Uncertainty-Evoking Leader Rhetoric and Support for Unexpected Leaders

by

Kathryn M. Kincaid

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Department of Psychology

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Abstract

Group members prefer leaders who are prototypical of their group and adopt a democratic (vs. autocratic) leadership style (Hogg & van Knippenberg, 2003; Lippitt and White, 1943). However, feelings of uncertainty can weaken these preferences and increase support for non-prototypical and autocratic leaders, who are typically seen as undesirable (Rast et al., 2013; 2015). Astute non-prototypical or autocratic leaders may intentionally evoke feelings of uncertainty among group members to elevate support for themselves. The current research examines uncertainty-evoking leader rhetoric and its effects on relative support for autocratic and non-prototypical leaders. In two experiments, participants (N = 138; N = 115) evaluated a prospective leader where I manipulated this leader's rhetoric (high versus low uncertainty) and the leader's prototypicality (Study 1) or leadership style (Study 2). Results indicated that among group members who were not strongly identified with their group, prototypical leaders were evaluated more favorably than non-prototypical leaders when they did not evoke uncertainty. However, this advantage disappeared when they used high uncertainty evoking rhetoric (Study 1). Furthermore, we found a persistent preference for non-autocratic leaders, regardless of leader rhetoric used (Study 2). These results suggest that using rhetoric to evoke feelings of uncertainty may be an effective strategy for non-prototypical leaders to garner support, but this advantage may not extend to autocratic leaders.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Kathryn Kincaid. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name “Uncertainty-evoking leader rhetoric and support for non-prototypical leadership,” No. 00086868, January 28, 2019, and Project Name “Uncertainty-evoking leader rhetoric and support for autocratic leadership,” No. 00092302, August 30, 2019.

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Introduction

We live in an uncertain world. At present, we're facing a global pandemic of a novel virus, an economy in turmoil, a war in Ukraine, and a litany of other modern uncertainties and crises. To deal with times of uncertainties and changes, especially uncertainties that challenge one's sense of identity in the world, people often look to their groups and leaders for direction (Rast, 2015; Rast, Hogg, Storey, Hartley, Denis, Hart, & Ulrich, 2017). Group leaders are expected to protect their groups and marshal them toward a better future, where uncertainty is minimized or resolved. This uncertainty can lead to non-traditional, unexpected, and potentially undesirable leaders gaining influence and support among followers (see Rast, Hogg, & Randsley de Moura, 2018). Feelings of uncertainty, especially uncertainty relating to the self, have been shown to significantly affect leader preference and lead to elevated support for leaders who are typically seen as undesirable (e.g., Gaffney, Rast, Hackett, & Hogg, 2014; Rast, Gaffney, Hogg, & Crisp, 2012; Rast, Hogg, & Giessner, 2013, 2016).

Social Identity Theory

Leaders are inexorably connected to the groups they lead, and groups often serve an important identity function for their members. Social identity is the portion of the self-concept that people derive from their group memberships. Henri Tajfel (1972) defined social identity as "the individual's knowledge that he [*sic*] belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him [*sic*] of this group membership." For example, people may define themselves in part based on their political party, profession, gender, or religious group. In this way, groups fulfill an important identity-function for their members (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987).

People cognitively represent groups in terms of their prototype, or the set of attributes (e.g., attitudes, values, and behaviors) that best define the group in a social context. Group prototypes capture similarities within the group as well as differences between the ingroup and relevant outgroups. Prototypes are derived by maximizing metacontrast – the ratio of perceived intergroup differences to intragroup differences – and therefore accentuate similarities within groups and differences between groups (Hogg, 2006). Ingroup prototypes are polarized away from relevant outgroups, and thus tend to capture ideal rather than actual group attributes (Abrams & Hogg, 2010). Prototypes allow members to define who they are and who they are not as a group with respect to outgroups (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987).

Social categorization of self and others into groups allows people to understand themselves and others as relative approximations of their group's prototype. When social categorization occurs, group members are perceptually depersonalized, or viewed in terms of their similarity to the group prototype rather than as individuals. Group members who closely approximate the group prototype represent an important source of information about the ingroup's identity, and thus provide information about how to think, feel, and behave (Hogg, 2012; Hogg & Gaffney, 2014). Because they provide this information about the ingroup, prototypical group members are disproportionately influential and likely to be viewed as leaders.

The social identity theory of leadership (Hogg, 2001; Hogg & van Knippenberg, 2003; Hogg, van Knippenberg, & Rast, 2012) conceptualizes leadership as a fundamentally group process, arising from self and social categorization processes where group prototypical members (members who best represent the attitudes, values, and beliefs of the group) are best positioned to attain leadership. As one's group membership becomes increasingly salient or an important basis for self-definition, evaluations of leaders increasingly depend on the extent to which the

leader embodies the group prototype. Group prototypical leaders are perceived as more trustworthy and more likely to act in the group's best interest (Giessner & van Knippenberg, 2008). Prototypical leaders are generally perceived as more effective, influential, and receive more support and trust than non-prototypical leaders (for overview, see van Knippenberg, 2011).

Uncertainty-Identity Theory

Contributing to social identity theory, uncertainty-identity theory explores the motivational underpinnings of social identity and social categorization processes. Uncertainty-identity theory (Hogg, 2000, 2007, 2012) argues that feelings of uncertainty, particularly uncertainty relating to one's self and identity, are aversive. Self-uncertainty can be highly anxiety provoking and stressful – it makes us feel unable to predict or control our world and what will happen to us in it. As such, humans are motivated to reduce this uncertainty. While there are many possible ways to reduce uncertainty, group identification is particularly effective. Joining a group or identifying more strongly with a group is associated with social categorization of self and others, which provides one with a sense of social identity and depersonalizes attitudes, feelings, and behaviors to conform to the group prototype. Because the group prototype is shared, one's worldview and self-concept are consensually validated by fellow group members. Thus, social categorization and group identification makes one's own and other's behavior more predictable, reducing aversive feelings of uncertainty. Empirical tests of uncertainty-identity theory have shown that people identify more strongly with groups when they are uncertain, especially when the uncertainty is relevant to the self (e.g., Grieve & Hogg, 1999; Mullin & Hogg, 1998; Reid & Hogg, 2005; for meta-analytic review, see Choi & Hogg, 2019).

Some types of groups are better equipped than others to reduce, control, or protect against feelings of uncertainty. One characteristic of groups that can make them especially suited to

reduce uncertainty is entitativity, or the extent to which a group forms a cohesive entity. Highly entitative groups are especially "groupy": they have clear boundaries, high internal homogeneity, frequent social interaction, clear internal structure, common goals, and common fate (Campbell, 1958; Hamilton & Sherman, 1996). Highly entitative groups are especially well-equipped to reduce uncertainty because they provide a clear, unambiguous, and consensual group prototype. Under uncertainty people prefer to identify with highly entitative groups, identify more strongly with them, accentuate the perceived entitativity of groups they already belong to, and seek to make the groups they already belong to more entitative (Hogg, 2004, 2005; Hogg, Sherman, Dierselhuis, Maitner, & Moffitt, 2007; Sherman, Hogg, & Maitner, 2009). When self-uncertainty is elevated and entitativity is taken to an extreme, these groups can develop rigid boundaries, orthodox ideologies, intolerance of dissent, and hierarchical power and leadership structures in which leaders are strong and directive (Hogg, 2004, 2005; Hogg, Meehan, & Farquharson, 2010; Rast, Hogg, & Giessner, 2013).

