



RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE ROLE OF MESSAGE-SENDING SKILLS IN LISTENING AND FEEDBACK: EVIDENCE FROM A MEDIATION ANALYSIS IN THE RETAIL INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

Managerial communication is widely acknowledged as a cornerstone of organisational effectiveness, with listening, message-sending, and feedback skills forming some of its essential components. Yet, the precise role of message-sending skills in this triadic relationship remains contested. Earlier evidence across manufacturing and service industries highlighted message-sending as important but effective primarily when accompanied by the ability to deal with interference. More recently, in the manufacturing sector, message-sending did not independently mediate the link between listening and feedback, surfacing only in combination with interference-handling skills. Against this backdrop, the present study examines the retail industry, revealing that message-sending skills do mediate the relationship between listening and feedback, even in the absence of interference management. Using survey data from 289 retail employees, structural equation modelling was used to test the hypothesised mediation model. The results confirm a significant mediating role for message-sending, underscoring the context-specific nature of communication competencies. The study advances understanding of communication competence by demonstrating that the influence of message-sending varies across industries. The findings highlight the importance of communication training that is tailored to industry-specific dynamics, particularly in customer-facing sectors such as retail.

KEYWORDS

Managerial competencies, Communication process, Listening skills, Feedback skills, Message-sending skills, Structural equation modelling, Mediation model, Retail industry

1. INTRODUCTION

Managerial communication continues to serve as a cornerstone of organisational effectiveness, particularly in industries where rapid decision-making and customer interaction define competitiveness (Brandt, 2021; Ibdunni, Ogundana and Olokundun, 2024). Within such environments, communication is not merely a technical exercise but a strategic competence that shapes how managers influence, align, and sustain performance outcomes. Prior research has consistently highlighted the centrality of communication skills in enabling managers to navigate complex organisational landscapes, yet empirical evidence on the relative importance of specific skills remains fragmented (Crawford, Hofmeyr and Price, 2015; Qian, Song and Wang, 2017; Velu and Mimoza, 2017; Luke and Heyns, 2019; Hitchcock, 2020; Longweni and Mdaka, 2023).

In earlier work, it was demonstrated that managers often overestimate the adequacy of message-sending skills in achieving communication effectiveness. While the ability to transmit information with clarity and precision is valuable, findings revealed that without an accompanying capacity to address interference, ranging from distractions to contextual distortions, the presumed effectiveness of such skills may become misleading (Longweni and Kroon, 2016). In this regard, message-sending can represent a red herring: seemingly vital, yet incomplete when not integrated with other elements of the communication process.

Subsequent inquiry sought to clarify the interplay between communication skills by modelling the relationships between listening, feedback, and message-sending (Longweni and Mdaka, 2024b).

Surprisingly, results indicated that message-sending did not significantly mediate the association between listening and feedback, suggesting that managers' ability to construct and deliver messages may not meaningfully enhance the feedback loop if listening is deficient. These findings underscored the primacy of listening as the foundation of managerial communication, with feedback being dependent on the extent to which messages are first received and interpreted accurately.

Taken together, these studies point to an unresolved contradiction: while message-sending skills appear indispensable in certain contexts, their role may be less pronounced when communication is conceptualised as a reciprocal cycle rooted in listening and feedback. Additionally, it seems that the role of message-sending skills only contributes to the effectiveness of communication competencies in the presence of the ability to deal with interference. Nonetheless, message-sending skills are crucial for managers in any industry. Such tensions highlight a gap in understanding the conditions under which message-sending skills contribute in the absence of the ability to deal with interference.

