



FEEDBACK VALENCE IN ORGANIZATIONS: A STRUCTURED LITERATURE REVIEW AND FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA

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Abstract

Valence of feedback - the sign of the information people receive concerning their own performance - is a well-researched yet theoretically fragmented construct. Even though scholars have been studying feedback for many years, current field-level review studies still characterize the literature on performance-related feedback as marked by inconsistent definitions, isolated theoretical perspectives, and conflicting conclusions about which feedback valence (positive or negative) works better for people and organizations. This study attempts to systematize the existing literature on feedback valence through a theoretically oriented review of academic studies retrieved from scientific databases. The purpose of the review is to trace the evolution of the feedback valence concept and identify major theoretical perspectives scholars have used to study it (Feedback Intervention Theory, feedback-seeking cost-benefit perspective, self-verification/attribution theory, and social exchange theory). The synthesis indicates that the effect of valenced feedback is highly situation-specific: positive feedback consistently promotes motivation, creativity, and feedback-seeking behavior, whereas the effect of negative feedback depends on the nature of the relationship, the delivery of feedback, and the agency of the person receiving it. The paper concludes with a discussion of theoretical, methodological, and situational limitations, as well as suggestions for future research in this area.

Keywords: Feedback Valence, Positive Feedback, Negative Feedback, Performance Feedback, Literature Review

1. Introduction

Among the levers that organizations can use to influence the performance, motivation, and development of their employees, feedback has been one of the most intensely studied (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Interest in feedback valence has developed alongside performance-management research, where valence has been examined as a direct determinant of task performance (Goller & Späth, 2024; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996), as a factor fostering creativity and innovative behavior (Hoever et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2022; Zhou, 1998), as a precursor of feedback-seeking behavior (Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Liu et al., 2026), and as an input to judgments of fairness and justice (Westerman et al., 2014). Nevertheless, two recent extensive reviews of the wider performance-feedback literature, Anseel and Sherf's (2025) 25-year review and Heine et al.'s (2025) systematic review of 173 studies, reach a similar conclusion about the fragmentation of the field and the generic nature of definitions of feedback and feedback valence.

In response, this paper presents a structured, systematic review of feedback valence within the HRM/OB domain. It addresses four research questions: RQ1, how is the empirical literature on feedback valence in work settings distributed over time, design, and sample; RQ2, what theoretical perspectives explain valence effects; RQ3, what antecedents, consequences, moderators, and mediators are reported; and RQ4, what conceptual, methodological, and contextual gaps can guide future research. The review is intended to serve academic researchers seeking a consolidated account and HR practitioners designing performance-management systems.



1.1 Prior reviews and the need for this review

Earlier reviews either treated valence as one of several feedback characteristics (Lechermeier & Fassnacht, 2018) or covered performance feedback in general (Anseel & Sherf, 2025; Heine et al., 2025). This review therefore contributes in two ways: it makes feedback valence the focus and an explicit inclusion criterion, and it follows PRISMA 2020 (Page et al., 2021) to synthesize recent evidence, including AI-delivered feedback, into a framework (Figure 3) and a research agenda.