Uncertainty and Leadership

In times of uncertainty, leadership becomes increasingly important (e.g., Weber, 1947). Group members often look to leaders to provide a clear direction and reduce their uncertainty. Taken together, uncertainty-identity theory and the social identity theory of leadership provide a framework for understanding the effects of uncertainty on leadership preference. A central tenet of the social identity theory of leadership (Hogg, 2001; Hogg & van Knippenberg, 2003; Hogg, van Knippenberg, & Rast, 2012) is that group members tend to prefer leaders who are prototypical of their group. Prototypical leaders embody the group's prototype and share the same attitudes, values, and beliefs as group members. These group prototypical leaders are

perceived as more effective, more influential, and receive more support and trust than non-prototypical leaders (for overview, see van Knippenberg, 2011).

However, self-uncertainty may weaken or even eliminate the usual preferential support for prototypical leaders. When group members are faced with potential or prospective leaders, elevated self-uncertainty may lead members to be supportive of realistic leader options largely irrespective of the leader's prototypicality. Under uncertainty, people may increasingly support any realistic candidate who can provide leadership and help reduce their uncertainty. Rast, Gaffney, Hogg, and Crisp (2012) showed that prospective prototypical leaders were supported more strongly than non-prototypical leaders, but this advantage was significantly weakened or disappeared under high uncertainty. This effect was driven by elevated support for non-prototypical leaders under high levels of self-uncertainty, rather than weakened support for prototypical leaders. Thus, self-uncertainty has been shown to moderate the relationship between leader prototypicality and leader support, such that group members are generally more supportive of non-prototypical leaders under high than low uncertainty.

Just as uncertainty moderates the relationship between leader prototypicality and leader support, uncertainty has also been shown to moderate the relationship between particular leadership styles and leader support. Group members generally prefer leaders who adopt a democratic and inclusive leadership style over an autocratic style (Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 1939; Lippitt and White, 1943). The leadership literature (e.g., Bass & Bass, 2008; Yukl, 2010) characterizes an autocratic leader as one who makes all the important decisions, is primarily concerned with task accomplishment rather than the happiness or satisfaction of followers, maintains considerable social distance from followers, and motivates followers by punishment or the threat of punishment rather than by rewards. Autocratic leaders are generally less preferable,

less effective, and threatening to group stability (De Cremer, 2006; Gastil, 1994; Van Vugt, Jepson, Hart, & De Cremer, 2003).

Despite this general preference for non-autocratic leaders, history is replete with examples of autocratic leaders successfully gaining power and exerting great influence. Steve Jobs, often described as an autocratic leader, gained power and influence in the midst of an uncertain technology field and economy, Adolf Hitler used autocratic leadership during the uncertainty of post-war and depression ravaged Europe, and current Rwandan president Paul Kagame emerged in the turmoil and uncertainty following the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Despite criticism for his autocratic leadership style, President Kagame maintains a high level of support among his followers even today. Although non-autocratic leadership is generally preferred, in times of uncertainty, group members may have an accentuated desire for strong, directive leadership to help manage the uncertainty and maintain their sense of identity. Autocratic leaders are particularly effective at constructing a clear vision of their group's prototype (Reicher & Hopkins, 2003), which may help reduce followers' identity-related uncertainty.

Research supports the idea that uncertainty may facilitate the emergence of autocratic leadership. Pierro, Mannetti, De Grada, Livi, and Kruglanski (2003) found that groups with members high in need for cognitive closure (a construct related to desire to reduce uncertainty) were more likely to develop an autocratic leadership structure compared to groups low in need for cognitive closure. Self-uncertainty has also been shown to elevate implicit associations of autocratic leadership with success among people with low and unstable self-esteem (Schoel, Bluemke, Mueller, & Stahlberg, 2011). Using a survey of organizational employees, Rast, Hogg, and Giessner (2013) found that less self-uncertain employees were more supportive of a non-autocratic than autocratic leader, but this pattern was reversed for more self-uncertain

participants, who were more supportive of an autocratic than non-autocratic leader. These findings suggest that self-uncertainty may reduce the typical preference for democratic leaders and elevate support for autocratic leaders.

Leader Rhetoric

Communication is a key aspect of leadership, and leaders use their rhetoric to shape group identity, mobilize followers, and elevate support for themselves. In some cases, leaders may use their rhetoric to intentionally evoke feelings of uncertainty in their followers. This can be seen frequently among candidates for public leadership positions, who may focus heavily on economic, cultural, and political uncertainty in the run-up to elections. Marris (1996) suggests that uncertainty is a resource used by individuals and groups to gain power over others. In this view, leaders engaging in uncertainty-evoking rhetoric use uncertainty as a strategic resource, often with the goal of garnering support for themselves.

Tests of uncertainty-identity theory and the relationship between uncertainty and leader preference have typically manipulated, primed, or measured self-uncertainty directly (Choi & Hogg, 2019). The present research aims to extend this work by examining whether uncertainty evoked by a group's leader can have similar effects. Hohman, Hogg, and Bligh (2010) studied the effects of uncertainty-evoking leader rhetoric on group identification by asking participants to read a leader's speech and either focus on aspects of the speech that made them feel uncertain or made them feel certain. Hohman and colleagues found that uncertainty-evoking leader rhetoric, just like self-uncertainty manipulated in other ways, can strengthen group identification. Although uncertainty rhetoric has been shown to strengthen group identification, its effects on leader support remain unstudied.

The Present Research

The present research aims to examine the effects of uncertainty-evoking leader rhetoric on leader support, specifically focusing on support for unexpected leaders. In two studies, we compare the effects of leader rhetoric (high uncertainty vs. low uncertainty) on relative support for prototypical vs. non-prototypical leaders (Study 1) and autocratic vs. non-autocratic leaders (Study 2), in which a non-prototypical leader and autocratic leader are both conceptualized as unexpected leaders. We hypothesized that uncertainty-evoking leader rhetoric will be an effective strategy for unexpected leaders to elevate support for themselves. Therefore, we expect to see that high uncertainty-evoking leader rhetoric will be associated with elevated relative support for both the non-prototypical leader (Study 1) and the autocratic leader (Study 2).

Study 1

In Study 1, participants read about a student who was ostensibly being considered for an open leadership position on campus. Participants read a segment of the leader candidate's campaign platform, which was constructed to manipulate both leader rhetoric (high uncertainty vs. low uncertainty) and leader prototypicality (prototypical vs. non-prototypical). The dependent variables were participants' evaluations of the leadership candidate.