Against this backdrop, the present study focuses on the retail industry, a sector characterised by high levels of interaction, rapid response demands, and an acute need for communication clarity across hierarchies. In this context, the researchers examine whether message-sending skills mediate the relationship between listening and feedback, thereby advancing the body of knowledge on communication skills by contextualising their interdependence. Specifically, the study addresses the question: Is the mediating role of message-sending skills in the listening-feedback relationship context-specific? By situating the analysis within retail management, this article extends scholarly debate on

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communication competencies and contributes empirical evidence on how message-sending may serve as a catalyst for effective feedback when anchored in active listening.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The communication process

Communication encompasses the transmission, interpretation, and exchange of information. Managers who excel at conveying messages are successful in informing, persuading, instructing, and motivating their teams (van Vuuren, Henrico and van Staden, 2015; Qian et al., 2019). Effective message delivery integrates both verbal and non-verbal communication, often amidst environments fraught with distractions. Communication is the mechanism through which ideas, values, information, opinions, thoughts, instructions, and plans are exchanged and comprehended by two or more individuals (De Stobbeleir, Ashford and Buyens, 2017). In a business context, these individuals typically include managers, subordinates, colleagues (or peers), or external stakeholders. Generally, this process aims to inform, inspire, and/or influence behaviour (Qian, Lin and Chen, 2012; Longweni and Kroon, 2018).

Listening represents a cognitive process in which an individual actively acquires, perceives, interprets, assesses, and responds to information conveyed through verbal and non-verbal messages (Castleberry and David Shepherd, 1993; Dobbelaer et al., 2013). Strong listening skills between managers and their subordinates have been associated with enhanced task performance, improved interpersonal dynamics, and the long-term viability of businesses (Itani et al., 2019; Kluger and Itzchakov, 2022). The paramount objective of effective listening is to grasp the content of the message, its intended meaning, and the emotions behind the conveyed information (Du and Man, 2022).

Feedback is a communication capability employed by managers to provide performance evaluation information to their subordinates (Dai, De Meuse and Peterson, 2010; Gingioveanu Lupulescu and Zamfir, 2023). However, feedback can also serve as a means to verify whether the original message was understood during the communication exchange (Jones and George, 2013). Furthermore, managers utilize feedback to evaluate and measure the performance of peers and subordinates against established criteria, standards, and norms (Daft and Marcic, 2014). The greater the experience of the feedback provider, the more significant the impact of the feedback on the receiver's future actions. Its significance lies in its ultimate aim of fostering growth, enhancing productivity, and facilitating optimal goal achievement (Kesebir et al., 2022). A collaborative communication culture within the business can bridge the gap between managers and their subordinates (particularly in retailing). Naturally, the divide between current subordinate behaviour and exemplary behaviour is narrowed through managers' feedback-giving actions (Jones and George, 2013; Biswas and Rakshit, 2022). Despite the recognized importance of feedback skills, both managers and employees frequently shy away from engaging in it (Song et al., 2017). Managers are encouraged to concentrate on predefined standards when offering feedback to their subordinates, as this is directed towards fostering optimal and consistent performance (Kakkar and Vohra, 2021).

Managers' message delivery skills follow a three-step framework (Lynn, 1976). First, they determine the most suitable medium for conveying the information, taking into account their preferences and the content of the message. Second, they arrange the information in the most fitting manner according to the recipient of the message. Finally, they express neutrality, approval, and disappointment regarding subordinates' performance (Hayah, 2022). In simple terms, message delivery skills refer to managers' capacity to articulate their thoughts through verbal and non-verbal communication (van Vuuren, Henrico and van Staden, 2015).

2.2. Communication in Retail

The retail industry provides a unique setting to revisit the mediating role of message-sending skills. Retail managers operate in dynamic environments characterised by high levels of interpersonal interaction, rapid decision-making, and customer-facing responsibilities (Goldberg and Gouws, 2023; Mashaba and Mdaka, 2024). In such contexts, clear and persuasive message delivery may play a heightened role in bridging the link between listening and feedback. Unlike more bureaucratic or formal organisational settings, retail communication requires immediacy, adaptability, and clarity across hierarchical levels (Sethna and Blythe, 2019).

