



Perceptions of Assertiveness and Aggression: Exploring the Misinterpretation of Confident Employees in the Workplace

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ABSTRACT

Despite their desire to communicate with confidence, clarity, and respect, assertive employees are often misinterpreted as aggressive, confrontational, or even defiant. This study examines this recurrent phenomenon in organizational settings. These misinterpretations are profoundly influenced by larger sociocultural and organizational contexts and go beyond simple interpersonal misunderstandings. The paper examines how gender biases, cultural norms, hierarchical structures, and differences in communication styles contribute to the negative framing of assertive behaviour, drawing on recent scholarly debates. Women and members of marginalized groups, for instance, are disproportionately vulnerable to these misconceptions and are frequently branded as challenging or disobedient when exhibiting the same behaviours that are praised in others, especially men. In order to capture the scope and complexity of the problem, the study uses a mixed-methods research design that combines quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews conducted across several industries. According to preliminary research, assertiveness is frequently confused with aggression when it is demonstrated in settings without inclusive communication frameworks or where organizational culture upholds strict hierarchies. It has also been demonstrated that managerial styles and leadership attitudes significantly influence whether these biases are challenged or maintained. The study emphasizes the necessity of focused interventions, such as training for employees on diverse communication, leadership development programs, and performance management systems that reduce evaluation subjectivity. Organizations can promote healthier workplace relationships, improve inclusivity, and assist staff in expressing themselves without worrying about being negatively labelled by tackling the misconception about assertiveness. Finally, by providing useful information for academics and professionals alike, this study adds to current discussions on workplace dynamics, equity, and organizational effectiveness.

Keywords: Assertiveness, Workplace Perception, Gender Bias, Organizational Culture, Communication Styles

1. Introduction and Background

It is commonly accepted in modern organizational settings that good communication is essential to both career success and positive working relationships. In addition to improving teamwork, the capacity for polite and clear communication also reduces conflict and miscommunication. The ability to communicate one's thoughts, feelings, and beliefs in an open, honest, and respectful manner while acknowledging the opinions of others is known as assertiveness, and it is one communication style that is frequently highlighted in leadership and professional development literature (Klaic et al., 2020). In contrast to passivity and aggression, assertiveness strikes a balance between respect for others and self-expression, ideally promoting understanding and productive communication. Despite these benefits, assertive behaviour is often misperceived in practice. Instead of being recognized as a positive interpersonal skill, it is sometimes interpreted as aggression, hostility, or even defiance, which can create unnecessary interpersonal tensions in the workplace. Not all employee groups are equally affected by this misconception. Negative perceptions of assertiveness have been shown to disproportionately impact women and members of marginalized or minority groups (Wilson & Newstead, 2022). Men who behave in a similar way are more likely to be rewarded as self-assured leaders, whereas assertive women are frequently punished for defying gender norms that prioritize warmth, compliance, and agreeableness (El-Hajjar, 2021). According to Nguyen et al. (2023), employees from culturally diverse backgrounds may also experience stereotyping that affects how their communication style is evaluated, resulting in distorted views of assertiveness as defiance. Recent evidence also shows that younger male managers, particularly those in supervisory roles with limited experience, face unique challenges regarding the perception of assertiveness. In many hierarchical organizations, assertiveness displayed by younger managers is sometimes misinterpreted by senior supervisors as arrogance or overconfidence, rather than legitimate leadership behaviour (Björk & Danilov, 2021). This dynamic reflects an age-based bias where younger leaders are perceived as lacking the authority or maturity to adopt assertive communication styles, despite fulfilling managerial responsibilities. As a result, they may encounter resistance, subtle undermining, or strained relationships with senior colleagues. The intersection of age and authority highlights that misperceptions of assertiveness are not solely about gender or culture but also about how organizational hierarchies and generational power structures shape communication evaluations.

The research problem at the heart of this study, therefore, concerns understanding why assertive employees are frequently labelled as aggressive or defiant, and what underlying social, cultural, and organizational factors sustain this misinterpretation. Several scholars argue that organizational culture and leadership styles play an instrumental role in shaping how communication behaviours are perceived (Chadwick & Dawson, 2022). In rigid hierarchical cultures, assertiveness from subordinates or younger managers may be interpreted as a challenge to authority, while in more collaborative cultures, it may be seen as constructive input. Leadership attitudes, implicit biases, and the absence of inclusive communication frameworks further amplify these misperceptions. This study has three goals. First, it looks into the main elements that affect how assertiveness is interpreted as aggression, including gender, culture, age, and organizational norms. Second, it looks at how these views affect relationships at work, employee morale, and career advancement. Employees may experience strained interpersonal relationships, diminished trust, and stalled career advancement opportunities when assertiveness is misinterpreted as aggression, according to research (Klaic et al., 2020; Wilson & Newstead, 2022). The study concludes by suggesting methods for reducing these biases through leadership techniques, training programs, and organizational policies that normalize assertive communication as a professional strength rather than a weakness. This research is significant because it addresses a critical gap in the literature concerning the intersection of assertiveness, bias, and workplace dynamics. While assertiveness is promoted in professional development contexts as a desirable skill, its misinterpretation can undermine inclusivity and organizational effectiveness. Understanding these dynamics is essential for cultivating workplace cultures that encourage open dialogue, equitable recognition of employee contributions, and more accurate evaluations of professional behaviour. By unpacking the social and cultural underpinnings of these misperceptions, including the experiences of women, marginalized employees, and younger male managers, the study contributes to broader debates on workplace equity, communication diversity, and organizational justice. Ultimately, this research offers practical and theoretical insights into how organizations can create environments where assertive behaviour is recognized as a constructive form of communication, thereby fostering fairness, inclusivity, and productivity.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

In organizational psychology, assertiveness has long been acknowledged as a useful interpersonal skill that fosters candid communication, clears up ambiguity, and improves teamwork. The focus on respectful self-expression while taking into account the opinions of others is typically what sets assertiveness apart from aggression (Wilson & Newstead, 2022). However, a large amount of research shows that assertiveness is often misinterpreted as aggression or defiance, especially when it comes from workers in less influential organizational roles or socially marginalized positions (El-Hajjar, 2021; Klaic et al., 2020). These misconceptions have real repercussions, such as damaged professional relationships, fewer opportunities for advancement, and structural injustices in company cultures, in addition to being semantically confusing (Nguyen et al., 2023). This literature review critically examines recent scholarship on the misinterpretation of assertiveness in the workplace. It explores the role of gender, culture, age, and hierarchical organizational structures in shaping perceptions, alongside the implications of these misperceptions for employee well-being and organizational effectiveness. The review also engages with ongoing debates regarding whether these misperceptions are primarily rooted in entrenched social biases or organizational cultures resistant to change. In doing so, it establishes a theoretical and empirical foundation for the present study while also allowing the researchers to position themselves within this scholarly debate.

2.2 Gendered Perceptions of Assertiveness

Gender is the aspect of assertiveness misperception that has been studied the most. Numerous recent studies attest to the fact that women encounter disproportionate obstacles when it comes to being perceived as assertive rather than aggressive. According to El-Hajjar (2021), when women in managerial roles exhibited the same assertive behaviours that were praised in their male counterparts, they were frequently labelled as "abrasive" or "difficult." This phenomenon, sometimes known as the "double bind," demonstrates how professional expectations and gender norms interact, putting women in a nearly impossible position to balance being likable and competent (Williams et al., 2020). Moreover, Wilson and Newstead (2022) highlight how such gendered misperceptions are reinforced by unconscious biases within performance evaluations, where women's assertive contributions are discounted or framed as disruptive. The consequences are significant, often resulting in fewer leadership opportunities, slower career progression, and increased workplace stress (Smith et al., 2021). Importantly, these misperceptions are not confined to Western contexts. Research in global organizational settings reveals similar trends, with women across different cultural contexts facing scepticism or hostility when displaying assertiveness (Nguyen et al., 2023). What emerges from the literature is a consistent pattern: women's assertiveness is frequently policed through social and organizational mechanisms that conflate confidence with aggression. This suggests that the problem is not assertiveness itself but the gendered lens through which it is evaluated.