I expected that leader rhetoric (high vs. low uncertainty) would moderate the effects of leader prototypicality. I hypothesized that when the leader used low uncertainty rhetoric, the prototypical leader would be evaluated more favorably than the non-prototypical leader (H1), but when the leader used high uncertainty rhetoric, the prototypical and non-prototypical leaders would receive equivalent evaluations (H2). Thus, I predicted that high uncertainty rhetoric would weaken the prototypicality advantage relative to low uncertainty rhetoric.

Method

Participants and design. Participants were 138 undergraduate students (63.5% female, *n* = 87; 36.5% male, *n* = 50) recruited from the University of Alberta psychology research participation pool. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 26 (*M* = 19, *SD* = 1.36). The majority reported being Canadian (55.1%, *n* = 76), with the next largest group being Chinese (9.4%, *n* = 13). The study was introduced as a leadership study and students received partial course credit for their participation. There were two manipulated predictor variables (leader rhetoric: high uncertainty vs. low uncertainty, leader prototypicality: prototypical vs. non-prototypical) and one measured predictor variable (group identification). The key dependent variables were three measures of leader evaluation: leader support, leader trust, and perceived leader effectiveness.

Procedure and materials. Participants came to a laboratory and occupied separate cubicles, where they received an explanation of the purpose of the study, ostensibly to examine how students respond to different kinds of leaders. Participants first provided basic demographic information regarding age, ethnicity, gender, and year in school. Next, participants completed a measure of their identification with the University of Alberta, adapted from measures of group identification used in prior work (e.g., Hogg & Hains, 1996; 1998; Hogg, Sherman, Dierselhuis, Maitner, & Moffitt, 2007). Group identification was measured by four items: (1) "Being a student at the University of Alberta is important to my identity," (2) "I often think about myself as a student at the University of Alberta," (3) "My identity as a University of Alberta student influences my life choices a lot," and (4) "My identity as a University of Alberta student influences my daily decisions a lot"; 1 = *Strongly disagree*, 9 = *Strongly agree*.

Following the initial questionnaire, participants read a vignette about a student ostensibly campaigning for an open leadership position on campus. Participants were provided a segment of

this leader candidate's campaign platform, which was constructed to manipulate both leader rhetoric (high uncertainty vs. low uncertainty) and leader prototypicality (prototypical vs. non-prototypical). Leader prototypicality was manipulated in the first paragraph. In the prototypical condition, the leader described themselves as sharing attributes with and being typical and representative of other students at the university. The campaign platform included statements such as "As a typical undergraduate student at this university, I feel as though I represent the interests, values, and opinions of undergraduate students very well." In the non-prototypical condition, the leader described themselves as not sharing many attributes and being less typical of the student body. The platform included statements such as "As an untypical student at this university, I will do my best to represent the interests, values, and opinions of students." This manipulation of leader prototypicality has been successfully used in previously published research (for details, see Rast et al., 2012).

The second paragraph of the leader statement manipulated high or low uncertainty-evoking leader rhetoric. In the high uncertainty condition, the candidate evoked uncertainty related to students' job prospects and post-graduation outcomes. In this condition, the leader's platform included statements such as "Data on post-graduation outcomes for UofA students show that job opportunities after graduation are uncertain and difficult to predict," and "Students are often unsure about what is expected of them as University of Alberta students and what they need to do to ensure they secure a good job after graduation." In the low uncertainty condition, the leader's platform included statements such as "Data on post-graduation outcomes for UofA students show that job opportunities after graduation are relatively certain and easy to predict," and "Students are often sure about what is expected of them as University of Alberta students and what they need to do to ensure they secure a good job after graduation." This manipulation

was pilot tested and found to be effective in inducing high or low feelings of self-uncertainty, as measured by a six-item self-uncertainty measure adapted from Rast and colleagues (2012) which included statements such as “I am uncertain about myself,” “I am worried about my future,” and “I am concerned about my place in the world”; 1 = *Strongly disagree*, 7 = *Strongly agree*.

Next, participants were asked to evaluate the leader. Participants completed measures of the three dependent variables pertaining to leader evaluation: leader support, leader trust, and perceived leader effectiveness. Leader support was measured by six items (Rast et al., 2012) in which participants responded to statements about the leader: (1) "This leader is very effective," (2) "This leader represents the interests of the University of Alberta very well," (3) "This leader fits well at the University of Alberta," (4) "I am likely to trust this leader as a leader of the University of Alberta," (5) "I am a strong supporter of this leader," and (6) "This leader is a very favorable candidate for future leadership positions at the University of Alberta"; 1 = *Strongly disagree*, 9 = *Strongly agree* ($\alpha = .96$). Leader trust was measured by six items (Giessner & van Knippenberg, 2008) using the same response scale: (1) "I trust this leader absolutely," (2) "I think this leader does the right things," (3) "I think this leader is trustworthy," (4) "This leader is very committed to the University of Alberta," (5) "This leader wants the best for the University of Alberta," and (6) "This leader aims to gain benefits for all of the University of Alberta" ($\alpha = .88$). Finally, perceived leader effectiveness was measured by four items (van Knippenberg & van Knippenberg, 2005): (1) "This is a good leader," (2) "This leader is very effective," (3) "This leader leads the group in a way which motivates others," and (4) "I would like working together with this leader" ($\alpha = .96$). Together, these three scales represent the measures of leader evaluation.

As a manipulation check, participants completed a six-item measure of leader prototypicality (van Knippenberg & van Knippenberg, 2005): (1) "The leader represents what is characteristic of students at the University of Alberta," (2) "The leader is representative of students at the University of Alberta," (3) "The leader is a good example of the kind of people who study at the University of Alberta," (4) "The leader stands for what students at the University of Alberta have in common," (5) "The leader is representative of the kind of people who study at the University of Alberta," and (6) "The leader is very similar to most students at the University of Alberta"; 1 = *Strongly disagree*, 9 = *Strongly agree* ($\alpha = .95$). Finally, participants were thanked for their time and fully debriefed.

Results

There were three predictor variables (leader rhetoric, leader prototypicality, and group identification), and one dependent measure of leader evaluation comprised of three subscales (leader support, leader trust, and leader effectiveness). Because group identification was a continuous variable, the data were analyzed using hierarchical multiple regression. Following the suggestion of Aiken and West (1991), all predictor variables were mean centered, interaction terms were calculated, and simple slope analyses were conducted for significant interactions. Table 1 shows the means, SDs, correlations, and reliabilities of all main variables for Study 1.

Background variables and manipulation checks. The regression of age, gender, and ethnicity revealed no significant effects on any of the leader evaluation measures, therefore these variables were removed from subsequent analyses. The manipulation of leader prototypicality was found to be effective. Participants perceived the prototypical leader candidate ($M = 5.25$, $SD = 1.68$) as significantly more prototypical than the non-prototypical candidate ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 1.75$), $F(1, 136) = 17.45$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .11$

Leader support. Leader prototypicality, leader rhetoric, and group identification were entered at Step 1 of the hierarchical linear regression. The three main effects accounted for significant variance in leader support, $R^2 = .10$, $F(3, 134) = 4.979$, $p = .003$. As predicted, the prototypical leader was evaluated more highly than the non-prototypical leader, $\beta = .56$, $t = 3.804$, $p < .001$. The main effects of leader rhetoric and group identification on leader support were not significant. The two-way interactions were entered at Step 2, and did not account for significantly more variance in leader support, $\Delta R^2 = .01$, $F(3, 131) = .71$, $p = .54$. However, the entry of the three-way interaction at Step 3 accounted for significantly more variance, $\Delta R^2 = .03$, $F(1, 130) = 4.67$, $p < .05$. The three-way interaction accounted for significant variance in leader support, $\beta = .32$, $t = 2.16$, $p < .05$ (see Figure 1).