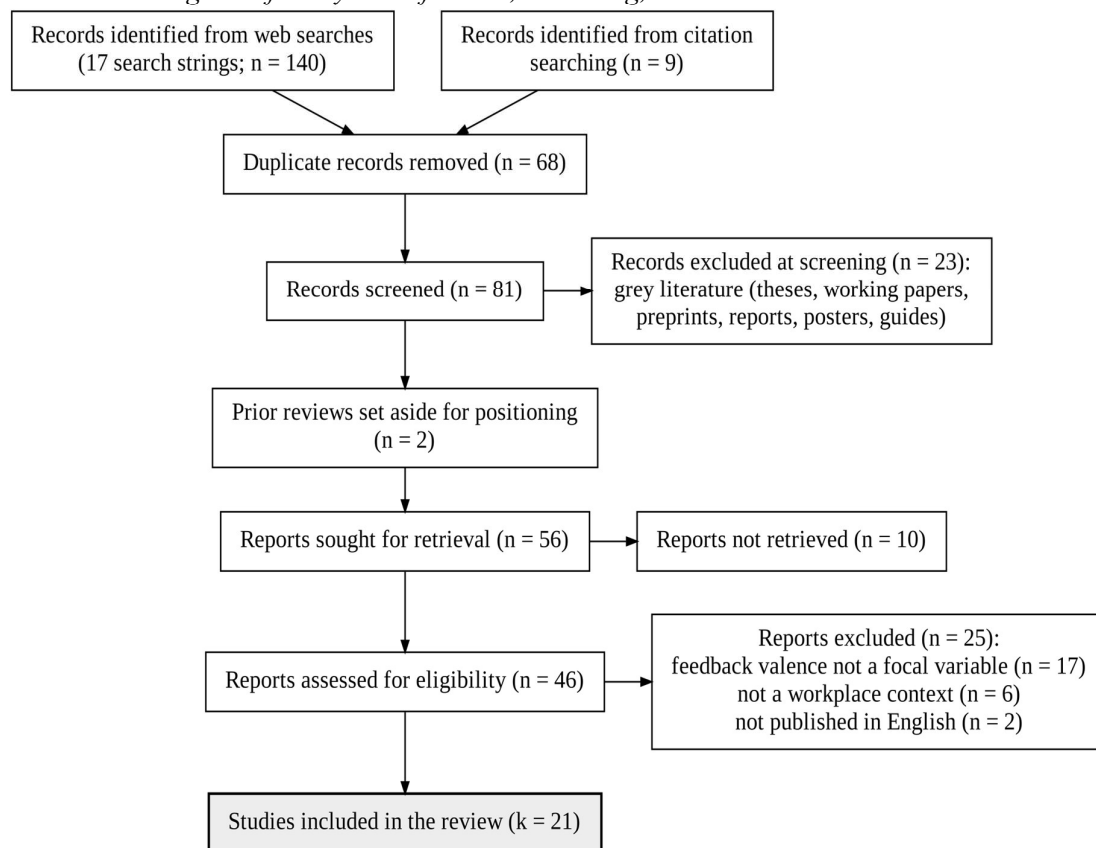
2. Review Methodology

2.1 Design and reporting standards

This review was conducted and reported in accordance with PRISMA 2020 (Page et al., 2021) and the systematic review guidance of Tranfield et al. (2003) and Snyder (2019). The studies differ in their designs and outcome measures, so a narrative synthesis (Popay et al., 2006) was used and is reported in accordance with the Synthesis Without Meta-analysis guideline (Campbell et al., 2020). No review protocol was registered.

Figure 1

PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram of Study Identification, Screening, and Inclusion



Note. Records were identified through a web-based search tool (17 search strings) and citation searching. n = number of records or reports; k = number of studies.

2.2 Eligibility criteria and time frame

Studies were eligible if they (a) were empirical (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed) and published in a peer-reviewed journal; (b) examined feedback valence (positive, negative or critical, or both) as a focal manipulated, measured, or analyzed variable; (c) were set in a work context or a work simulation; (d) were written in English; and (e) were published between 1 January 1996 and the search date. The window opens in 1996 because Kluger and DeNisi's (1996) meta-analysis reframed the valence debate and anchors later work, and it closes in September 2026, when the last search was run. Theses, working papers, preprints, reports, posters, practitioner guides, and prior reviews were excluded from the synthesis (prior reviews were retained only to position this



contribution). Records were also excluded when valence was not examined as a variable, when the setting was not a workplace, or when the report was not in English.

2.3 Information sources and search strategy

Records were identified through a web-based academic search using 17 search strings that combined valence terms (e.g., feedback valence, positive feedback, negative feedback) with outcome and context terms (e.g., performance, creativity, feedback seeking). Citation searching of key studies added 9 records. Scopus and Web of Science were not searched, which is acknowledged as a limitation.

2.4 Selection, data extraction, and synthesis

One reviewer screened records using AI-assisted tools, based on titles, abstracts, and bibliographic records. Study design, sample, outcomes, mediators, moderators, and main findings were extracted and summarized by valence and outcome domain using direction-of-effect vote counting, without pooling effect sizes. The review is organized by conceptualization, theoretical foundations, antecedents, consequences, and moderators of feedback valence (Garg et al., 2021; Heine et al., 2025).