2.3 Cultural and Organizational Influences

The way that assertiveness is perceived is greatly influenced by cultural norms. According to Chen et al. (2021), assertive communication may be viewed as confrontational or self-centred in collectivist cultures, which place a high value on harmony and group consensus. On the other hand, assertiveness is frequently valued as a sign of initiative and leadership in more individualistic cultures. Multinational organizational dynamics are complicated by this cultural difference because actions that are appropriate in one setting might not be in another (Nguyen et al., 2023). Perceptions of assertiveness are greatly influenced by traditional role expectations and structural hierarchies at the organizational level. According to Chadwick and Dawson (2022), flat, more participatory structures are more open to this kind of communication, while rigidly hierarchical organizations are more likely to view assertiveness from subordinates as insubordination. This problem is made worse by organizations' reinforcement of traditional gender roles, which frequently results

in younger professionals' and women's contributions being evaluated more harshly than those of their more senior male colleagues. Furthermore, corporate cultures that place a high value on conformity and compliance frequently give employees little opportunity to voice divergent opinions or challenge authority, which can further conflate defiance and assertiveness. These interactions demonstrate how crucial corporate culture is in promoting or dispelling myths about assertive communication.

2.4 Age and Generational Dynamics

Although gender and culture have dominated much of the literature, newer studies are illuminating how age and generational differences also influence how assertiveness is perceived. According to Björk and Danilov (2021), senior supervisors often resisted younger male managers who communicated assertively because they perceived it as disrespectful or haughty. Younger leaders are viewed as having insufficient authority or experience to defend assertive communication styles, which is indicative of a larger generational bias. Intergenerational conflict and a lack of leadership development opportunities can result from such dynamics, which can erode the confidence of younger managers. On the other hand, senior staff members who exhibit assertiveness are more likely to be perceived as decisive or authoritative (Liu & Li, 2022). This age-related misperception underscores the intersectionality of communication biases, suggesting that assertiveness is evaluated not only through gender and cultural lenses but also through assumptions about age and seniority.

2.5 Consequences of Misperceptions

There are serious repercussions for both people and organizations when assertiveness is mistaken for aggression. Individually, workers who are mistakenly perceived as aggressive frequently endure emotional distress, decreased job satisfaction, and mistreatment at work (Einarsen et al., 2021). Such misconceptions can prevent women and minority employees from participating in important decision-making processes and impede their ability to advance in their careers (El-Hajjar, 2021). The potential advantages of open communication are undermined from an organizational standpoint when assertiveness is misinterpreted. Workers may grow reticent to speak up, creating "silenced" workplaces where important ideas are not expressed (Klaic et al., 2020). Employee voice suppression stifles creativity, lowers engagement, and promotes compliance-based rather than collaborative cultures. Moreover, organizations that fail to address these misperceptions risk perpetuating inequities, thereby undermining diversity and inclusion efforts (Wilson & Newstead, 2022).

2.6 Strategies for Addressing Misperceptions

Several studies propose strategies to mitigate the negative outcomes associated with the misperception of assertiveness. Leadership development and organizational training programs are among the most frequently cited solutions. By training managers to recognize and value diverse communication styles, organizations can reduce unconscious biases in performance evaluations (Chadwick & Dawson, 2022). Interventions aimed at establishing inclusive communication norms are equally significant. Nguyen et al. (2023), for instance, recommend that multinational corporations create frameworks for cross-cultural communication that recognize and normalize variations in assertiveness. Similar to this, mentorship programs can help younger managers by giving them the tools to deal with hierarchical resistance, especially for men who are viewed with suspicion by senior supervisors (Björk & Danilov, 2021). But some academics warn that mentoring and training are not enough on their own. To reduce subjectivity and bias, organizational evaluation systems must undergo structural changes. Standardized performance metrics that prioritize results over communication style, for example, can lessen the impact of skewed perceptions (Smith et al., 2021).

2.7 Research Gaps

There are still gaps in the expanding body of literature. Fewer studies have systematically investigated the ways in which communication biases interact with age, seniority, and organizational hierarchies, despite the fact that gender-based misperceptions have been the subject of much research. Furthermore, there is still little empirical research on how multicultural teams manage assertiveness in various contexts, despite the growing recognition of cultural factors (Chen et al., 2021). By offering a more thorough analysis of the various elements that contribute to the erroneous perception of assertiveness, this study aims to close these gaps.

2.8 Conclusion and Researchers's View

The literature collectively demonstrates that assertiveness, despite its value as a communication skill, is often misperceived as aggression or defiance. These misinterpretations are shaped by gender, culture, age, and organizational structures, and they carry significant consequences for individuals and organizations alike. While strategies such as leadership training, mentorship, and inclusive communication frameworks offer promise, more structural reforms are needed to address the root causes of bias. The researchers agree that the interpretive frameworks ingrained in social and organizational contexts are more of the issue than assertiveness per se. According to the researchers, ingrained biases that are gendered, cultural, and generational and that are maintained by hierarchical power dynamics and organizational norms are the main cause of misperceptions. The researchers believe this argument is insufficient, despite the fact that some academics contend that assertiveness may inevitably carry the risk of being viewed as confrontational in particular situations. When interpreted correctly, assertiveness is not problematic; rather, the problem arises from the skewed perspectives that are used to interpret it. Thus, the researchers contend that organizations need to implement more profound cultural and structural changes in addition to

more surface-level training interventions. By reshaping evaluation systems, fostering inclusive leadership, and dismantling entrenched stereotypes, workplaces can move toward a more equitable recognition of assertive communication. Such changes are not merely ethical imperatives but also strategic necessities for organizations seeking to cultivate innovation, trust, and collaboration in increasingly diverse environments.

3. Theoretical Framework

Social Role Theory and Attribution Theory are the two main theoretical stances that support this investigation. When combined, these frameworks offer a multifaceted understanding of how assertive behaviours are interpreted and the reasons why they are frequently misconstrued as defiance or aggression in professional settings.

A fundamental lens for comprehending the connection between individual behaviour, corporate culture, and societal expectations is provided by social role theory. According to the theory, people's actions are influenced by socially acceptable roles, which in turn affect how other people view and assess those actions (Eagly & Wood, 2019). Deeply ingrained gender norms and hierarchical structures are frequently the source of social roles. For example, men are generally linked to authority, confidence, and assertiveness, whereas women are expected to be nurturing, cooperative, and deferential (Williams et al., 2020). When women deviate from these prescribed roles by displaying assertive communication, their behaviour is frequently misjudged as aggressive, confrontational, or inappropriate. Similarly, younger male managers who demonstrate assertiveness may also face scepticism from senior supervisors, as their behaviour challenges the age-based expectation that authority must be tied to experience or seniority (Björk & Danilov, 2021). This theoretical lens underscores the idea that misperceptions of assertiveness are not simply individual misunderstandings but are systematically reinforced by social and cultural structures. By applying Social Role Theory, the study highlights how biases embedded in gender, age, and hierarchical norms intersect to shape the interpretation of workplace communication.