Among those who were not strongly identified with the university (low identifiers), simple slope analyses revealed that the prototypical leader received greater support than the non-prototypical leader when the leader used low uncertainty rhetoric ($\beta = .78$, $t = 2.74$, $p < .01$), but this advantage disappeared when the leader used high uncertainty-evoking rhetoric ($\beta = -.06$, $t = -.21$, $p = .83$), and the prototypical and non-prototypical candidates received equivalent support.

Among those who were strongly identified with the university (high identifiers), simple slopes analyses revealed that the prototypical leader received greater support than the non-prototypical leader when the leader used high uncertainty rhetoric ($\beta = .93$, $t = 3.36$, $p < .001$), but this preference was weakened when the leader used low uncertainty rhetoric ($\beta = .48$, $t = 1.52$, $p = .13$).

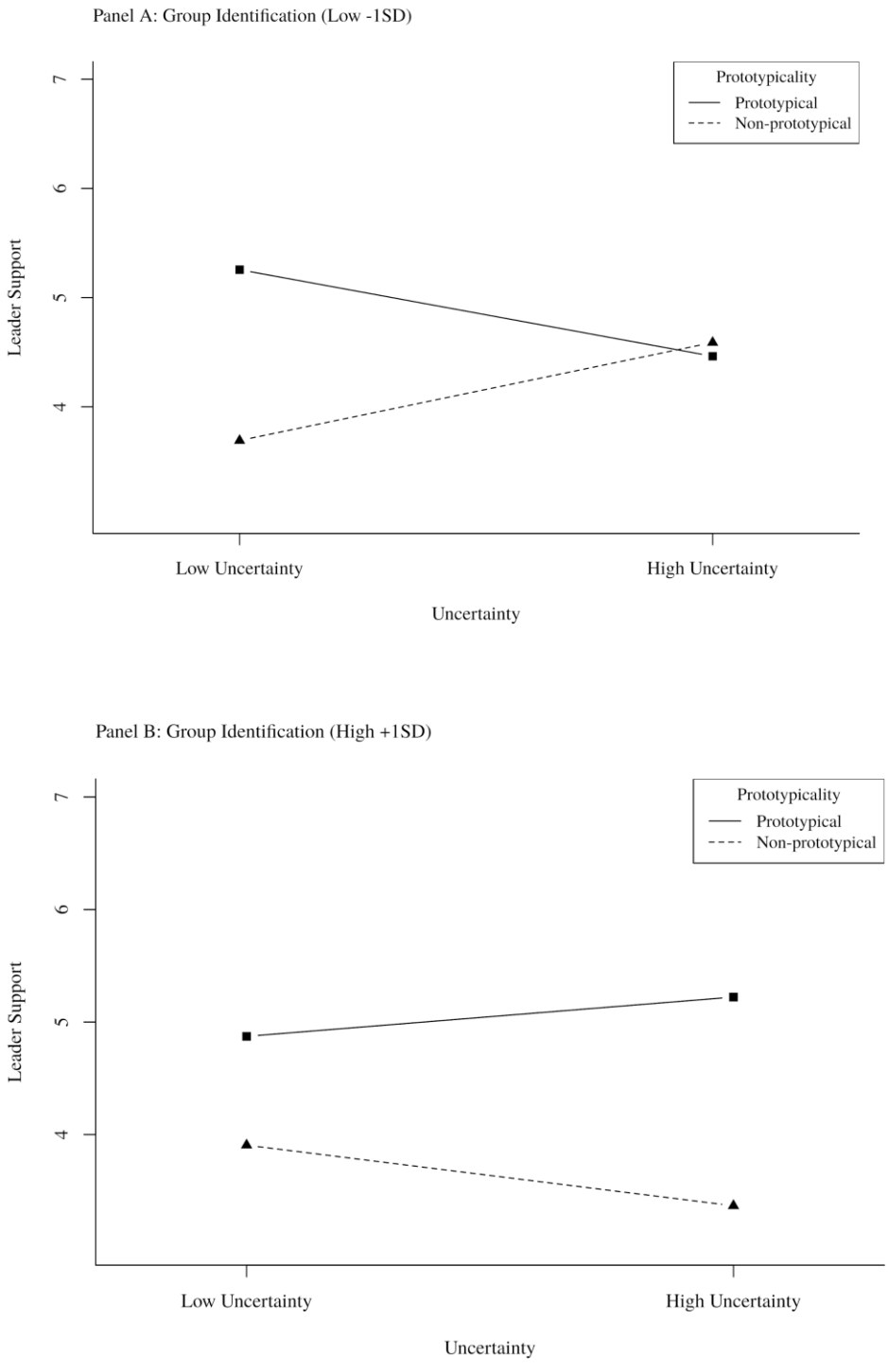

Figure 1. Study 1: Leader support as a function of leader prototypicality, leader rhetoric, and group identification (±1SD).

Leader trust. Leader prototypicality, leader rhetoric, and group identification were entered at Step 1 of the hierarchical linear regression. The three main effects did not account for significant variance in leader trust, $R^2 = .016$, $F(3, 134) = .73$, $p = .54$. The two-way interactions were entered at Step 2, and did not account for significantly more variance in leader trust, $\Delta R^2 = .01$, $F(3, 131) = .32$, $p = .81$. The entry of the three-way interaction at Step 3 accounted for marginally more variance, $\Delta R^2 = .02$, $F(1, 130) = 3.23$, $p = .07$. The three-way interaction accounted for marginally significant variance in leader trust, $\beta = .21$, $t = 1.80$, $p = .08$ (see Figure 2).

Among those who were not strongly identified with the university (low identifiers), simple slope analyses revealed that the prototypical leader received marginally greater trust when using low uncertainty-evoking rhetoric compared to high uncertainty rhetoric, $\beta = -.39$, $t = -1.68$, $p = .09$. No other simple slopes approached statistical significance.