By exploring message-sending skills as a mediator within the retail industry, this study contributes to the refinement of communication theory. It responds to conflicting evidence from prior work, advancing the

argument that the role of message-sending is not universal but rather contingent on industry characteristics and communication demands (Longweni and Kroon, 2016; Longweni and Mdaka, 2024b).

2.3. Managerial Communication as a Strategic Competence

Communication has long been acknowledged as a fundamental managerial skill, shaping both organisational outcomes and individual effectiveness (Keyton, 2017; Longweni and Mdaka, 2022). In business contexts, communication extends beyond transactional information exchange and is increasingly regarded as a strategic resource that enhances coordination, leadership, and decision-making (Downs and Adrian, 2012; Clampitt, 2017). Effective communication enables managers to align employee efforts with organisational goals, build trust, and create conditions for collaboration, particularly in service-intensive environments such as retail (Siegfried and Quankun, 2022).

2.4. Listening as the Cornerstone of Managerial Communication

Among the diverse communication competencies, listening is consistently identified as the most critical (Brownell, 2017; Longweni and Kroon, 2018; Kluger and Itzchakov, 2022). Listening not only facilitates understanding but also provides the foundation upon which feedback and message-sending processes operate. Research suggests that when managers listen actively, subordinates are more likely to engage openly, fostering a two-way communication climate that improves problem-solving and innovation (Ashford et al., 2003; Madlock, 2008; Qian, Lin and Chen, 2012). Consequently, listening forms the entry point to effective managerial communication cycles, which then expands to message formulation and feedback delivery (Qian et al., 2019).

2.5. Feedback and the Role of Reciprocity

Feedback constitutes the evaluative component of managerial communication, providing employees with guidance, reinforcement, or redirection (Keyton, 2017; Kesebir et al., 2022). During the feedback stage of the communication process, the response may also include affirming that the initial message was understood, rephrasing the original message to guarantee correct interpretation, or asking for further details (Jones and George, 2013). Both managers and employees provide and request feedback with the goal of confirming, supplementing, modifying, or reorganising the information received (Longweni and Mdaka, 2024b). Feedback allows subordinates to assess whether they have effectively communicated their message (Longweni and Kroon, 2018). The effectiveness of feedback depends on both accuracy and relational sensitivity, making it essential for sustaining performance and morale (van Vuuren et al., 2015). However, the quality of feedback is significantly influenced by prior listening. Without adequate listening, managers risk misdiagnosing issues, resulting in feedback that is either irrelevant or counterproductive (Qian et al., 2019). Thus, listening and feedback should be understood as mutually reinforcing processes.

2.6. Message-Sending Skills: Mediator or Red Herring?

Despite the prominence of listening and feedback, managers frequently overemphasise message-sending skills, believing that clear articulation alone ensures effective communication (Brandt and Donohue, 2022). Prior analysis argued analysis argued that while message-sending enhances clarity, it may function as a red herring if managers neglect the contextual interference that undermines message delivery (Longweni and Kroon, 2016). The ability to manage distractions, cultural noise, or environmental barriers proved equally important in determining whether messages were actually received and acted upon.

Later, an empirical inquiry tested a multiple mediation model examining the relationship between listening and feedback through message-sending skills in manufacturing by Longweni and Mdaka (2024b). Contrary to expectations, results revealed no significant mediation effect of message-sending skills in the relationship between listening and feedback skills. The findings suggested that without strong listening competencies, the value of message-sending diminishes, since feedback ultimately depends on how well managers interpret and process subordinate input. Notably, this is in the context of the manufacturing industry, where the ability to deal with interference was also present. This raised questions about whether the utility of message-sending skills is context-dependent, rather than universally applicable.

Based on the above background, these are the hypotheses of the current study:

- H₀: Message-sending skills do not mediate the relationship between listening and feedback amongst participants in the retail industry.
- H₁: Message-sending skills positively mediate the relationship

between listening and feedback amongst participants in the retail industry.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional research design, suitable for examining structural relationships among communication variables within a single point in time (Burns et al., 2017). A survey-based approach was used to capture managers' self-reported levels of listening, message-sending, and feedback skills. This design builds on prior work (Longweni and Mdaka, 2024b), which applied mediation analysis to communication competencies, but is extended here by situating the investigation in the retail industry. The design was chosen because it allows the simultaneous estimation of both direct and indirect effects between constructs, thus testing the mediating role of message-sending skills in a theoretically rigorous manner.