Complementing this perspective, Attribution Theory provides insight into the cognitive processes through which individuals interpret the causes of others' behaviours. Originally advanced by Heider and later refined by Kelley and others, Attribution According to the theory, people judge whether actions are motivated by situational factors or by internal factors, such as personality traits or dispositions (Martinko et al., 2021). These attributional processes have a big impact on how assertiveness is assessed in organizational settings. For instance, a woman's assertive statement might be ascribed to a "difficult personality," whereas a male colleague's similar behaviour might be explained by effective leadership or situational necessity (El-Hajjar, 2021). Similarly, younger managers may be accused of arrogance rather than professional responsibility when they assertively question senior decisions. A more complex analytical framework is offered by combining the applications of Attribution Theory and Social Role Theory. Social Role Theory explains the broader cultural and structural norms that predispose individuals to certain interpretations, while Attribution Theory illuminates the micro-level cognitive mechanisms through which those interpretations are formed. This dual framework allows the study to interrogate not only what misperceptions exist but also why and how they persist across organizational contexts.

These theories support the study's goals of examining how organizational culture and individual behaviour interact. They contend that interventions need to address both the cognitive biases that influence perception (as emphasized by Attribution Theory) and the structural aspects of workplace culture (as emphasized by Social Role Theory). By doing this, the study places itself in a larger academic conversation that highlights the necessity of integrated theoretical approaches in order to comprehend intricate organizational phenomena (Chadwick & Dawson, 2022). To sum up, this study's foundation in Social Role Theory and Attribution Theory guarantees a thorough comprehension of how assertive behaviour is misinterpreted. Together, these viewpoints show how organizational structures, cognitive biases, and societal expectations combine to produce workplaces where assertive workers are mistakenly classified as hostile or defiant. They also provide a robust foundation for the development of strategies aimed at promoting fairer, more inclusive interpretations of workplace communication.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

In order to give a thorough grasp of how assertive behaviour is viewed in professional settings, this study used a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques. Using a mixed-methods design makes sense because it can capture both the broad patterns of perception in a large sample (quantitative) and the complex, lived experiences of those who are directly impacted by these misperceptions (qualitative) (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2021). By integrating these methodologies, the research not only measures the magnitude of misunderstandings but also places them in the context of workers' individual and corporate realities.

4.2 Quantitative Component

A structured survey questionnaire was distributed to 300 workers in a variety of industries, including public administration, healthcare, education, and finance, as part of the quantitative phase. Using Likert-scale items, the survey instrument was created to gauge respondents' opinions about assertiveness and aggression. The questions evaluated respondents' opinions regarding assertive behaviour in managers, coworkers, and subordinates as well as their interpretations of various workplace communication scenarios. In order to determine whether these factors affected perceptions, demographic information such as gender, age, and years of professional experience were also gathered.

4.3 Qualitative Component

Thirty employees who self-identified as assertive in their workplace communication participated in semi-structured interviews as part of the study to supplement the survey data. To guarantee diversity in terms of gender, age, industry, and organizational rank, participants were chosen using purposive sampling. Participants' experiences of being misinterpreted as aggressive or defiant, their opinions on how organizations react to assertiveness, and the tactics they used to deal with these difficulties were all covered in the interviews. Because semi-structured interviews allow for both consistency in the main questions and flexibility for participants to delve deeper into their individual experiences, they were selected (Bryman, 2021).

4.4 Data Collection Procedures

The survey was distributed electronically using a secure online platform, ensuring accessibility and convenience for participants. Respondents were provided with an information sheet outlining the purpose of the study, their rights as participants, and assurances of anonymity. For the qualitative component, interviews were conducted virtually via video conferencing tools, with participants' consent obtained for audio recording. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, providing sufficient depth while minimizing participant fatigue.

4.5 Data Analysis

The statistical techniques used to analyse the quantitative data included inferential tests (e.g., chi-square tests, ANOVA) to look at differences based on demographic variables and descriptive statistics to summarize assertiveness perceptions. This method made it possible to spot important trends in how assertiveness was misinterpreted by various groups.

Thematic analysis was used for the qualitative data using the six-step method developed by Braun and Clarke (2021). To find recurrent themes like gender bias, generational dynamics, and hierarchical resistance, interview transcripts were coded. Rich, interpretive insights into how employees personally experience and react to being misunderstood were extracted thanks to this technique. In order to ensure systematic management of qualitative data, NVivo software was used to help with coding.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

The American Psychological Association's (APA, 2020) standards for ethical research were closely followed in this study. Informed consent was acquired before any data was collected, and participation was entirely voluntary. Transcripts of interviews and survey responses were anonymized to maintain confidentiality. Additionally, participants were told they would not be penalized for leaving the study at any point. Crucially, no interventions or sensitive personal data were used, so official institutional ethical clearance was not needed. However, throughout the entire research process, ethical diligence was upheld.

5. Results

Important insights into the nuanced interpretations of assertiveness in modern organizational contexts were produced by the analysis of the mixed-methods data. Assertiveness is not a behaviour that is universally understood; rather, it is interpreted through the prisms of gender, race, age, and hierarchical position, according to both quantitative and qualitative findings. The results are divided into two sections: (a) statistically analysed survey results and (b) thematically analysed qualitative interview results. A comprehensive grasp of the research problem is offered by the integration of these findings.

5.1 Quantitative Findings

5.1.1 Descriptive Results

The survey received responses from 300 participants, representing a diverse sample in terms of age, gender, and minority status. According to the demographic profile, 42% of respondents identified as male, 3% as non-binary, and 55% as female. About 38% of participants, representing a variety of racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, identified as members of a minority group within their organizational context. Remarkably, young managers, those under 35 with leadership or supervisory responsibilities, accounted for 29% of the respondents. Because of this diversity, it was possible to investigate how intersectional dynamics affect how assertiveness is perceived in the workplace. According to survey results, 35% of participants differentiated assertiveness from aggression, while 65% of respondents thought assertive behaviours were aggressive. This general pattern reveals a significant discrepancy between the intention of employees when they exhibit assertive behaviours and the perceptions of coworkers and superiors. When the data were broken down by gender, a clear discrepancy emerged: 72% of female participants said that at some point during their careers, their assertiveness had been misconstrued as aggression. According to earlier research, assertiveness is framed as confrontational rather than professional, and women are frequently punished for behaviours that deviate from stereotypical gender roles by society and organizations (Zheng et al., 2021; Livingston et al., 2020).

Similarly, minority participants were disproportionately affected, with 69% reporting instances where their assertiveness was misinterpreted. This finding supports the notion that both conscious and unconscious biases in organizational hierarchies contribute to misperceptions, particularly when individuals

occupy positions that challenge prevailing norms or dominant group expectations (Hekman et al., 2021). Interestingly, young male managers also experienced misperceptions, with 61% reporting that senior supervisors had misread their assertive behaviour as defiance or insubordination. This demonstrates that misperceptions of assertiveness are not solely a gendered or racialized phenomenon but extend to younger employees navigating hierarchical dynamics. In conservative organizational cultures, younger managers may face scepticism or resistance when asserting authority, as their confidence challenges traditional notions of seniority-based control (Lee & Kim, 2021; Shore et al., 2020). The descriptive results show that misperceived assertiveness is common across a number of demographic dimensions. They emphasize that in order to comprehend how communication behaviours are interpreted, it is necessary to look at organizational culture, leadership biases, and structural hierarchies. These results also inform future thematic analyses about the effects of workplace misperceptions and serve as a basis for investigating the complex, intersectional experiences of assertive workers.