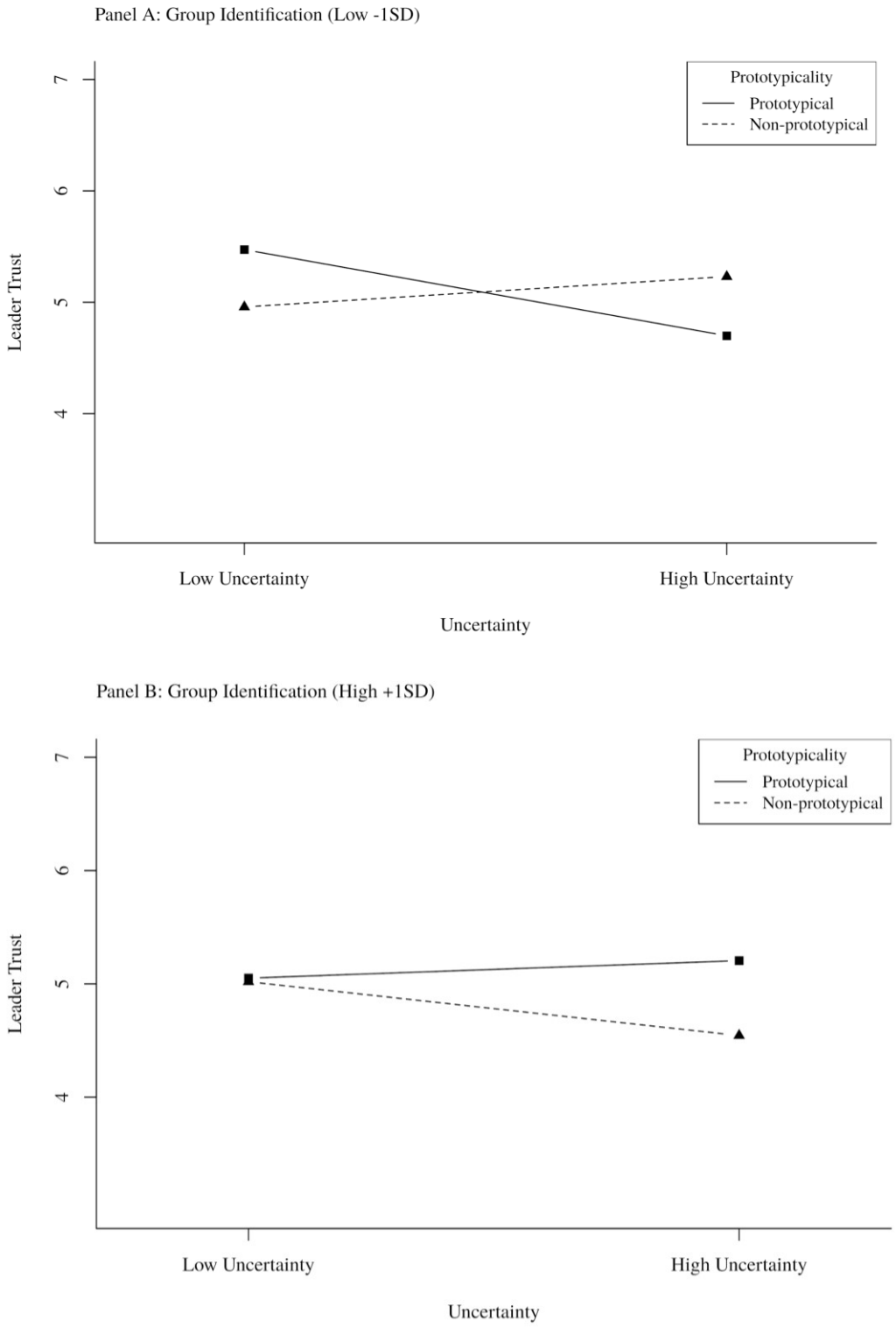

Figure 2. Study 1: Leader trust as a function of leader prototypicality, leader rhetoric, and group identification (±1SD).

Perceived leader effectiveness. Leader prototypicality, leader rhetoric, and group identification were entered at Step 1 of the hierarchical linear regression. The three main effects did not account for significant variance in perceived leader effectiveness, $R^2 = .029$, $F(3, 134) = 1.34$, $p = .26$. The two-way interactions entered at Step 2 also did not account for significantly more variance in leader effectiveness, $\Delta R^2 = .02$, $F(3, 131) = 1.14$, $p = .34$. However, the entry of the three-way interaction at Step 3 accounted for significantly more variance, $\Delta R^2 = .03$, $F(1, 130) = 4.36$, $p < .05$. The three-way interaction accounted for significant variance in leader effectiveness, $\beta = .29$, $t = 2.09$, $p < .05$ (see Figure 3).

Among those who were not strongly identified with the university (low identifiers), simple slope analyses revealed that the prototypical leader was perceived as more effective when using low uncertainty-evoking rhetoric compared to high uncertainty rhetoric, $\beta = -.59$, $t = -2.13$, $p < .05$. When the leader used low uncertainty rhetoric, the prototypical leader was perceived as marginally more effective than the non-prototypical leader, $\beta = .48$, $t = 1.81$, $p = .07$, but this advantage disappeared when the leader used high uncertainty rhetoric, $\beta = -.40$, $t = -1.39$, $p = .17$.

Among those who were highly identified with the university (high identifiers), simple slope analyses revealed that when the leader used high uncertainty rhetoric, the prototypical leader was perceived as significantly more effective than the non-prototypical leader ($\beta = .55$, $t = 2.14$, $p < .05$), but this advantage disappeared when the leader used low uncertainty rhetoric, $\beta = .30$, $t = .90$, $p = .37$.

Further, simple slopes analyses revealed that the prototypical leader who used high uncertainty rhetoric was perceived as marginally more effective by high identifiers compared to low identifiers, $\beta = .50$, $t = .1.88$, $p = .06$.