3.2. Population and Sampling

The population consisted of subordinates employed in retail organisations across South Africa. The target population consisted of respondents with at least a Grade 12 qualification. The retail industry was purposively selected owing to its reliance on real-time communication and high interpersonal interaction. A nonprobability, convenience sampling method was followed (Struwig and Stead, 2007). Twenty trained fieldworkers were used to distribute the self-administered questionnaires and collect them afterwards. The fieldworkers were BCom honours students in the field of Business Management who had completed an undergraduate module in marketing research. A total of 289 valid responses were retained after screening for completeness. This sample size exceeds the minimum requirement for mediation modelling using structural equation modelling (SEM), which generally recommends at least 200 participants (Kline, 2016).

3.3. Measurement Instruments

All constructs were measured using validated scales adapted from prior studies on managerial communication research (van Vuuren et al., 2015; Longweni and Kroon, 2016; Longweni and Kroon 2018; Longweni and Mdaka, 2024b). Listening skills were adapted using a seven-item scale capturing attentive and empathetic listening behaviours. Message-sending skills were adapted using a four-item scale evaluating clarity, persuasiveness, and structuring of verbal messages. Feedback skills were adapted using a six-item scale focusing on the provision of constructive, timely, and actionable feedback. Items were measured on a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

3.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis was carried out through an extensive analytical approach supported by statistical software, namely SPSS 27.0 and AMOS 27.0. This combination of tools made it easier to run multiple regression analyses, which were designed to elucidate the complicated interactions between the independent variables, the mediator, and the dependent variable within the study's framework (Struwig and Stead, 2007). To properly investigate the mediation effects, the study design used the bootstrapping approach published by (Preacher and Hayes, 2008). This approach involved generating 5,000 bootstrapped samples from the dataset. Bootstrapping, a nonparametric statistical approach, was used to repeatedly resample the data, which increased the reliability of the studies.

The next step of the analysis, particularly pertinent in the context of multiple mediations, included calculating indirect effects to establish a thorough sampling distribution. These indirect effects underwent rigorous significance testing, employing a 95% confidence interval. The significance testing procedure, vital for determining the existence of mediation. Specifically, mediation was concluded within the model if the tests for indirect effects returned statistically significant results (Burns et al., 2017). This methodological accuracy ensures the reliability and validity of the results obtained from the analytical procedures used on the dataset.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

Participants provided informed consent prior to completing the survey. No personal identifiers were collected, and data were stored securely in compliance with institutional ethical guidelines. Respondents were allowed to withdraw at any stage without penalty.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Demographic profile of participants

A total of 289 valid responses were received from the sample. 112 (38.8%) were male, while 177 (61.2%) were female.

Table 1: Demographic profile of respondents			
Gender	Business Size	Total (N)	Percentage (%)
Male	Small business	57	19.7
	Medium business	46	15.9
	Large business	9	3.1
Total Male		112	38.8
Female	Small business	82	28.4
	Medium business	86	29.7
	Large business	9	3.1
Total Female		177	61.2

Source: Own Compilation from data

From Table 1 it is apparent that there were 112 male respondents, of which 19.7% (n=57) were from small businesses employing less than 50 people, 15.9% (n=90) were from medium-sized businesses employing between 50 and 200 people, while only 3.1% (n=9) were in large businesses employing more than 200 people. From the 177 female respondents, 28.4% (n = 82) were from small businesses employing fewer than 50 people, while 29.7% (n = 86) were from medium-sized businesses with between 50 and 200 employees. A further 3.1% (n = 9) of the female respondents were employed in large businesses with more than 200 employees.