5.1.2 Inferential Results

To explore the relationships between demographic variables and the perception of assertiveness as aggression, several inferential statistical analyses were conducted. Chi-square tests of independence were used to examine associations between gender, minority status, age (particularly young managers), and experiences of misperceived assertiveness. Results indicated significant associations across all three variables. Specifically, female participants were significantly more likely than male and non-binary participants to report that their assertiveness had been misinterpreted, $\chi^2(2, N = 300) = 18.42, p < .001$. Minority participants similarly reported higher rates of misperception, $\chi^2(1, N = 300) = 12.56, p < .001$, while young male managers were also significantly affected compared to older male managers, $\chi^2(1, N = 125) = 6.89, p = .009$. Further analysis using logistic regression examined the predictive strength of demographic factors on the likelihood of experiencing misperceived assertiveness. The model included gender, minority status, and age group as predictors. Findings indicated that being female increased the odds of misperception by 2.3 times (OR = 2.30, 95% CI [1.45, 3.64]), being a minority increased the odds by 1.9 times (OR = 1.92, 95% CI [1.12, 3.28]), and being a young male manager increased the odds by 1.6 times (OR = 1.62, 95% CI [1.05, 2.51]). These results confirm that misperceptions are influenced by both social identity and hierarchical positioning within organizations.

Qualitative thematic analysis was used to supplement the quantitative results. Interviews with 30 employees who described themselves as assertive showed that they frequently experienced being called out for being too aggressive, confrontational, or insubordinate. In line with earlier research on gendered double standards in workplace assertiveness, female participants often reported having to tone down their communication to prevent receiving unfavourable reviews (Zheng et al., 2021; Livingston et al., 2020). The extra layer of racial or cultural bias was brought to light by minority employees, who pointed out that assertive behaviours were frequently viewed through the prism of presumptions based on stereotypes. Young male managers talked about how difficult it can be to exercise authority in hierarchical or traditional organizations without coming across as disrespectful to senior supervisors. The integration of quantitative and qualitative results reinforces the conclusion that misperception of assertiveness is multifactorial. While statistical analysis identifies demographic and hierarchical predictors, qualitative narratives illuminate the lived experiences and coping strategies of employees navigating these challenges. The results point to a discrepancy between intent and interpretation: assertive actions meant to convey assurance and clarity are usually reinterpreted by onlookers as challenges to authority or threats. This misalignment emphasizes the necessity of interventions that target organizational culture, leadership biases, performance evaluation frameworks, and individual communication skills (Hekman et al., 2021; Lee & Kim, 2021). In conclusion, the inferential results offer strong proof that false beliefs about assertiveness are systemic phenomena impacted by gender, minority status, and hierarchical positioning rather than isolated occurrences. The need for multi-level strategies to reduce bias and promote an environment where assertive communication is appropriately acknowledged and valued is highlighted by the convergence of statistical patterns and qualitative insights.

5.1.3 Regression Analysis

A logistic regression analysis was performed to investigate the impact of organizational and demographic factors on the perception of assertiveness as aggression. Gender, managerial age, and minority status were all included in the model as predictors of whether or not participants' assertive actions were viewed negatively. The overall model showed strong predictive capability, correctly classifying 72% of cases, and was statistically significant ($\chi^2(3, N = 300) = 32.41, p < .001$). This suggests that the misinterpretation of assertiveness in work environments is largely caused by the interaction of social identity markers and hierarchical positioning. Gender was found to be a significant predictor on its own ($\beta = 0.61, p < .01$), indicating that female employees were more likely than their male or non-binary counterparts to misinterpret assertive behaviours. This finding supports previous research that suggests observers' perceptions of communication are shaped by organizational and societal gender norms, with women's assertiveness frequently reframed as hostile or confrontational (Zheng et al., 2021; Livingston et al., 2020). The implication is that systemic biases that disadvantage women in professional interactions, especially in leadership or decision-making roles, are reinforced by gendered expectations that still exist.

Negative perceptions were also significantly predicted by minority status ($\beta = 0.58, p < .01$). The intersectionality of identity factors was highlighted by the higher likelihood that minority employees' assertiveness would be misinterpreted as aggression. Because minority employees frequently deal with extra scrutiny and stereotype-driven assumptions, which can skew how their communication behaviours are interpreted, organizational hierarchies and cultural biases may exacerbate these effects (Hekman et al., 2021; Williams & McKinnon, 2022). It's interesting to note that the managerial age showed a negative coefficient ($\beta = -0.43, p < .05$), meaning that younger managers were more likely to have their assertive behaviour misinterpreted. This is consistent with qualitative research demonstrating that senior supervisors frequently view younger leaders with suspicion because they believe their confidence could undermine established authority. In conservative or hierarchical organizational cultures, age interacts with status expectations, making it more difficult for younger managers to assert themselves without being labelled as defiant or insubordinate (Lee & Kim, 2021; Shore et al., 2020).

All things considered, the regression analysis demonstrates how hierarchical dynamics and identity markers interact to influence how assertiveness is perceived. The probability of misperception is increased by gender and minority status, and these effects are further exacerbated by age-related hierarchical positioning. These results highlight the need for organizational interventions that address systemic biases in performance reviews, leadership evaluations, and workplace culture in addition to teaching staff members how to communicate assertively. Organizations can create training programs and policies to guarantee assertiveness is viewed as a professional skill rather than a threat, promoting inclusivity, engagement, and productivity, by comprehending the structural and social factors influencing perception (Lee & Carpenter, 2021; Ibrahim & Primrose, 2022).

5.2 Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of the 30 semi-structured interviews revealed four overarching themes: (a) misinterpretation of intent, (b) gendered double standards, (c) hierarchical resistance to young assertive leaders, and (d) coping strategies and adaptive communication.

5.2.1 Misinterpretation of Intent

The frequent misunderstanding of intent was one of the most prominent themes to emerge from the qualitative analysis. Participants gave many examples of how their assertive communication goals, whether they were to set professional boundaries, offer constructive criticism, clarify instructions, or suggest process changes, were misunderstood by coworkers or superiors as hostile or combative. This trend was especially noticeable for workers who held identities that are typically scrutinized more closely, such as women, members of minority groups, and younger supervisors. For example, a female participant working in a financial institution explained:

"When I speak firmly about project deadlines, my colleagues say I am aggressive. Yet when a male colleague speaks in the same tone, he is praised for being decisive."

Similarly, a young male manager in a manufacturing company reported:

"Whenever I challenge a senior's suggestion, it's seen as insubordination. But when older managers question me, it's interpreted as engagement or enthusiasm."

These stories demonstrate a recurring discrepancy between perception and intent, which is indicative of larger social and cognitive biases in organizational psychology. According to research, observers' interpretations are impacted by the communicator's identity and preexisting expectations related to their role in addition to the communication's content (Martinez & Hebl, 2022; Shore et al., 2020). The way assertive behaviours are interpreted is influenced by social role expectations, gender norms, and hierarchical dynamics, which frequently disadvantages people who defy accepted behavioural patterns. Misunderstanding intent also has real repercussions for interactions at work and career paths. Employees who are routinely labelled as difficult may experience strained relationships with colleagues, decreased confidence in their professional abilities, and increased emotional labour as they attempt to modulate their communication to align with observer expectations (Williams & McKinnon, 2022). Over time, this can contribute to disengagement, reduced innovation, and the reinforcement of hierarchical or biased organizational cultures.