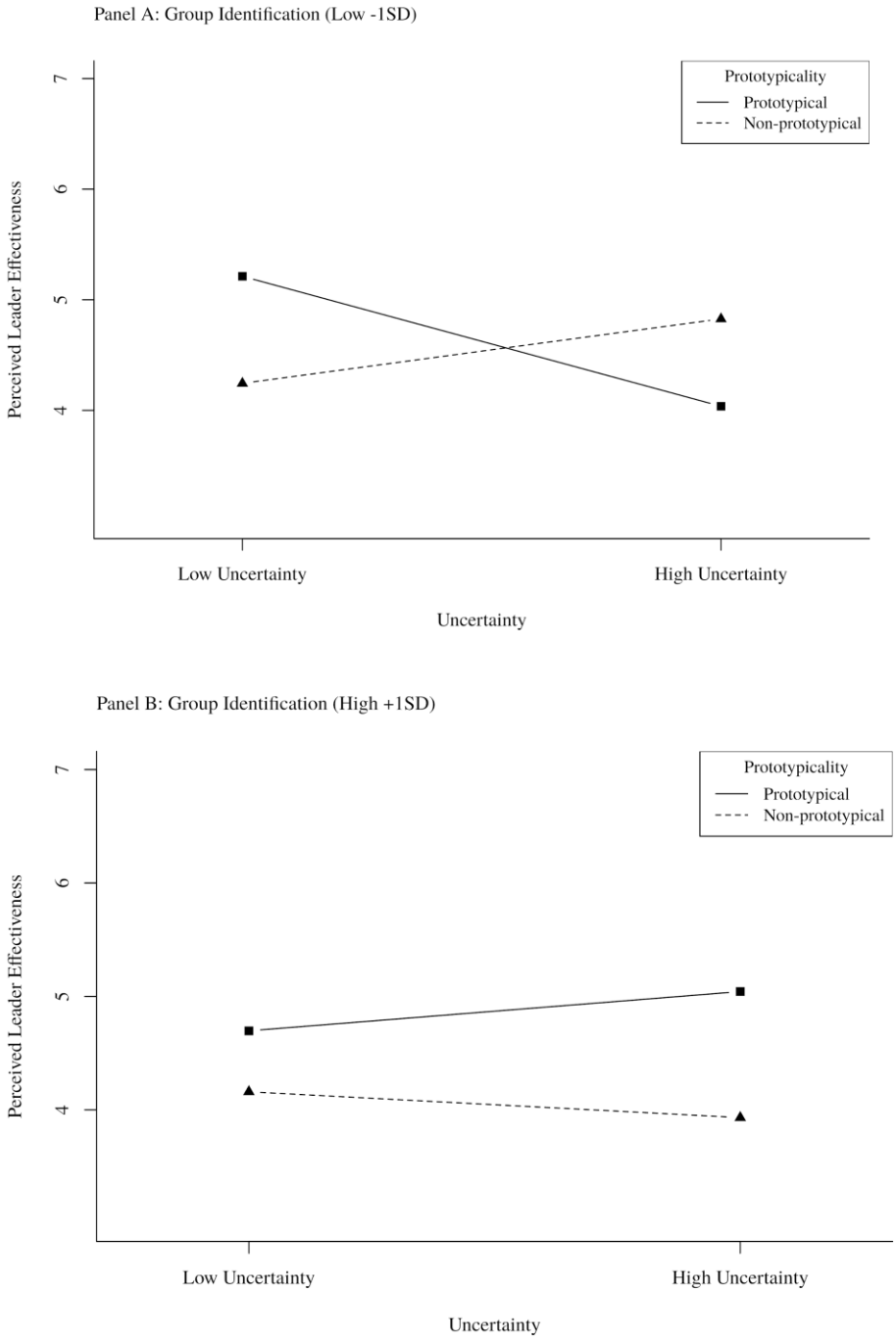

Figure 3. Study 1: Perceived leader effectiveness as a function of leader prototypicality, leader rhetoric, and group identification (±1SD).

Discussion

Study 1 tested the prediction that leader rhetoric (high vs. low uncertainty) moderates the effects of prototypicality on leader evaluation, where high uncertainty rhetoric weakens preferential evaluation for prototypical leaders compared to low uncertainty rhetoric. The results provide partial support for this prediction. This pattern of results was generally found among those who are not strongly identified with the group (low identifiers). Among low identifiers, the prototypical leader received greater support, trust, and perceived effectiveness than the non-prototypical leader when the leader used low uncertainty rhetoric (H1), but this advantage in leader support disappeared when the leader used high uncertainty rhetoric (H2).

Although these results suggest support for the hypotheses among low identifiers, an opposite pattern emerged for those who are highly identified with the group (high identifiers). Among high identifiers, the prototypical leader received similar if not marginally greater support, trust, and perceived effectiveness than the non-prototypical leader when the leader used low uncertainty rhetoric, and this advantage was strengthened when the leader used high uncertainty rhetoric.

Study 2

Study 2 was designed to extend Study 1 by examining the effects of uncertainty-evoking leader rhetoric on evaluations of autocratic and non-autocratic leaders. Study 2 was methodologically similar to Study 1 but differed in the following ways: (a) leadership style (autocratic vs. non-autocratic) was manipulated in place of leader prototypicality, (b) as manipulation checks, autocratic leadership and self-uncertainty were measured at the end of the study, and (c) group identification was not measured as a moderator.

The hypotheses follow a similar pattern to Study 1. First, I expected that the non-autocratic leader would be evaluated more favorably than the autocratic leader (H1). I also expected that leader rhetoric (high vs. low uncertainty) would moderate the effect of leadership style (autocratic vs. non-autocratic) on leader evaluation. I hypothesized that when the leader used low uncertainty rhetoric, the non-autocratic leader would be evaluated more favorably than the autocratic leader (H2), but when the leader used high uncertainty rhetoric, the non-autocratic and autocratic leaders would receive equivalent evaluations (H3). Thus, I predicted that high uncertainty leader rhetoric would weaken the advantage for non-autocratic leaders compared to low uncertainty rhetoric.

Method

Participants and design. Participants were 115 undergraduate students (71.7% female, n = 81; 28.3% male, n = 32) recruited from the University of Alberta psychology research participation pool. They ranged in age from 17 to 32 (M = 19, SD = 2.46). The majority reported their ethnicity as Euro-North American or European (46.5%, n = 53), with the next largest groups being East Asian (18.4%, n = 21) and South Asian (14.9%, n = 17). The study was introduced as a leadership study and students received partial course credit for their participation. There were two manipulated predictor variables (leader rhetoric: high uncertainty vs. low uncertainty, leadership style: autocratic vs. non-autocratic). The key dependent variable was leader evaluation with three subscales: leader support, leader trust, and perceived leader effectiveness.

Procedure and materials. The procedure was identical to that of Study 1, except leadership style (autocratic vs. non-autocratic) was manipulated in place of leader prototypicality. Participants came to a laboratory and occupied separate cubicles, where they

received an explanation of the purpose of the study. Participants first provided demographic information on age, gender, and ethnicity. Participants were then shown a segment of a student leader candidate's campaign platform. This leader statement was constructed to manipulate leader rhetoric (high uncertainty vs. low uncertainty), as was done in Study 1, and leadership style (autocratic vs. non-autocratic), which is unique to Study 2. In the autocratic condition, the leader statement read:

> My leadership style is strong and directive. I present my ideas and suggestions during discussions, and then push my ideas and opinions throughout every phase of a discussion. As a leader, I make decisions alone without asking for suggestions from others. I do not consult others or let anyone else have a say in decisions. When directing people, I provide strong instructions and make sure everyone knows what to do.

Participants randomly assigned to the non-autocratic condition read:

> My leadership style is democratic and inclusive. I present my ideas and suggestions during discussions, and then refrain from pushing my ideas and opinions throughout every phase of a discussion. As a leader, I ask for suggestions from others before making decisions. I consult others and ensure they have a say in decisions. When directing people, I provide guidance and make sure everyone has a choice in what to do.

Following exposure to the leader statement, participants were asked to evaluate the leader using the same scales as in Study 1. Participants completed measures of the three key subscales relating to leader evaluation: leader support, leader trust, and perceived leader effectiveness. Participants also completed a measure of leader prototypicality (van Knippenberg & van Knippenberg, 2005).

Finally, two manipulation checks assessed self-uncertainty and perceptions of autocratic leadership. Participants completed a seven-item self-uncertainty measure adapted from Rast and colleagues (2012) stating: (1) "I am uncertain about myself," (2) "I am uncertain about my future," (3) "I am concerned about my future," (4) "I am worried about my future," (5) "I am uncertain about my place in the world," (6) "I am worried about my place in the world," and (7) "I am concerned about my place in the world"; 1 = *Strongly disagree*, 9 = *Strongly agree* (α = .93). To verify the effectiveness of the autocratic leadership manipulation, participants completed six items adapted from the Autocratic Leader Behavior Scale (De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2009) and used by Rast and colleagues (2013): ‘‘This leader. . . ’’ (1) makes decisions in an autocratic way; (2) often pushes his/her opinions; (3) makes decisions alone without asking for suggestions; (4) harshly tells subordinates what to do; (5) is bossy and orders subordinates around; and (6) makes sure that his/her own interests are always met; 1 = *Strongly disagree*, 9 = *Strongly agree*. (α = .96). At the end of the study, participants were thanked for their time and fully debriefed.