Additionally, 61.9% (n=179) of respondents have only obtained matric (grade 12), while 31.8% (n=92) and then 6.2% (n=18) of respondents have a diploma/degree and post-graduate qualification, respectively. Within each business, irrespective of size, respondents comprised of the following departments, namely Marketing and Sales (35.6%; n=103) Customer Relations (25.3%; n=73), Operations and production (11.3%; n=33), Administration (9%; n=26), Finance (8.3%; n=24), Human Resources (5.5%; n=16%), information technology (1%; n=3) and others (3.8%; n=11).

4.2. Construct descriptives

Respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which they agree with the questions related to each construct. The questions were asked on a 5-point Likert-scale. The overall mean scores for message sending skills (3.63), listening (3.52) and feedback (3.65) were positive and above average. As such, respondents generally agreed with the items within each construct.

Table 2: Descriptors of constructs			
CONSTRUCT	Mean	Std. Dev.	Variance
Message-sending skills	3.63	0.855	0.732
Feedback	3.65	0.751	0.565
Listening	3.52	0.907	0.824

Source: Own Compilation from data

4.3. Reliability and validity

Cronbach's Alpha and Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) were calculated to confirm the reliability of the scale and to assess whether the measurement model and the overall structural model fit the data.

Cronbach's alpha coefficients equal to or exceeding 0.80 indicate a high level of reliability, whereas a Cronbach's alpha coefficient lower than 0.60 indicates poor reliability. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated to determine the internal consistency of the items of the scales measuring listening, feedback and message sending skills. The reliability of all the measurement scales used is reported in Table 3.

Table 3: Cronbach's alpha coefficients and inter-item correlations

CONSTRUCT	ITEMS	CRONBACH'S ALPHA COEFFICIENTS
Listening	8	0.889
Feedback	6	0.805
Message sending skills	4	0.712

Source: Own Compilation from data

Table 3 indicates that Cronbach's alpha coefficients for each factor are larger than 0.70. Therefore, all the items are internally consistent and reliable in adequately measuring listening skills ($\alpha = 0.889$), message-sending skills ($\alpha = 0.712$) and feedback skills ($\alpha = 0.804$).

Table 4: Validity Analysis

	CR	AVE	MSV	MaxR(H)	Feedback	Message Sending	Listening
Feedback	0,801	0,404	0,577	0,808	0,636		
Message Sending	0,741	0,418	0,657	0,747	0,760***	0,647	
Listening	0,872	0,495	0,657	0,876	0,729***	0,811***	0,703

Source: Own compilation

From Table 4 convergent validity was established as all CR values are above the required threshold of 0.7. Seminal authors Hair et al., (2010) established that convergent validity is established when CR values corresponding to a latent construct exceed its respective AVE. Additionally, Fornell and Larcker (1981) evinced that if AVE is less than 0.5, but composite reliability is higher than 0.6, the convergent validity of the construct is still adequate. Based on this criterion, the convergent validity of all the latent constructs is confirmed. All measures have psychometric quality and reliably measure their respective constructs.

Discriminant validity is established when the square root of the AVE of each latent construct is greater than the construct's highest correlation with other constructs in the model or through the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) test. The heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) method checks the degree to which the latent variables are distinctly different. Discriminant validity is established when an HTMT value between two latent constructs is less than 0.85. This method is proven to have a high sensitivity over the traditional methods, such as the square root of AVE, in detecting discriminant validity problems (Rasoolimanesh, 2022). Table 5 provides the results of the HTMT test.

Table 5: HTMT analysis of validity

	Listening	Message Sending	Feedback
Listening			
Message Sending	0,833		
Feedback	0,727	0,765	

Source: Own compilation

The HTMT values of all constructs are below the conservative threshold of 0.85, confirming that the latent constructs are distinctly different. Therefore, based on the HTMT validity test, the discriminant validity of all the latent constructs is also confirmed.

