003). In contrast, employees who have low trait mindfulness may feel their self-concept is threatened by daily illegitimate task and have more negative emotions and persistent psychological activation (Sonnentag and Lischetzke, 2018). As a result, these employees need to exert more self-control resources to effectively cope with such tasks on that day. Previous research has shown that mindfulness plays a crucial role in mitigating the negative effects of stressors that threaten one's self-concept (Long and Christian, 2015; Lyddy *et al.*, 2022). This study presents the following hypothesis:

- H3.* Trait mindfulness negatively moderates the relationship between daily illegitimate tasks and daily ego depletion, such that the positive relationship is weaker for employees with high trait mindfulness.

This study further infers that trait mindfulness moderates the indirect effect of illegitimate tasks on voice and silence through ego depletion. Specifically, employees with high-level trait mindfulness are able to consistently focus on the present moment without judgment, which helps to reduce unnecessary defensive responses and develop appropriate self-regulation (Glomb *et al.*, 2011; Grover *et al.*, 2017). On days when high-trait mindfulness employees encounter more illegitimate tasks than usual, they do not need to exert as much control resources to regulate themselves. As a result, they may have a higher level of control resources. Instead of protecting resources through silence, they will invest resources through voice behavior (Ng and Feldman, 2012). In contrast, low trait mindfulness employees need to mobilize self-control resources to handle daily illegitimate tasks. This can result in increased ego depletion, leading to more silence and less voice. This study presents the following hypotheses:

- H4a.* Trait mindfulness moderates the indirect effect of daily illegitimate tasks on employees' daily silence behavior through daily ego depletion. Specifically, the positive indirect effect was weaker when the level of trait mindfulness was high.

H4b. Trait mindfulness moderates the indirect effect of daily illegitimate tasks on employees' daily voice behavior through daily ego depletion. Specifically, the negative indirect effect was weaker when the level of trait mindfulness was high.

Methods

Samples and procedure

The participants in this study were 81 MBA students from a university located in Eastern China. They are full-time employees working in various industries. The research team explains to participants the importance of the research and assures them of anonymity. Each participant was assigned an ID code for anonymous surveys. There are two types of surveys: one-time surveys and daily surveys. Participants completed one-time questionnaires one week before the daily survey began. These questionnaires collected data on trait mindfulness, proactive personality and demographics. Participants were then asked to complete a daily questionnaire for 10 consecutive workdays. All questionnaires are administered online. The participants received the questionnaire's link through social network platforms (WeChat). The participants received a daily questionnaire on illegitimate tasks at 11:00 a.m., and another questionnaire on daily ego depletion, daily voice and daily silence at 16:00 p.m. After completing data collection, we provided participants with a payment of 50 CNY. Out of the total participants, 49 were females, accounting for 60.5%. The participants had an average age of 32.95 years ($SD = 4.76$), and an average tenure in their current company of 6.33 years ($SD = 3.79$).

Measures

The scales used in this study have been previously adopted and have demonstrated good reliability and validity in Chinese samples.

Illegitimate tasks

The illegitimate task was measured using the Bern Illegitimate Task scale developed by [Semmer et al. \(2010\)](#), which exhibited good reliability in previous research. This scale contains eight items. A sample item is as follows: "This morning, do you have work tasks to take care of that you believe should be done by someone else?" All items were scored on a five-point Likert scale ranging from never (1) to frequently (5). The average Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient across 10 days was 0.92.

Ego depletion

Ego depletion was measured using the scale developed by [Twenge et al. \(2004\)](#) and applied by [Shi et al. \(2021\)](#). This scale has five items. A sample item is as follows: "Today, my mental energy is running low." All items were scored on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The average Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient across 10 days was 0.92.

Silence behavior

Employee silence was measured using the scale developed by [Tangirala and Ramanujam \(2008\)](#) and applied by [Li et al. \(2012\)](#). This scale has five items. A sample item is as follows: "Today, I said nothing to others about potential problems I noticed in my workplace." All items were scored on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The average Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient across 10 days was 0.94.