2.5 Study selection and characteristics

Figure 1 shows the flow of records. Of 149 records identified (140 from web searches and 9 from citation searching), 68 duplicates were removed, and 81 records were screened. Twenty-three were excluded as grey literature, and 2 prior reviews were set aside, leaving 56 reports sought, of which 10 were not retrieved. Of the 46 reports assessed for eligibility, 25 were excluded (feedback valence not a focal variable, $n = 17$; not a workplace context, $n = 6$; not published in English, $n = 2$), leaving 21 included studies.

3. Conceptualizing Feedback Valence

Valence, in a broad psychological sense, is the inherent positivity or negativity of a stimulus (Frijda, 1986). Feedback valence refers to the perceived positivity or negativity of feedback individuals receive in the workplace (Ilgen et al., 1979). At work, positive feedback confirms that behavior met the standard, whereas negative feedback signals a gap between performance and what is desired (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Although the dichotomy seems clear, the term is used inconsistently: for the objective direction of the message, for the subjective perception of favorability, or, wrongly, as a synonym for feedback specificity (Anseel & Sherf, 2025; Heine et al., 2025). Both recent reviews therefore recommend defining feedback constructs before testing their impact.

A further distinction is between valence as delivered, the signal the sender conveys, and valence as received, the recipient's subjective evaluation, which may differ from the sender's intention depending on the medium and the relationship (Sheer, 2012; Westerman et al., 2014). Valence also interacts with feedback style, informational or controlling (Zhou, 1998). The included studies operationalized valence in five ways: manipulated scenarios or messages, rated scales of positive and negative developmental feedback (Zheng et al., 2015), naturally occurring ratings or rankings (Goller & Späth, 2024; Singh & Zureich, 2025), team feedback conditions (Liu et al., 2022), and managers' accounts (Gonzalez-Montero & Maydell, 2025). Valence has also been examined as a situational moderator of creative behavior (George & Zhou, 2001).

4. Theoretical Foundations

Feedback valence research in HRM/OB draws on a relatively wide set of theoretical traditions, reflecting the construct's relevance to motivation, self-regulation, social exchange, and creativity research. Figure 2 maps the six theoretical anchors most consistently used across the included studies and the background literature.

4.1 Feedback Intervention Theory

Feedback intervention theory (FIT; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996) remains the most dominant theory. Their meta-analysis of 607 effect sizes found that feedback improved performance on average, but more than a third of effects were negative and could not be explained by feedback sign alone. FIT holds that feedback directs attention among three levels of self-regulation (task learning, task motivation, and meta-task or self processes), and that feedback of either sign works best when it keeps attention on the task. Recent studies apply FIT to positive feedback and performance (Su & Jiang, 2023), archival ratings (Goller & Späth, 2024), and challenge-versus-threat appraisals of negative feedback (Li et al., 2024).

4.2 Feedback-Seeking and the Cost-Benefit Framework

Ashford and Cummings (1983) viewed feedback not only as something managers give but as a resource employees seek, weighing its informational value against ego, effort, and inference costs. Because negative



feedback is more ego-costly, employees who receive positive feedback are expected to seek more feedback, whereas anticipated negative feedback may deter seeking (Anseel et al., 2015). Included studies are consistent with this logic for positive feedback (Liu et al., 2026; Su & Jiang, 2023; Wondim et al., 2021), and Liu et al. (2026) found no effect of negative feedback on feedback seeking.

4.3 Self-Verification, Self-Enhancement, and Attribution Processes

A parallel stream uses self-verification, self-enhancement, and attribution theory to explain why negative feedback is often discounted: favorable information is attributed to one's own competence, while unfavorable information is attributed to external or unstable causes. Included studies capture this logic through appraisal and attribution processes, such as challenge versus threat appraisals of negative supervisory feedback (Li et al., 2024) and positive attributions that moderate the link between valence and work meaningfulness (Liu et al., 2026).