4.5. Hypothesis tests

The null and alternate hypotheses for this study are:

The measurement model was analysed using covariance-based modelling in AMOS, maximum likelihood estimation and modification indices. Assessing how well the model fits the data, the CFI > 0.90, TLI > 0.90, SRMR < 0.08 and RMSEA < 0.08 thresholds must be attained. The fit statistics of the measurement model revealed that a relatively good model fit was achieved. The fit index values of CFI (0.924), IFI (0.925) and TLI (0.909) were well above the cut-off point of 0.90, and RMSEA (0.068) and SRMR (0.052) were less than the liberal cut-off of 0.08, with 90% confidence lower limit of 0.05 and upper limit of 0.07. Further, the CMIN/df value was found below the conservative threshold of 3 (2,357), demonstrating that the measurement model fits the data well. Once the model fit was established, validity tests were conducted to determine the accuracy of the measurement model.

H₀: Message-sending skills do not mediate the relationship between managers' listening and feedback based on participants' perceptions in the retail industry.

H₁: Message-sending skills positively mediate the relationship between listening and feedback amongst participants in the retail industry.

To conduct hypothesis testing, structural equation modelling was used. Firstly, the main direct relationship was tested, with listening as the independent variable and feedback as the dependent variable to construct the structural equation model. The model fit test for the direct relationship meets discussed in the above sections ($\chi^2/df = 2.390$, CFI = .944, TLI = .929, IFI = .944 and RMSEA = 0.068). The main direct effect test results confirm that a positive relationship between listening and feedback exists ($\beta = 0.732$, $p < 0.001$). Lastly, message-sending skills are added to the model as the mediator of the relationship between listening and feedback. Before testing the hypothesis, the model fit of the mediated relationship was tested. Table 6 indicates the results of the model fit tests, showing that an acceptable fit was found.

Table 6: Model fit indices of hypothesis relationships

Model-fit	Model 1	Model 2 (Mediation)
CMIN/DF (>5)	2.390	2.357
SRMR (>0.080)	0.048	0.052
CFI (<0.900)	0.944	0.924
RMSEA (>0.080)	0.068	0.068

Source: Own compilation

The bootstrapping was used to repeat the sampling 5,000 times in order to test the mediating effect of message sending skills (H₁). The mediating effect of message sending skills was 0.399, with 95% confidence interval [0.139, 0.523]. Therefore, the alternative hypothesis stating message sending skills positively mediates the relationship between listening and feedback, was supported.

Table 7: Structural Equational Model Analysis Results

Relationships	Standardised β weights	Confidence Level (95%)		P-value	R ²
		Lower	Upper		
Model 1: Listening $\rightarrow$ Feedback	0,732***	-	-	0,000	0,536
Model 2: Listening $\rightarrow$ Message sending skills $\rightarrow$ Feedback	0,399**	0,139	0,523	0,007	0.617

Figure 1 below summarises the mediation role of message-sending skills in the relationship between listening and feedback skills

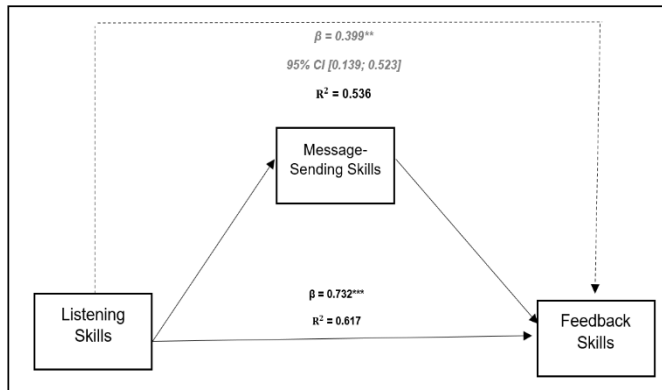


Figure 1: Final framework of significant direct and indirect interactions between listening

5. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to examine whether message-sending skills mediate the relationship between listening and feedback skills among managers in the retail industry. The findings reveal that message-sending plays a significant and positive mediating role, thereby clarifying ambiguities in prior research and offering context-specific insights into managerial communication.