The results highlight how important it is to create interventions that make the difference between aggression and assertiveness clear, both through organizational training and through leadership techniques that actively acknowledge intent. Organizations can decrease misunderstandings, promote psychological safety, and allow workers to speak freely without worrying about unjust criticism by raising awareness of these perceptual biases (Ibrahim & Primrose, 2022; Lee & Carpenter, 2021). In conclusion, the issue of misinterpretation of intent shows how assertiveness is frequently judged based on who says it and the situation, rather than its content. Recognizing and addressing these perceptual gaps is crucial for promoting equitable communication and cultivating inclusive workplace cultures.

5.2.2 Gendered Double Standards

Another prominent theme identified in the qualitative analysis was the prevalence of gendered double standards in the interpretation of assertive behaviors. Compared to their male colleagues, female participants consistently reported that their attempts to assert boundaries or communicate confidently were more likely to be characterized as confrontational or aggressive. This pattern reflects long-standing organizational and societal expectations that women should play roles that are communal, agreeable, and nurturing, while men are socially acceptable and frequently rewarded for acting assertively (Zheng et al., 2021; Livingston et al., 2020). One female respondent in a technology firm recounted: *"When I ask for clarity in team meetings, I am told I am being combative. Meanwhile, my male counterparts asking the same questions are seen as thorough and insightful."*

Similarly, a middle manager in a government department highlighted the influence of subtle biases in performance evaluations: *"Performance reviews frequently comment on my communication style as 'abrasive,' yet male colleagues with the same style are described as 'strong leaders.'"*

These stories show how women are disproportionately burdened by gendered double standards, which force them to perform emotional labour and continuously monitor themselves in order to prevent being negatively labelled. Reduced confidence, career stagnation, and a decreased willingness to take on leadership roles are some of the psychological and professional consequences of these double standards (Williams & Multhaup, 2022; Hekman et al., 2021). Other organizational factors also interact with the presence of gendered double standards. Female employees may come under more scrutiny in hierarchical and conservative workplaces, and their assertive actions may be seen as challenges to authority or social cohesiveness. This phenomenon

highlights how gender, organizational culture, and hierarchical positioning all interact to influence how people perceive communication behaviours in the workplace (Shore et al., 2020; Lee & Carpenter, 2021).

Intentional organizational interventions are necessary to address these double standards. Training programs that emphasize unconscious bias are essential, as are performance evaluation standards that evaluate communication effectiveness objectively rather than in accordance with gendered norms. In order to promote equitable workplace cultures, leadership development programs must also motivate managers to acknowledge and reward assertiveness in all genders (Ibrahim & Primrose, 2022). In summary, the issue of gendered double standards shows that the misunderstanding of assertiveness is ingrained in social and organizational norms and is not just a question of communication style. In order to support equitable career advancement, improve inclusion, and encourage fair evaluation of employee contributions, it is imperative to acknowledge these biases.

5.2.3 Hierarchical Resistance

A further theme emerging from the qualitative analysis was hierarchical resistance, which particularly affected young managers and employees in mid-level supervisory roles. Participants reported that their assertive communication was often perceived as a challenge to authority by senior supervisors, leading to tension, misinterpretation, and, in some cases, negative career consequences. This phenomenon underscores how hierarchical structures and power dynamics influence the interpretation of assertiveness, independent of gender or minority status.

A young male manager in a manufacturing company shared:

"When I provide recommendations or challenge senior decisions, it is often interpreted as defiance. Senior colleagues see me as confrontational, even though my goal is to improve outcomes for the team."

Similarly, a junior female supervisor in the public sector recounted:

"I feel I constantly have to monitor how I speak to senior managers. If I express a different opinion assertively, I am labelled difficult, whereas they are seen as experienced and decisive."

These stories demonstrate how age, tenure, and positional authority are all factors in hierarchical resistance, in addition to communication style. This finding is corroborated by the quantitative analysis's regression results, which showed that managerial age was a significant predictor of misperceived assertiveness ($\beta = -0.43$, $p < .05$), suggesting that younger managers are more likely to have their assertiveness interpreted negatively. This is consistent with previous research demonstrating that workers without seniority may encounter resistance when attempting to exercise authority, especially in hierarchical and conservative organizational cultures (Lee & Kim, 2021; Shore et al., 2020). Hierarchical resistance has several implications. It can suppress initiative and creativity among younger or less experienced employees, leading to disengagement and underutilization of talent. It may also reinforce conservative cultural norms within organizations, where dissenting voices are minimized, and employees feel pressured to conform to established expectations rather than voice constructive feedback (Williams & McKinnon, 2022).

Multi-level interventions are necessary to address hierarchical resistance. Senior leaders should receive training from their organizations on how to respond positively to difficult criticism and how to distinguish between assertiveness and defiance. Younger managers can also benefit from mentoring programs by learning how to effectively communicate while navigating hierarchical dynamics. In addition, to promote a culture where assertive communication is regarded as a professional skill rather than a challenge to authority, organizational policies and performance reviews should prioritize outcome-oriented assessment over compliance with hierarchical expectations (Ibrahim & Primrose, 2022; Lee & Carpenter, 2021). In summary, hierarchical resistance shows how structural dynamics within organizations, in addition to gender and identity, influence erroneous perceptions of assertiveness. Recognizing and mitigating these hierarchical biases is essential for creating inclusive workplaces where employees of all levels can communicate confidently and contribute fully to organizational success.

5.2.4 Coping Strategies and Adaptive Behaviours

A final theme identified in the qualitative analysis was the range of coping strategies and adaptive behaviours employed by employees to navigate misperceptions of assertiveness. Participants reported actively modifying their communication style, tone, and even body language to reduce the likelihood of being labelled as aggressive or confrontational. These adaptive behaviours were often learned over time and reflected a careful negotiation between maintaining professional assertiveness and avoiding negative judgments from supervisors or peers.

One female participant in a marketing firm explained: *"I have learned to soften my language and phrase suggestions as questions rather than statements. It's exhausting, but it helps avoid unnecessary conflict and prevents being perceived as difficult."*

Similarly, a young male manager in a logistics company noted: *"I sometimes hold back my input in meetings with senior leaders to avoid being seen as challenging their authority, even if my perspective could improve the project. It's a balancing act between being effective and not stepping on toes."*

The emotional work and ongoing self-monitoring that employees do to lessen the effects of misinterpreted assertiveness are demonstrated by these coping mechanisms. Adaptive behaviours can have unanticipated negative consequences, such as decreased authenticity, diminished confidence, and decreased engagement, even though they may momentarily lessen interpersonal conflict (Williams & McKinnon, 2022; Lee & Carpenter, 2021). Reliance on such tactics over time may stifle creativity and keep workers from offering their full range of expertise, which would eventually affect the effectiveness of the company. The fact that these tactics are so common further emphasizes how structural the problem is. In addition to interpersonal relationships,

organizational norms and leadership styles that unintentionally discourage assertive behaviour also force employees to adjust. As such, coping strategies are a response to systemic challenges rather than isolated interpersonal conflicts (Ibrahim & Primrose, 2022; Shore et al., 2020).

Organizations must move from reactive individual adjustments to proactive systemic change in order to address these issues. Mentorship programs for younger and minority employees, explicit communication policies that differentiate assertiveness from aggression, and leadership training centred on identifying and appreciating assertive communication are a few examples of interventions. Organizations can lessen the need for employees to engage in exhaustive adaptive behaviours by establishing a culture that appropriately interprets and rewards assertive behaviours. This will promote psychological safety and organizational effectiveness (Zheng et al., 2021; Martinez & Hebl, 2022). To sum up, employees' lived realities of overcoming misunderstandings about assertiveness are reflected in their coping mechanisms and adaptive behaviours. While these strategies can mitigate immediate risks, they also underscore the need for organizational interventions that address systemic biases, enabling employees to communicate confidently without fear of misjudgement.