4.4 Social Exchange and Leader-Member Exchange

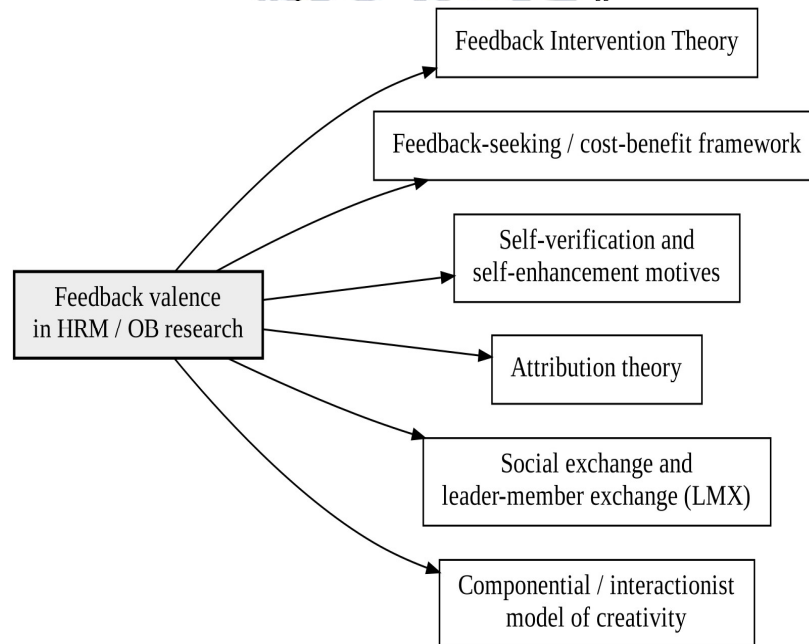
Because most workplace feedback comes from supervisors, social exchange and LMX theories help explain when feedback is accepted. Feedback in a high-quality, trusting relationship is more likely to be accepted whatever its valence, whereas the same feedback in a low-quality relationship may be ignored or damage the relationship (Heine et al., 2025). Included studies document relational routes: respect and perceived opportunities for advancement after constructive feedback (Sommer & Kulkarni, 2012), and relationship conflict as a mediator in teams (Liu et al., 2022).

4.5 Componential and Interactionist Models of Creativity

Zhou (1998) showed an interaction of valence, feedback style, and task autonomy: positive, informational feedback under high autonomy produced the highest creativity. Later work extends this to teams, where valence effects depend on informational diversity (Hoever et al., 2018), and positive feedback improves team creativity partly by reducing relationship conflict (Liu et al., 2022).

Figure 2

Principal Theoretical Foundations Used to Explain Feedback Valence Effects in HRM/OB Research



5. Antecedents and Consequences of Feedback Valence Effects

How valence operates in practice depends on antecedent conditions related to the source, the recipient, the delivery, and the task. Table 1 summarizes the antecedent conditions examined in the included studies.

Across the 15 studies that examined positive feedback, 10 reported a favorable association with performance, creativity, or engagement outcomes, 1 reported a contingent pattern (Hoever et al., 2018), and 4 examined reactions rather than performance. Negative feedback, examined in 18 studies, showed no single pattern: 4 studies reported adverse effects at least relative to positive feedback (Liu et al., 2022; Singh & Zureich, 2025;



Wei et al., 2024; Zhou, 1998), 3 reported mixed effects (Kim & Kim, 2020; Li et al., 2024; Su & Zhang, 2023), 2 reported favorable effects (Hoever et al., 2018; Xiao et al., 2021), 3 found no detectable effect on the outcome tested (Goller & Späth, 2024; Liu et al., 2026; Zheng et al., 2015), and 6 examined reactions, delivery, or managers' experience without a performance test. Table 2 summarizes the consequences by outcome domain. These counts are direction-of-effect tallies and ignore study size and precision.

Table 1

Antecedents Shaping the Emergence and Effects of Feedback Valence in the Included Studies

Category	Antecedents examined	Representative studies
Feedback source	Supervisor developmental feedback and relationship; direction of feedback flow; human versus AI source	Hein et al. (2024); Kim & Kim (2020); Sommer & Kulkarni (2012); Zheng et al. (2015)
Recipient characteristics	Feedback orientation; growth mindset; proactive personality; intrinsic motivation; challenge/threat appraisal; achievement orientation	Li et al. (2024); Su & Jiang (2023); Wei et al. (2024); Wondim et al. (2021); Xiao et al. (2021); Zhou (1998)
Delivery and channel	Face-to-face, telephone, text, and e-mail delivery; synchronous versus asynchronous	Sheer (2012); Westerman et al. (2014)
Task and team context	Task autonomy; creative time pressure; team informational diversity	Hoever et al. (2018); Liu et al. (2022); Zhou (1998)
Organizational and cultural context	Chinese organizational samples; New Zealand managers; cross-national differences (background)	Gonzalez-Montero & Maydell (2025); Su & Xiao (2022); Sully De Luque & Sommer (2000)