Voice behavior

Employee voice was measured using the scale adapt from [Van Dyne and LePine \(1998\)](#) and applied by [Gao et al. \(2011\)](#) and [Schmitt et al. \(2017\)](#). This scale has three items. A sample item is as follows: "Today, I developed and made recommendations concerning issues that affect my work group." All items were scored on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The average Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient across 10 days was 0.90.

Trait mindfulness

Mindfulness was assessed using the 15-item Mindful Attention and Awareness Scale developed by [Brown and Ryan \(2003\)](#) and applied by [Chen et al. \(2021\)](#). A sample item is as follows: "I find it difficult to stay focused on what's happening in the present." All items were scored on a six-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6). Items were coded in reverse, with higher scores indicating greater trait mindfulness. The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was 0.94.

Control variables

In line with previous studies ([Madrid et al., 2015](#); [Morrison, 2011](#)), demographic variables such as gender, age and organizational tenure were include in the model. Age and organizational tenure were measured in years, while gender was coded as 0 for males and 1 for females. Since proactive personality is associated with employee voice and silence ([Guenther et al., 2017](#); [Wijaya, 2019](#)), we controlled for proactive personality at the between-person level using a shortened version of the Proactive Personality Scale ([Seibert et al., 1999](#)). We compared the model with and without control variables and found that adding control variables did not significantly impact the results. To mitigate potential bias, we followed Becker's recommendations and excluded these variables from the final model ([Becker, 2005](#)).

Analytic strategy

The data have a nested structure. The discriminant validity was examined through multilevel confirmatory factor analyses using Mplus 7.4. Before conducting hypothesis testing, the daily illegitimate tasks were person-mean centered to remove the influence of between-person variance. The trait mindfulness were grand-mean centered. The study utilized Mplus 7.4 to conduct multilevel analyses and test the hypothesis. Specifically, we specified the relationship between illegitimate tasks and ego depletion as random slope, while all other paths at the within-person level were fixed. Then, we specified trait mindfulness as cross-level predictor of the random slope between illegitimate tasks and ego depletion. Additionally, the Monte Carlo method (20,000 replications) was utilized to estimate the confidence intervals of the mediation and moderated mediation effects ([Preacher et al., 2010](#)).

Results*Discrimination test*

Multilevel confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to test whether there was good discrimination between variables. We constructed one hypothesized model (five-factor model) and three alternative models (TM,IT,ED,SB + VB; TM,IT + ED,SB + VB; TM,IT + ED + SB + VB). The hypothesized model was compared to alternative models. The results indicated that the hypothesized model (five-factor model) had the best fit ($\chi^2(767) = 1559.59$, $\chi^2/df = 2.03$, $p < 0.001$, $CFI = 0.91$, $TLI = 0.90$, $RMSEA = 0.04$, $SRMR_{within} = 0.04$) and is better than the alternative models ($361.39 \leq \Delta\chi^2 \leq 2442.81$, $p < 0.001$). The results indicate a good discriminant validity among the variables.

Descriptive analysis

We initially conducted a null model to test the percentage of within-person variance. The results showed that illegitimate tasks, ego depletion, silence and voice had significant differences at the daily level, and the within-person variance accounted for 31.06%–41.57% of the total variance. The results indicated that the data can be analyzed using a multilevel model.

The means, standard deviations and correlation coefficients of all variables are shown in Table 1.

Hypothesis test

The multilevel analysis was used to test the hypothesis. The results showed that daily illegitimate tasks positively related to daily silence behavior ($\gamma = 0.22, p < 0.001$) and negatively related to daily voice behavior ($\gamma = -0.15, p < 0.05$) – see Table 2; Hypotheses 1a and 1b were supported.