5.3 Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

A thorough grasp of how assertive behaviours are misinterpreted in organizational settings is provided by the integration of quantitative and qualitative data. According to the quantitative analysis, the likelihood that assertiveness will be misconstrued as aggression or defiance is significantly predicted by gender, managerial age, and minority status. In particular, minority group members and female employees were more likely to be negatively perceived, and younger managers were more likely to be misunderstood. Results from logistic regression supported these patterns, demonstrating how hierarchical positioning and identity markers interact to influence perceptions in the workplace. The model correctly classified 72% of cases ($\beta = -0.43$ for managerial age; $\beta = 0.61$ for gender; $\beta = 0.58$ for minority status) (Lee & Kim, 2021; Hekman et al., 2021). In addition, the qualitative results offered deep, contextual understanding of the real-life experiences of workers overcoming these prejudices. Themes like gendered double standards, hierarchical resistance, misinterpretation of intent, and coping mechanisms demonstrated the complex ways that assertiveness is viewed and handled in various organizational contexts. Participants gave examples of how their assertive communication, which was meant to offer constructive criticism, make suggestions for improvements, or clarify instructions, was misunderstood as hostile or disrespectful. According to these accounts, navigating workplace dynamics requires emotional work, such as changing one's communication style, using softer language, or withholding information to prevent unfavourable opinions (Williams & McKinnon, 2022; Zheng et al., 2021).

Collectively, the mixed-methods evidence shows that assertiveness misperceptions are systemic rather than isolated. While qualitative narratives show how these biases appear in daily interactions and organizational practices, quantitative results pinpoint the demographic and structural predictors. This integration emphasizes how leadership behaviours, cultural norms, and organizational hierarchies are all infused with misconceptions. In addition to personal prejudices, larger institutional frameworks that uphold stereotyped standards of authority and communication also influence workers' experiences (Shore et al., 2020; Ibrahim & Primrose, 2022). Additionally, the combined results emphasize how experiences at work are intersectional. Because of overlapping identity and hierarchical factors, women, minority employees, and younger managers frequently face additional challenges. This convergence may make assertive behaviour even more misunderstood, which could have an impact on career advancement, job satisfaction, and organizational engagement. The study demonstrates the necessity of multi-level organizational interventions, such as training in bias awareness, leadership development, and updated performance evaluation systems that appropriately identify assertive behaviours as constructive rather than threatening, by combining quantitative trends with qualitative insights (Lee & Carpenter, 2021; Martinez & Hebl, 2022). In conclusion, a comprehensive view of assertiveness misperception is offered by the combination of quantitative and qualitative data. Emphasizing the significance of systemic strategies to promote inclusive and equitable workplace communication, it exposes both the structural predictors and the experiential realities of employees navigating organizational biases.

5.4 Researchers' Interpretation

According to the researchers, the results of this study provide compelling evidence that hierarchical cultures and ingrained stereotypes cause assertiveness to be consistently misunderstood in organizational settings. The data gathered for this study suggests that structural biases and power dynamics are more important than the idea that misperceptions are the result of interpersonal misunderstandings or differences in communication styles (Zhang & Cao, 2020). When quantitative and qualitative data come together, it becomes clear that misperceptions are influenced by overlapping factors like gender, managerial age, and minority status rather than being random or incidental. The systemic nature of this phenomenon is highlighted by the consistent reports of misinterpretation of assertive behaviours from female employees, members of minority groups, and younger managers (Hekman et al., 2021; Lee & Kim, 2021). The researchers support critical viewpoints in the literature that present this issue as a power and equity issue rather than just a communication breakdown between individuals. Because of traditional organizational hierarchies and implicit and explicit stereotypes, some employees' assertiveness is perceived as a challenge to authority rather than a professional trait. The chances for marginalized groups and younger leaders to fully and confidently participate in organizational decision-making processes are restricted by this misinterpretation, which perpetuates structural inequalities (Shore et al., 2020; Williams & McKinnon, 2022).

By highlighting the lived realities of workers who have to actively change their tone, language, or behaviour to avoid being perceived as hostile or challenging, the qualitative findings lend additional credence to this interpretation. These adjustments represent a great deal of emotional work and are a reflection of the larger organizational expectation that workers will follow biased standards rather than be judged on the basis of their contributions (Martinez & Hebl, 2022; Ibrahim & Primrose, 2022). The researchers contend that organizations should prioritize systemic reform over individual

adjustment in light of these findings. To get around biased structures, employees shouldn't have to soften or hide their assertiveness. Instead, organizations must implement policies and training initiatives that actively challenge stereotypes, promote equitable evaluation practices, and foster cultures that recognize assertiveness as a valuable communication skill rather than a threat. By addressing the structural roots of misperception, organizations can create environments that support inclusive, fair, and productive workplace interactions. In conclusion, the interpretation of this study's findings underscores that misperception of assertiveness is both a social and organizational issue, shaped by entrenched biases and hierarchical norms. Addressing it requires intentional, systemic interventions that go beyond training individuals, promoting equity and empowering all employees to communicate confidently.

5.5 Conclusion of Results

The results show that assertive actions are frequently misconstrued as aggression, especially by younger managers, women, and employees of colour. Significant correlations between demographic identity and perceptions were validated by statistical analyses, and the lived experiences that underlie these figures were revealed by qualitative themes. The results show that assertiveness is filtered through ingrained norms, organizational hierarchies, and social biases rather than being intrinsically problematic. The ramifications for organizations are obvious: employees will continue to face misperception, marginalization, and impeded career advancement unless deliberate efforts are made to change cultural perceptions of assertiveness.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study confirm and extend the growing body of scholarship that demonstrates how assertive behaviours are routinely misinterpreted as aggression in organizational contexts. The survey data, which showed that 65% of respondents perceived assertive behaviours as aggressive, reinforces the argument that the line between assertiveness and aggression is often blurred in practice. Importantly, this misperception was more pronounced for female employees, minority groups, and young male managers working under senior supervisors, highlighting the intersection of gender, age, hierarchy, and cultural norms in shaping how workplace behaviours are judged.

6.1 Alignment with Existing Literature

The results are consistent with a strong body of recent research. Recent research on organizational behaviour, for example, has shown that women are more likely to face consequences for being assertive because they are perceived as difficult or abrasive rather than confident (Livingston et al., 2020; Williams & Multhaup, 2022). This is in line with the current study's quantitative results, which indicated that female participants had higher negative opinions of assertiveness. Similar to this, minority workers, especially those from underrepresented cultural or ethnic groups, frequently experience discrimination in the workplace, with their assertiveness being more readily interpreted as animosity (Hekman et al., 2021). The qualitative interviews deepen this narrative by illustrating how individuals' lived experiences reflect structural biases. Participants described being labelled as "too direct" or "confrontational" even when using measured and respectful communication. These findings echo Zheng et al. (2021), who demonstrated that observer biases often override the intent of the communicator, leading to systematic misjudgements. Moreover, our data revealed that young male managers also experience misinterpretations of assertiveness, particularly from older, senior supervisors who may perceive assertiveness as arrogance or insubordination. This observation aligns with literature on intergenerational dynamics in the workplace, which shows that younger leaders often struggle to be taken seriously by older colleagues, especially when their communication style challenges entrenched hierarchies (Ng & Parry, 2021).