The results demonstrate that listening is not only directly associated with feedback but also indirectly strengthens feedback through the use of message-sending. This dual pathway advances theoretical understanding by confirming that message-sending is not a redundant or peripheral competence, but a crucial mechanism through which listening is translated into actionable feedback.

This finding stands in contrast to earlier work, who cautioned against viewing message-sending as a universal driver of communication effectiveness, suggesting instead that it could function as a “red herring” when interference was accounted for. As a study found that message-sending did not significantly mediate the listening–feedback relationship in a broader managerial sample, raising questions about its generalisability by (Longweni and Kroon, 2016; Longweni and Mdaka, 2024b). By demonstrating a significant mediation effect in the retail industry, this study suggests that the utility of message-sending is context-dependent. In service-intensive industries where communication is frequent, customer-facing, and time-sensitive, message-sending may become an indispensable skill that bridges listening and feedback.

This contextualised contribution deepens theory in two ways. First, it highlights the importance of adopting a contingency perspective in managerial communication research. Second, it underscores the need to model communication skills as interdependent rather than isolated, thereby recognising that message-sending links the cognitive act of listening with the behavioural act of feedback.

For practitioners, these findings underscore the need to prioritise message-sending skills in managerial training within the retail industry. Listening alone is insufficient if managers cannot articulate messages clearly and translate understanding into effective feedback. Investing in message-sending training enhances managers’ ability to convert customer and employee inputs into actionable communication. This is particularly relevant in the retail industry, where frontline managers operate in dynamic environments that require clarity, responsiveness, and

adaptability.

Organisations should therefore consider communication development programmes that integrate listening, message-sending, and feedback training rather than treating these competencies as stand-alone skills. By strengthening this triadic link, managers are better positioned to maintain employee motivation, ensure alignment with organisational goals, and enhance customer service delivery.

Although this study contributes important insights, it is not without limitations. Even though, measuring managers’ competencies based on the perceptions of their subordinates has proven to be valuable in the past future studies may benefit from validating the proposed model based on managers’ self-assessment (Longweni and Kroon, 2018; Longweni and Mdaka, 2024a; Longweni and Meintjes, 2025). Cross-sectional design restricts causal inferences, and future research could employ longitudinal designs to examine how these communication skills develop and interact over time. Moreover, while the retail industry provides a valuable service-intensive context, future studies should investigate whether the observed mediation effect holds across other industries such as healthcare, hospitality, or education. Finally, expanding the model to include moderating factors such as managerial experience, cultural context, or organisational structure, may further enrich the understanding of when and how message-sending exerts its influence.

6. CONCLUSION

This study set out to investigate whether the role of message-sending skills is context-specific, drawing on earlier empirical contradictions. The evidence across three studies reveals a nuanced answer. In the 2016 study, message-sending skills proved essential, particularly when reinforced by the ability to manage interference, across manufacturing, services, and retail industries (Longweni and Kroon, 2016). However, the 2024 investigation within the manufacturing sector indicated that message-sending skills alone did not significantly mediate the listening–feedback relationship; their influence emerged only in conjunction with interference-handling abilities within a multiple mediation model (Longweni and Mdaka, 2024b). In contrast, the present study demonstrates that within the retail industry, message-sending skills independently mediate the listening–feedback relationship, even in the absence of interference-handling skills.

Taken together, these findings confirm that the role of message-sending skills is indeed context-specific. While their impact may be muted in structured, production-driven environments such as manufacturing, they become a critical link in communication effectiveness within service-intensive domains like retail, where immediacy, clarity, and relational exchanges are central to performance. This suggests that communication competencies should not be conceptualised as universally stable but rather as contingent upon industry context. For theory, this underscores the need to advance context-sensitive models of managerial communication. For practice, it highlights the importance of tailoring communication training to industry realities, ensuring that message-sending skills are emphasised where they are most consequential.

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