Results

There were two manipulated independent variables (leader rhetoric and leadership style), and one dependent measure of leader evaluation with three subscales (leader support, leader trust, and leader effectiveness). The data were analyzed using a two-way ANOVA and simple effects analyses were performed for significant interactions. Table 2 shows the means, SDs, correlations, and reliabilities of all main variables for Study 2.

Background variables and manipulation checks. The regression of age, gender, and ethnicity revealed no significant effects on any of the leader evaluation measures, therefore these variables were removed from subsequent analyses. The manipulation of autocratic leadership was found to be effective. Participants perceived the autocratic leader candidate as significantly

more autocratic (M = 7.12, SD = 1.41) than the non-autocratic candidate (M = 2.33, SD = 1.21), $F(1, 113) = 382.85$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .77$. However, the manipulation of uncertainty was not found to be effective in this study, $F(1, 113) = 0.49$, $p > .05$.

Leader support. A two-way ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of leadership style (autocratic vs. non-autocratic), $F(1, 111) = 126.09$ $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .53$. The non-autocratic leader received significantly greater support (M = 6.23, SD = 1.63) than the autocratic leader (M = 3.17, SD = 1.31) as predicted under H1. There was also a significant main effect of leader rhetoric, $F(1, 111) = 4.47$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$. The leader using low uncertainty rhetoric received greater support (M = 4.97, SD = 2.19) than the leader using high uncertainty-evoking rhetoric (M = 4.42, SD = 2.05). Contrary to my predictions under H2 and H3, there was no interaction between leader rhetoric and leadership style, $F(1, 111) = 0.02$, $p > .05$, $\eta_p^2 < .001$ (see Figure 4).

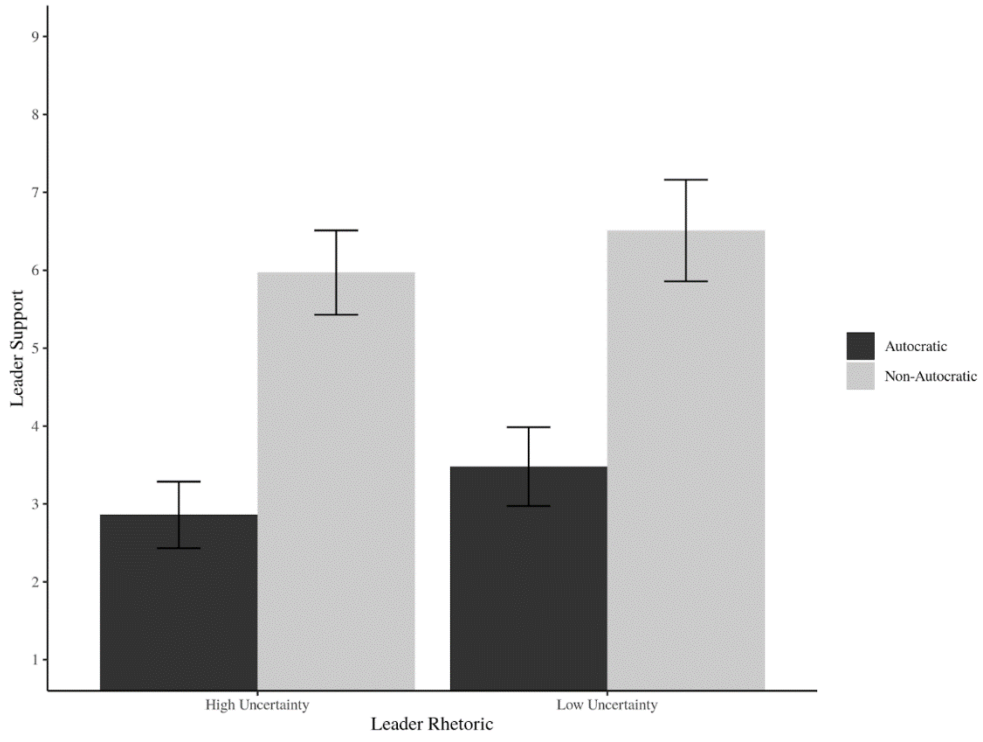

Figure 4. Study 2: Leader support as a function of leadership style and leader rhetoric

Leader trust. A two-way ANOVA revealed that the non-autocratic leader was perceived as significantly more trustworthy (M = 6.26, SD = 1.28) than the autocratic leader (M = 4.1, SD = 1.34), $F(1, 111) = 78.72$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .41$. There was no interaction between leader rhetoric and leadership style, $F(1, 111) = 0.05$, $p > .05$, $\eta_p^2 < .001$.

Perceived leader effectiveness. A two-way ANOVA revealed that the non-autocratic leader was perceived as significantly more effective (M = 6.04, SD = 1.62) than the autocratic leader (M = 3.61, SD = 1.63), $F(1, 111) = 63.65$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .36$. There was no interaction between leader rhetoric and leadership style, $F(1, 111) = 0.48$, $p > .05$, $\eta_p^2 < .01$.

Discussion

Study 2 tested the prediction that leader rhetoric (high vs. low uncertainty) moderated the effects of leadership style on leader evaluation, where high uncertainty rhetoric weakens preferential evaluation for non-autocratic leaders compared to low uncertainty rhetoric. The results do not support this overall prediction, possibly due to the unsuccessful uncertainty manipulation.

As predicted under H1, the autocratic leader received significantly lower leader evaluations than the non-autocratic leader in terms of support, trust, and perceived effectiveness, demonstrating that the non-autocratic leader was evaluated more favorably than the autocratic leader. When the leader used low uncertainty rhetoric, the non-autocratic leader was evaluated more favorably than the autocratic leader (H2). However, the predicted interaction between leadership style and leader rhetoric did not emerge. When the leader used high uncertainty rhetoric, the non-autocratic leader continued to be evaluated significantly more favorably than the autocratic leader, in contrast to the prediction under H3. These results demonstrate that the autocratic leader was consistently evaluated less favorably than the non-autocratic leader,

regardless of whether they used high or low uncertainty rhetoric. Contrary to our hypotheses, high uncertainty-evoking rhetoric did not affect the preference for a non-autocratic over an autocratic leader.

General Discussion

Leader preference and evaluation depend on the extent to which a leader is perceived as being prototypical of the group, especially when one's group membership is an important basis of self-definition (Hogg & van Knippenberg, 2003). Prototypical leaders are evaluated more favorably than non-prototypical leaders and receive greater support and trust. In addition, group members prefer leaders who adopt a democratic and inclusive leadership style over an autocratic leadership style. Autocratic leaders (those who make decisions unilaterally without consulting group members) are generally less preferable, less effective, and threatening to group stability (De Cremer, 2006; Gastil, 1994; Van Vugt, et al., 2003). Thus, both non-prototypical and autocratic leaders can be conceptualized as unexpected leaders; they traditionally receive little support and are not expected to emerge as successful leaders.