6.2 Gender Biases and Social Role Expectations

The key role that gender biases play in forming perceptions is one of the most compelling themes to come out of the survey and interview data. According to social role theory, men are linked to agentic traits like dominance and assertiveness, whereas women are expected to exhibit communal traits like warmth and compliance (Eagly & Wood, 2019). These prescriptive norms are broken when women engage in assertive behaviours, which frequently results in negative reactions. This claim is supported by the current study, which shows that assertiveness in women is disproportionately interpreted as aggression. The literature is complicated, though, by the discovery that young male managers are also susceptible to misinterpretation. It implies that even among men, assertiveness is not always rewarded and that it depends on factors like seniority, age, and organizational placement. This nuance points to a broader dynamic where deviation from expected hierarchical roles, regardless of gender, can trigger negative attributions. Thus, Social Role Theory alone may not fully explain the phenomenon, Attribution Theory provides an additional layer by highlighting how observers interpret behaviour based on preconceived assumptions about intent and authority (Martinko et al., 2020).

6.3 Cultural and Organizational Norms

Another significant factor influencing how assertive behaviours are viewed is culture. Because assertiveness was framed as compromising group harmony, participants from collectivist backgrounds reported feeling more penalized for it. Respondents from individualistic cultures, on the other hand, thought assertiveness was more acceptable, despite the fact that it was still susceptible to hierarchical and gendered biases. This is consistent with research by Huang et al. (2020), who contend that cultural norms around communication differ, with assertiveness being problematic in collectivist cultures but valued in Western ones. These perceptions were also influenced by organizational culture. While assertiveness was more easily viewed as positive in

flat, collaborative organizations, it was more likely to be viewed as insubordinate in rigid, hierarchical ones. This is consistent with Einarsen et al. (2021), who demonstrate that organizational structures can either reinforce or mitigate misinterpretations of behaviour.

6.4 Consequences for Employees

These misconceptions have serious repercussions. Being mistakenly classified as aggressive harms employees' relationships with coworkers, limits their chances of advancing in their careers, and lowers their level of job satisfaction. Young male managers talked about having tense relationships with senior supervisors who thought their assertiveness was disrespectful, while several female participants said they were passed over for promotions because they were "too difficult." These accounts align with studies that demonstrate a direct correlation between employee disengagement and higher turnover intentions and inaccurate perceptions of assertiveness (Naseer et al., 2020). Furthermore, minority participants described a "double burden," whereby they had to excessively control their communication style in order to prevent negative labelling. This phenomenon is known as "emotional tax" in contemporary diversity literature (Travis & Thorpe-Moscon, 2021). This need for constant self-monitoring can lead to stress, burnout, and feelings of exclusion.

6.5 Consequences for Organizations

There are hidden costs associated with misinterpreting assertiveness from an organizational standpoint. One recurring theme in the interviews was decreased productivity, as staff members frequently refrained from offering suggestions during meetings out of concern that they would be viewed unfavourably. This self-censorship stifles creativity and teamwork. Additionally, companies run the risk of losing high-potential workers, especially minorities and women, who might look for workplaces that value their communication styles. This result is consistent with the expanding body of research on diversity and inclusion, which contends that bias in communication norms and performance reviews reduces organizational effectiveness (Shore et al., 2020). Leadership succession is also at risk due to the misunderstanding of young male managers' assertiveness. If senior leaders dismiss younger managers as arrogant rather than confident, organizations may inadvertently stifle leadership development and perpetuate generational divides. This has long-term implications for organizational adaptability and resilience in fast-changing environments (Ng & Parry, 2021).

6.6 Researchers' Viewpoint

In reflecting on these findings and the broader debate, the researchers support the perspective that misinterpretations of assertiveness are primarily the product of bias rather than intrinsic flaws in assertive communication itself. While some scholars suggest that individuals should adjust their communication style to fit contextual expectations (Huang et al., 2020), the researchers argue that this places an undue burden on employees, particularly those from marginalized groups. The responsibility should not rest solely on the communicator but on organizations to cultivate cultures where diverse communication styles are recognized and respected. The researchers also contend that focusing only on gender as the explanatory variable is insufficient. The evidence from young male managers in this study indicates that hierarchies and intergenerational dynamics are equally important in shaping how assertiveness is perceived. This broadens the debate beyond gender to include power, authority, and organizational design.

7. Recommendations

Based on the results and discussion, several targeted recommendations emerge that can help organizations address the persistent misperception of assertive behaviours as aggression or defiance. These recommendations are grounded in empirical evidence, communication theory, and best practices in organizational development.

7.1. Implement Training Programs

Creating organized training programs for managers and staff is the first step in correcting misunderstandings about assertiveness. In order to help participants understand how tone, body language, and context affect perception, training should clearly distinguish between assertiveness, passivity, and aggression (Lee & Carpenter, 2021). Workshops on communication skills can dramatically lower stereotyping and misattribution in professional interactions, according to organizational psychology research (Chen & Houser, 2022). In order to demonstrate how the same assertive statements may be interpreted differently based on the speaker's gender, age, or seniority, training should also include role-play scenarios. Unconscious biases can be dismantled with the aid of this experiential component. Organizations can cultivate a workforce capable of communicating with confidence and respect by instituting such training.

7.2. Promote Inclusive Organizational Culture

A cultural shift is necessary for long-lasting change, in addition to training. Perceptions of assertive behaviour are significantly influenced by organizational culture (Al-Yahya & Zhu, 2020). Assertiveness is often interpreted as insubordination in cultures with strict hierarchies or traditional gender norms. As a result, organizations should consciously work to foster inclusivity by, for example, incorporating respect for various communication styles into their mission and values statements. This could entail setting up committees dedicated to diversity and inclusion whose job it is to keep an eye on communication standards and suggest changes. Additionally, cultural audits can be used to pinpoint instances in which assertiveness is

disproportionately punished, especially for minority workers, women, and younger male managers negotiating power dynamics (Berkovich & Eyal, 2021). Shifting organizational culture in this way not only enhances fairness but also encourages innovation by legitimizing voices that might otherwise be suppressed.

7.3. Revise Performance Evaluation Criteria

Misconceptions about assertive behaviour are frequently reinforced by performance reviews. People whose communication style is mistakenly perceived as confrontational may face penalties under traditional evaluation frameworks. Subjective managerial evaluations, according to research, usually show bias instead of real performance results (Nguyen et al., 2022). Therefore, organizations should update their evaluation systems to include behaviour-based, objective criteria that recognize the positive contributions of assertiveness, like advocating for moral behaviour, expressing ideas clearly, or resolving conflicts effectively. The impact of a single supervisor's skewed perception can also be lessened by implementing multi-rater or 360-degree feedback mechanisms (Zhang & Akhtar, 2021). Organizations can make sure that workers aren't unjustly punished for using communication styles that support productive workplace operations by redefining assertiveness as a leadership competency.

7.4. Supportive Leadership Practices

Leaders have a significant impact on how their teams view communication. In order to implement supportive leadership practices, managers and supervisors must be trained to recognize the difference between assertiveness and aggression and to react appropriately when assertive communication occurs. This entails promoting candid discussions, setting an example of inclusive communication, and giving feedback that confirms workers' intentions rather than concentrating only on delivery or tone (Ibrahim & Primrose, 2022). Furthermore, it should be emphasized in leadership training how personal biases, whether they be based on gender, race, or generational hierarchies, can skew assessments of assertive workers. Studies show that inclusive communication and emotional intelligence-focused leadership development programs can dramatically lower employee attrition and increase engagement (Thomas & Hardy, 2021). For younger male managers, who are often misperceived as arrogant or confrontational by senior supervisors, mentorship programs can provide support, helping them navigate organizational hierarchies while retaining their assertive communication style.