Table 2 shows that illegitimate tasks are positively related to ego depletion ($\gamma = 0.33, p < 0.001$). Ego depletion is positively related to silence ($\gamma = 0.46, p < 0.001$) and negatively related to voice ($\gamma = -0.44, p < 0.001$). To test the confidence interval of the indirect effects, the Monte Carlo program (replication = 20,000) recommended by Preacher *et al.* (2010) was used to calculate the mediating effect and its 95% confidence intervals. The results showed

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
<i>Within-person</i>						
1. IT	2.59	1.02				
2. ED	2.34	1.12	0.48**			
3. SB	2.42	1.16	0.44**	0.55**		
4. VB	3.54	1.21	-0.29**	-0.41**	-0.60**	
<i>Between-person</i>						
5. TM	4.09	1.00	-0.61**	-0.72**	-0.65**	0.56**

Note(s): $N_{\text{within-person}} = 810, N_{\text{between-person}} = 81$. IT = illegitimate task, ED = ego depletion, SB = silence behavior, VB = voice behavior, TM = trait mindfulness. ** $p < 0.01, *p < 0.05$

Source(s): Authors' own creation

Table 1.
Means, standard
deviations and
correlations among
variables

	Ego depletion			Silence			Voice		
	γ	SE	<i>t</i>	γ	SE	<i>t</i>	γ	SE	<i>t</i>
<i>Between-person level</i>									
TM	-0.65**	0.10	-6.71						
<i>Within-person level</i>									
IT	0.33**	0.06	5.48	0.22**	0.05	4.89	-0.15*	0.07	-2.24
ED				0.46**	0.05	8.55	-0.44**	0.08	-5.88
<i>Cross-level predictor</i>									
IT × TM	-0.25**	0.07	-3.54						
Pseudo R^2	0.52			0.13			0.10		

Note(s): $N_{\text{within-person}} = 810, N_{\text{between-person}} = 81$. IT = illegitimate task, ED = ego depletion, TM = trait mindfulness. ** $p < 0.01, *p < 0.05$

Source(s): Authors' own creation

Table 2.
Results of multilevel
analysis

that the indirect effects of illegitimate tasks on silence and voice through ego depletion were 0.15 (95% CI [0.05, 0.18]) and -0.15 (95% CI [-0.24, -0.07]). In summary, the results support [Hypotheses 2a](#) and [2b](#). Trait mindfulness negatively moderates the relationship between illegitimate tasks and ego depletion ($\gamma = -0.25, p < 0.001$), which indicate that trait mindfulness plays a moderating role in the relationship between illegitimate tasks and ego depletion. [H3](#) was supported.

The patterns of the moderating effect are plotted in [Figure 2](#), which illustrates the simple slopes of trait mindfulness at high (+1 SD) and low (-1 SD) levels. The simple slope test showed that the illegitimate task had a significant positive relationship with ego depletion when trait mindfulness was low ($\gamma = 0.58, t = 6.24, p < 0.001$), but the relationship was not significant when trait mindfulness was high ($\gamma = 0.09, t = 0.97, ns$). Finally, the moderated mediation effect was significant [effect_{silence} = -0.12, 95% CI (-0.18, -0.05); effect_{voice} = 0.11, 95% CI (0.04, 0.19)]. The results support [Hypotheses 4a](#) and [4b](#).

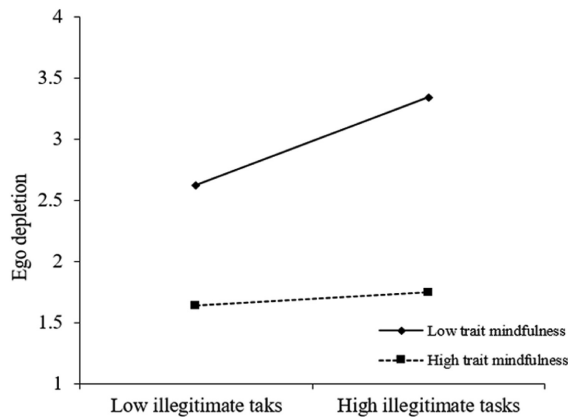
Discussion

Conclusion

Drawing on COR theory, This study investigated how and when daily illegitimate tasks affect daily voice and daily silence. The results showed that illegitimate tasks were positively related to silence behavior, and negatively related to voice behavior. Ego depletion mediates the relationship between them, and trait mindfulness moderates the indirect effect of illegitimate tasks on silence and voice through ego depletion. This study expands the understanding of the consequences of illegitimate tasks and offers a dynamic perspective on the effects of illegitimate tasks.