Although non-prototypical and autocratic leaders normally receive little support, these leadership preferences may be altered or even overturned when followers experience high levels of self-uncertainty (Rast et al., 2015). There is evidence that both non-prototypical and autocratic leaders receive elevated support when uncertainty is high (Rast et al., 2012; 2013). As such, astute non-prototypical and autocratic leaders may use their rhetoric to intentionally evoke feelings of uncertainty in their followers. To examine the effects of uncertainty-evoking leader rhetoric on evaluations of non-prototypical and autocratic leaders, I conducted two studies manipulating leader rhetoric (high uncertainty vs. low uncertainty) and prototypicality (Study 1) or leadership style (Study 2).

In Study 1, we found the predicted interaction between leader rhetoric and prototypicality on leader support and perceived leader effectiveness among participants who were not highly identified with the group. For low identifiers, when a leader used low uncertainty rhetoric, prototypical leaders were evaluated more favorably than non-prototypical leaders. When the leader did not evoke uncertainty, the prototypical leader received significantly greater support and was perceived as marginally more effective than the non-prototypical leader. However, this preference disappeared when the leader used high uncertainty-evoking rhetoric. When the leader evoked high uncertainty, the prototypical and non-prototypical leaders received equivalent support and were perceived as equally effective. Although this predicted interaction was non-significant on leader trust, the results generally follow the same pattern as the two other subscales of leader evaluation.

The opposite pattern emerged among those who were highly identified with the group. For high identifiers, when the leader used low uncertainty rhetoric, the prototypical leader received marginally greater support and was perceived as equally as effective as the non-prototypical leader. The prototypicality advantage emerged and was strengthened, however, when the leader used high uncertainty rhetoric. When the leader used high uncertainty rhetoric, the prototypical leader received significantly greater support and was perceived as more effective than the non-prototypical leader. Although this interaction was non-significant on leader trust, the results generally follow the same pattern as the two other subscales of leader evaluation.

These results qualify and extend the social identity theory of leadership and uncertainty-identity theory, demonstrating how group identification moderates the effects of uncertainty-evoking leader rhetoric on the prototypicality advantage. Prior research has shown that the prototypicality advantage is strongest among high identifiers and weaker among those who are

less strongly identified with the group (Hogg, et al., 2012). From this, it is not surprising that we found low identifiers are more likely to respond to high uncertainty-evoking rhetoric with a weakened preference for prototypical over non-prototypical leaders.

In Study 2, we did not find the predicted interaction between leader rhetoric and leadership style on leader evaluation. The results showed that the autocratic leader received significantly less support and trust and was perceived as less effective than the non-autocratic leader. This effect held regardless of the rhetoric the leader used (high or low uncertainty), meaning the autocratic leader was consistently evaluated less favorably than the non-autocratic leader, regardless of whether they used high or low uncertainty rhetoric. While Study 1 demonstrated that high uncertainty-evoking leader rhetoric attenuated the prototypicality advantage among low identifiers, Study 2 showed that this effect may not extend to autocratic leaders.

The findings reported here represent an important first step towards understanding the effects of uncertainty-evoking leader rhetoric on support for unexpected leaders. However, this research is not without limitations. Both studies were conducted using between-subjects designs, where participants only evaluated a single leader. Future research should test similar hypotheses using a within-subjects design where participants evaluate multiple leaders. This would more closely resemble an election context and provide greater ecological validity, while also allowing for greater understanding of participants' leader preferences when they are presented with more than a single leader option. Second, the sample sizes for both studies are smaller than ideal. Following recent recommendations from Aberson (2019), we conducted post-hoc power analyses using obtained model parameters. Results show that our models were not sufficiently powered.

Further, the results from Study 2 are unexpected and present two major limitations. First, the manipulation of leadership style (autocratic versus non-autocratic) may have been too extreme. In the context of a student group leader, where students are accustomed to a more inclusive leadership style, the vignette describing the autocratic leadership style may have been too harsh and described too extreme of an autocratic style, leading to participants' consistently negative evaluations of this leader. Further, the manipulation check for leader rhetoric (high versus low uncertainty) revealed that this manipulation was not effective in inducing high or low uncertainty, a finding inconsistent with the results from pilot testing. Although the leader rhetoric manipulation may need to be strengthened, the extreme leadership style manipulation may also have overshadowed the leader rhetoric manipulation. Future research should use a more subtle manipulation of leadership style where the level of autocratic leadership is more aligned with the level of uncertainty evoked.

Taken together, the current findings help us understand how and when unexpected and potentially undesirable leaders gain influence and control, and how leaders may use uncertainty to their advantage. This research represents an important step towards a more complete understanding of leadership in times of uncertainty.

Table 1
Study 1: Means, SDs, Intercorrelations, and Reliabilities for Main Variables

	Variables	α	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6
1.	Leader prototypicality		1.51	0.50						
2.	Leader rhetoric		1.50	0.50	.03					
3.	Group identification (4 items)	.85	6.33	1.56	.03	.10				
4.	Leader support (6 items)	.96	4.43	1.80	-.31**	-.02	-.05			
5.	Leader trust (6 items)	.88	5.03	1.33	-.08	-.09	-.06	.81**		
6.	Perceived leader effectiveness (4 items)	.96	4.54	1.63	-.16	-.04	-.04	.91**	.85**	
7.	Leader prototypicality scale (6 items)	.95	4.63	1.82	-.34**	-.08	-.07	.83**	.70**	.78**

Note. Means ($N = 138$) can take values between 1 and 9, with 9 indicating more of the property described, except for leader prototypicality and leader rhetoric, which are binary variables with values of 1 (prototypical) and 2 (non-prototypical) for leadership style, and values of 1 (low uncertainty) and 2 (high uncertainty) for leader rhetoric.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Table 2
Study 2: Means, SDs, Intercorrelations, and Reliabilities for Main Variables

	Variables	α	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6
1.	Leadership style		1.50	0.50						
2.	Leader rhetoric		1.50	0.50	.01					
3.	Leader support (6 items)	.95	4.69	2.13	.72**	-.13				
4.	Leader trust (6 items)	.92	5.17	1.70	.64**	-.12	.89**			
5.	Perceived leader effectiveness (4 items)	.96	4.82	2.02	.60**	-.06	.90**	.87**		
6.	Self-uncertainty (7 items)	.93	5.14	1.95	.09	-.07	.23*	.25**	.28**	
7.	Autocratic leadership behavior (6 items)	.96	4.74	2.74	-.88**	-.00	-.68**	-.62**	-.59**	-.06

Note. Means ($N = 115$) can take values between 1 and 9, with 9 indicating more of the property described, except for leadership style and leader rhetoric, which are binary variables with values of 1 (autocratic) and 2 (non-autocratic) for leadership style, and values of 1 (low uncertainty) and 2 (high uncertainty) for leader rhetoric.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

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