7.5. Establish Mechanisms for Continuous Feedback and Reflection

Organizations should establish avenues for ongoing feedback in addition to the aforementioned tactics, such as open-door policies, employee forums, or anonymous surveys. Through these channels, staff members can report situations in which assertive behaviour was misunderstood, offering insightful information for organizational analysis and change. The way assertiveness is perceived and valued can be gradually changed by regular communication climate monitoring in conjunction with reflective techniques like leadership journaling and organized debriefing sessions (Gao et al., 2023).

7.6. Integrate Policy Reforms to Protect Assertive Employees

Lastly, policy changes ought to formalize safeguards for workers who use assertive communication. Policies that address bullying, discrimination, and mistreatment in the workplace should specifically acknowledge that unfair treatment can result from misunderstandings about communication style. Organizations demonstrate their commitment to fairness and acknowledgement of the problem by incorporating this recognition into their human resource policies (Williams & McKinnon, 2022). When combined, these suggestions suggest a systemic strategy as opposed to isolated fixes. Leadership development, performance management reform, training, and culture change must all be coordinated. Organizations can only lessen the prejudice-driven misunderstanding of assertive behaviours and create cultures where confident communication is valued as a strength rather than a threat by implementing such a thorough approach.

8. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the phenomenon that assertive behaviours in the workplace are frequently misinterpreted as defiance or aggression. The research has elucidated the complex nature of this misconception and pinpointed the organizational, cultural, and demographic elements that influence it using a mixed-methods approach that comprised both quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. According to the findings, these misunderstandings are neither sporadic nor insignificant; rather, they consistently disadvantage particular employee groups, particularly women, people from underrepresented groups, and junior managers negotiating hierarchical structures. The study's theoretical foundation in Attribution Theory and Social Role Theory was crucial in interpreting the results. Deviations from expected social or gender roles, like women being assertive or young male managers defying hierarchical norms, are viewed negatively, which is explained by social role theory (Eagly & Wood, 2019). Because of preexisting biases, observers frequently interpret neutral or constructive assertiveness as hostile or insubordinate. Attribution theory helps to clarify how observers attribute intent to behaviours (Martinko et al., 2020). Collectively, these frameworks highlight how crucial it is to take into account both personal cognitive processes and societal expectations when analysing workplace dynamics. According to quantitative findings, women and minority employees were most likely to report that assertive behaviours are viewed as aggressive, with 65% of workers saying this. A disproportionate number of young male managers were also impacted, especially in companies with strict hierarchical structures. Age, gender, and minority status are significant predictors of misperceptions of assertive behaviours, according to statistical analysis using chi-square tests, ANOVA, and logistic regression. These findings demonstrate how organizational positioning and identity intersect to shape employee experiences (Hekman et al., 2021; Ng & Parry, 2021). By examining

the real-life experiences of assertive workers, qualitative analysis expanded on these discoveries. Four main themes surfaced: (1) misinterpretation of intent, wherein employees' professional communication was reinterpreted as confrontational; (2) gendered double standards, which reflected the expectation in society for women to be communal rather than agentic; (3) hierarchical resistance, wherein senior colleagues resisted younger managers; and (4) coping strategies, which included adaptive communication techniques to reduce misperception. These accounts demonstrate the emotional toll that dealing with prejudiced organizational cultures takes on workers (Johnson et al., 2023; Travis & Thorpe-Moscon, 2021).

The results have significant ramifications for organizations and employees alike. Misconceptions about assertiveness can cause emotional exhaustion, a decrease in job satisfaction, and a barrier to career advancement. Minority and female employees frequently bear a "double burden," meaning they must continuously adjust their communication to prevent unfavourable labelling while still being productive professionals. Intergenerational conflicts in hierarchical workplaces are highlighted by the particular difficulties faced by young male managers, whose assertive leadership is occasionally misinterpreted as disrespect or arrogance. These misconceptions have a negative impact on an organization's ability to retain talent, innovate, and be productive. Employee performance may be harmed by self-censorship, idea withholding, or disengagement from collaborative processes due to fear of being mislabelled. Furthermore, biased performance reviews have the potential to perpetuate systemic injustices by disadvantageously affecting assertive people who are mistakenly viewed as aggressive (Shore et al., 2020; Naseer et al., 2020). Businesses run the risk of maintaining unfair working conditions and losing out on chances to fully utilize their employees' potential if they don't acknowledge and address these dynamics. Additionally, the study adds to the current scholarly discussion about the causes of misinterpreted assertiveness. Although some academics contend that communication style differences are the main cause of misperception (Zhang & Akhtar, 2021; Huang et al., 2020), the current research indicates that systemic biases, hierarchical norms, and cultural expectations are just as important, if not more so. The data from young male managers shows that age, seniority, and organizational structure are all misinterpreted as aspects of assertiveness in addition to gender. This promotes a more thorough comprehension of workplace dynamics by highlighting the need for interventions that target both organizational systems and individual behaviours. Practically speaking, the study suggests a number of methods to counteract the false impression of assertiveness. These include initiatives to promote an inclusive culture that values a variety of communication styles, training programs that help employees understand the difference between assertiveness and aggression, updated performance evaluation standards that lessen bias, supportive leadership practices that model and reinforce constructive communication, and policy changes that shield workers from unjust treatment. By following these suggestions, an atmosphere where assertiveness is valued as a professional quality rather than a challenge to authority can be established, promoting equity and efficiency (Lee & Carpenter, 2021; Ibrahim & Primrose, 2022).

From a theoretical standpoint, this study supports the usefulness of Attribution Theory and Social Role Theory in elucidating erroneous beliefs about assertiveness. It also draws attention to the necessity of more complex frameworks that incorporate organizational culture, hierarchy, and intersectionality. Future studies should examine other aspects like leadership style, organizational climate, and cultural background to gain a deeper understanding of how intricate social and structural elements interact to shape perception. Longitudinal studies may shed more light on how these dynamics change over time, especially as organizations start addressing bias through interventions. The study also highlights how organizations have an ethical obligation to identify and lessen bias. Workers shouldn't have to over adapt or repress their innate communication styles in order to get by at work. Instead, organizations must cultivate environments that respect assertiveness as a valuable tool for collaboration, problem-solving, and leadership. By doing so, they not only enhance individual well-being but also promote innovation, engagement, and organizational resilience. In summary, this study shows that gender, minority status, age, hierarchy, and organizational culture all have an impact on the systemic problem of assertiveness being mistaken for aggression. The effectiveness of the organization, career advancement, and employee satisfaction all depend on the accurate interpretation of assertive behaviours. In order to guarantee that assertiveness is rewarded rather than punished, the results emphasize the significance of multi-level interventions, such as training, cultural change, leadership development, and policy reform. By implementing these strategies, companies can establish fair and inclusive work environments where assertive communication is valued as a strength rather than a weakness. This research contributes to both theory and practice by providing empirical evidence of the misperception of assertive behaviours and offering actionable strategies for change. It underscores that fostering equitable, psychologically safe, and high-performing organizations requires more than individual adaptation; it necessitates systemic attention to bias, hierarchy, and culture. Ultimately, this study emphasizes that assertiveness, when appropriately recognized and supported, is a key driver of effective communication, leadership, and organizational success.

9. References

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