Theoretical implications

The present study makes several theoretical contributions to the existing literature. First, this study enriches the literature on illegitimate tasks by identifying employees' daily constructive voice and silence as an important outcome of daily illegitimate tasks. [Zhao et al. \(2022b\)](#) found that illegitimate tasks positively related to employees' destructive voice; however, destructive voice is excessive criticism of the organization rather than providing constructive advice ([Maynes and Podsakoff, 2014](#)). In addition, recently researchers have found that illegitimate tasks are associated with employee's silence ([Koçak and Ünal, 2022](#);



Source(s): Authors' own creation

Figure 2.
The moderating effect of trait mindfulness on the relationship between illegitimate task and ego depletion

Zhou *et al.*, 2023). We still lack a comprehensive understanding of the connection between illegitimate tasks and silence and voice. In addition, previous studies only focused on the long-term effects of illegitimate tasks over a period of time (Koçak and Ünal, 2022; Zhao *et al.*, 2022b; Zhou *et al.*, 2023), neglecting to consider the short-term effect of daily illegitimate tasks on daily voice and daily silence on within-person level. In fact, illegitimate tasks and voice and silence may have daily fluctuations (Madrid *et al.*, 2015; Schulte-Braucks *et al.*, 2019; Zhou *et al.*, 2018). Researchers suggest using a dynamic approach to test the COR theory in order to better understand the dynamic relationships between variables (Halbesleben *et al.*, 2014). The daily diary method will provide new insights into the short-term dynamic relationships between illegitimate tasks and employee voice and silence. Finally, previous studies have primarily focused on the contextual factors of voice and silence from the perspective of leadership style and organizational culture, while neglecting the influence of task design factors (Morrison, 2011, 2014). In fact, task design plays a critical role in employee work behavior (Oldham and Fried, 2016). This study also contributes to the existing literature on the antecedents of voice and silence.

Second, this study offers a new perspective (i.e. control resource status) to understand how daily illegitimate tasks affect employees' daily silence and voice behavior. Previous studies have examined the mechanism of illegitimate tasks from cognition or emotion perspective (Ding and Kuvaas, 2022; Zhao *et al.*, 2022b). This study goes beyond the "cognition and emotion" framework and expands our understanding of the mediating mechanism of illegitimate tasks from the perspective of control resource status. Additionally, this study establishes a dynamic mechanism linking daily illegitimate tasks and daily voice and daily silence. The COR theory highlights the dynamic nature of resources (Halbesleben *et al.*, 2014); on days when employees received higher illegitimate tasks than usual days, they must exert self-control to regulate themselves, which can lead to ego depletion on that day. In turn, ego-depleted employees are more likely to exhibit more silence and less voice to conserve their resources (Baumeister *et al.*, 1998; Hobfoll, 1989). Previous studies have only investigated the long-term effects of illegitimate tasks on ego depletion at the between-person level (Dong and Zhang, 2022; Zong *et al.*, 2022). However, the short-term effects of illegitimate tasks on ego depletion and its subsequent effects at the within-person level remain unknown. This study contributes to the understanding of changes in resource dynamics as proposed by COR theory.

Third, this study expands our understanding of the boundary conditions of illegitimate tasks by examining the moderating role of trait mindfulness. Unlike previous studies that focused on individual factors (Ding and Kuvaas, 2022; Schulte-Braucks *et al.*, 2019), trait mindfulness reflects one's ability to regulate attention (Brown and Ryan, 2003). There is evidence that mindfulness can mitigate the negative effects of self-concept threat (Long and Christian, 2015; Lyddy *et al.*, 2022). This study demonstrates that trait mindfulness can mitigate the depleting effects of daily illegitimate tasks. Researchers have suggested the need for additional research on the individual factor boundary conditions of illegitimate tasks (Schulte-Braucks *et al.*, 2019; Semmer *et al.*, 2019). This study answers the researchers' calling by highlighting the moderating role of trait mindfulness. This study confirms the initial resource effect emphasized by COR theory by introducing trait mindfulness. It also confirms that trait mindfulness is a personal resource that benefits employees.