Table 2

Reported Consequences of Positive Versus Negative Feedback Valence in the Included Studies

Outcome domain	Pattern reported	Representative studies
Task performance	Positive feedback favorable in 6 of 6 studies testing it; negative feedback adverse (2), mixed (1), or null (2)	Goller & Späth (2024); Singh & Zureich (2025); Su & Jiang (2023); Su & Xiao (2022); Wei et al. (2024); Zheng et al. (2015)
Creativity and innovative behavior	Positive generally more conducive, especially with informational style and high autonomy; negative depends on appraisal, flow, and team diversity	Hoever et al. (2018); Kim & Kim (2020); Li et al. (2024); Liu et al. (2022); Xiao et al. (2021); Zhou (1998)
Feedback seeking and engagement	Positive feedback increases seeking and information seeking; negative feedback showed no effect; AI source lowered willingness to seek	Hein et al. (2024); Liu et al. (2026); Su & Jiang (2023); Wondim et al. (2021)
Fairness, emotions, accountability	Positive valence and richer channels raised perceived justice; feedback types evoked different emotions; negative feedback raised accountability pressure	Belschak & Den Hartog (2009); Sheer (2012); Westerman et al. (2014)
Extra-role behavior and satisfaction	Constructive feedback raised satisfaction and citizenship intentions; negative feedback lowered extra-role performance	Sommer & Kulkarni (2012); Su & Zhang (2023)
Team-level outcomes	Positive feedback reduced relationship conflict and aided team creativity; negative feedback effects contingent	Hoever et al. (2018); Liu et al. (2022); Xiao et al. (2021)

Note. Counts are direction-of-effect tallies by the authors of this review.

6. Moderators and Mediators

Evidence on moderators and mediators now goes beyond simple valence comparisons. Recipient characteristics moderate effects: feedback orientation (Su & Jiang, 2023), growth mindset (Wei et al., 2024), proactive personality (Xiao et al., 2021), intrinsic motivation (Wondim et al., 2021), and positive attributions (Liu et al., 2026). Context also matters: task autonomy and feedback style (Zhou, 1998), creative time pressure (Liu et al., 2022), team informational diversity (Hoever et al., 2018), and feedback direction (Kim & Kim, 2020). Relationship quality is frequently proposed as a moderator (Heine et al., 2025). Delivery matters too: telephone raised perceived justice relative to text, irrespective of valence (Sheer, 2012; Westerman et al., 2014), and AI sources were rated as less acceptable and less motivating due to perceived social distance (Hein et al., 2024).

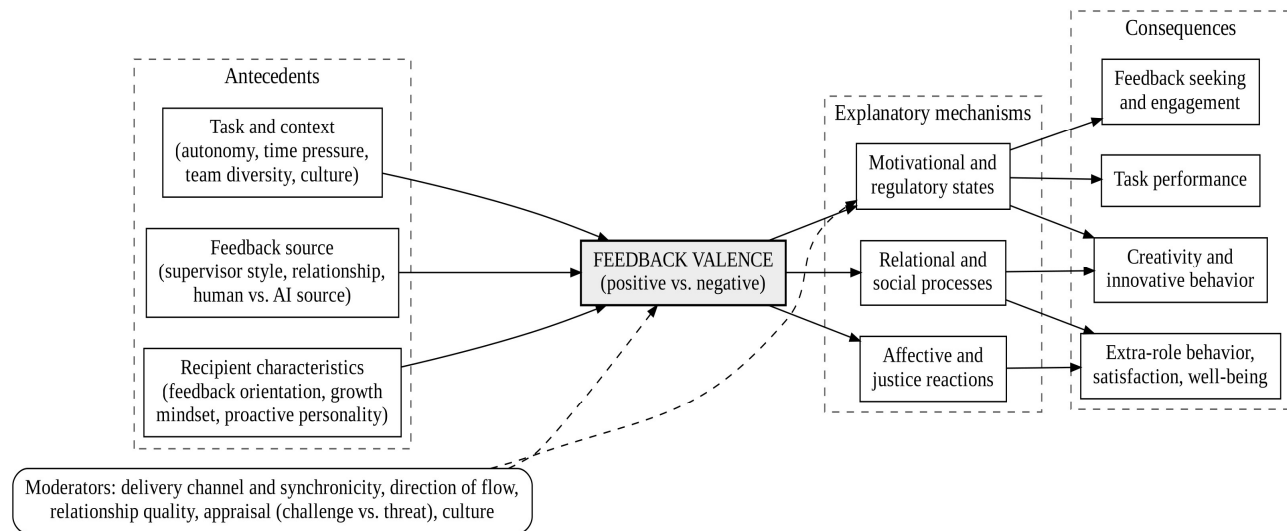
Mediators fall into three families. Affective and justice reactions link feedback to citizenship, commitment, turnover intentions, and counterproductive behavior (Belschak & Den Hartog, 2009). Motivational and regulatory