Practical implications

This study has the following practical contributions. The results showed that daily illegitimate tasks negatively related to daily voice and positively related to daily silence. Thus, it is critical for managers to identify and eliminate illegitimate tasks in the workplace. First, managers should strengthen communication with employees, which can help to

establish a shared understanding of illegitimate tasks between supervisors and subordinates (Meier and Semmer, 2018), and at the same time it also helps managers to understand what are the tasks that employees may not expect. Second, organizations should strengthen the training of managers. Managers should be aware of the risks associated with assigning illegitimate tasks and should minimize them in the workplace. Even though it may not be possible to completely avoid it, supervisors should provide an explanation or show appreciation immediately to prevent serious consequences (Apostel *et al.*, 2018).

Ego depletion plays a mediating role in the relationship between illegitimate tasks and silence and voice behavior. Organizations should focus on the adverse effects of ego depletion and implement effective interventions to alleviate employees' ego depletion. Organizations should provide training courses to help employees improve their cognitive and emotional regulation skills, thereby reducing the depletion of self-control resources. In addition, managers should also be aware of their employees' status and promptly reward them to foster positive emotions and aid in their recovery from ego depletion (Baumeister and Vohs, 2007; Tice *et al.*, 2007).

Individuals with high trait mindfulness can mitigate the adverse effect of daily illegitimate tasks. Research has found that trait mindfulness can help individuals cope with workplace stressors (Glomb *et al.*, 2011). Managers should prioritize candidates with high trait mindfulness when recruiting. In addition, managers should be mindful of the fact that illegitimate tasks can have stronger negative effects on individuals with low trait mindfulness. Therefore, they should minimize the assignment of illegitimate tasks to such individuals. Furthermore, previous studies have shown that mindfulness training can alter trait mindfulness (Kiken *et al.*, 2015). Managers should consider providing long-term mindfulness training, such as mindfulness-based stress reduction courses, to help employees establish stable mindfulness traits.

Limitations and future research

Despite the aforementioned contributions, there are limitations to this study. First, in terms of method, although our study measured daily variables at two time points, it is still not possible to make firm inferences about their causal relationship; thus, experiment can be used in future studies to increase the reliability of causal inferences. In addition, illegitimate tasks may have long deadlines, which will lead to ego depletion more than one day. However, this study can only demonstrate the short-term effects of ego depletion within one day. Future studies could consider sampling on a weekly basis or using event-based sampling to more accurately capture the temporal characteristics of ego depletion caused by illegitimate tasks.

Second, the samples in this study were collected from a Chinese cultural context, where employees may have a higher level of power distance orientation and be more obedient to the organization or leader's directives (Knoll *et al.*, 2021). An employee's increased acceptance of illegitimate tasks can result in a diminished effect. Future research could compare employees' response to illegitimate tasks across cultures to gain more insight into the effects of such tasks. In addition, the sample for this study was limited to MBA students from one university, which restricts the theoretical contribution and generalizability of our findings. Future research should include a larger sample size, including students from multiple universities or employees from various work contexts, in order to validate the conclusions.

Finally, this study did not differentiate between promotive voice and prohibitive voice (Liang *et al.*, 2012), missing an opportunity to further discuss the relationship between illegitimate tasks and voice. Whether illegitimate tasks will result in employees expressing more concerns about work problems (prohibitive voice), and fewer constructive ideas and suggestions (promotive voice), is a topic that deserves further exploration. In addition, the current study primarily focused on the adverse effects of illegitimate tasks on individuals and organizations. A study proposed that illegitimate tasks are positively related to job crafting

(Mäkikangas *et al.*, 2021). Employees can also cope with the negative effects of illegitimate tasks by optimizing their job demands. Therefore, it would be interesting to investigate if illegitimate tasks have the potential to elicit positive work behavior among employees.

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