states include promotion focus (Su & Xiao, 2022), prevention focus (Li et al., 2024; Su & Zhang, 2023), goal commitment (Wei et al., 2024), work meaningfulness (Liu et al., 2026), and energy and information seeking (Wondim et al., 2021). Relational and social processes include relationship conflict (Liu et al., 2022), team harmonious innovation passion (Xiao et al., 2021), and accountability pressure (Sheer, 2012). Figure 3 integrates these antecedents, mechanisms, moderators, and consequences.

Figure 3

Integrative Conceptual Framework of Feedback Valence Antecedents, Mechanisms, Moderators, and Consequences



Note. Synthesized by the authors from the 21 included studies; dashed arrows indicate moderation.

7. Discussion: Advancing the Research on Feedback Valence

7.1 Conceptual Gaps

The two most recent reviews of the performance-feedback literature share a conceptual problem: “feedback” and “feedback valence” are defined differently across studies, depending on whether valence refers to the message, its interpretation, or the evaluation of measured performance (Anseel & Sherf, 2025; Heine et al., 2025). The same holds for the subset of valence studies here: included studies treat valence as manipulated content, as a perceived scale, or as a rating-based signal.

7.2 Methodological Gaps

Most included studies are cross-sectional or short-term experiments or use single-source surveys; only 5 of 21 used multi-wave field surveys and 2 used archival designs (Goller & Späth, 2024; Singh & Zureich, 2025). This makes causal conclusions about repeated exposure to positive or negative feedback difficult. Field and quasi-experimental designs remain uncommon in mainstream HRM/OB settings.

7.3 Contextual Gaps

A further gap concerns the joint influence of individual and contextual factors, which Zhou and Hoever (2023) identify as central to innovation. In the feedback valence literature, recipient characteristics and context have mostly been examined separately, so little is known about how the two combine to shape the effects of positive and negative feedback. Moreover, as reported, samples were largely Chinese, with single studies from Hong Kong, New Zealand, and Korea, so cross-national differences in how valence is interpreted remain underexplored (Stone-Romero & Stone, 2002; Sully De Luque & Sommer, 2000). Delivery channels and AI-mediated feedback have only begun to be studied (Hein et al., 2024; Westerman et al., 2014), and managers’ own difficulty in delivering negative feedback is rarely modeled (Gonzalez-Montero & Maydell, 2025).

8. Future Research Agenda

Five areas emerge as especially fruitful. *First*, longitudinal and field-experimental designs are needed to understand the temporal dynamics of valence and reversal processes; the quasi-experimental studies of Goller and Späth (2024) and Singh and Zureich (2025) show what such designs can offer. *Second*, with growing use of digital



platforms and AI-driven feedback, the interaction between valence and source should be tested, and relational factors that buffer negative feedback from human supervisors should be examined, given evidence that AI disclosure can change performance regardless of accuracy (Hein et al., 2024; Tong et al., 2021). *Third*, future research should map the actor-context typology interaction with feedback valence, meaning who receives it (positive or negative actor), and what the contextual factors are (supportive or non-supportive), because the same valence can be perceived differently and have different effects depending on the actors or context involved. Existing evidence points in this direction: the effect of negative feedback on creativity depended on whether it flowed upward or downward (Kim & Kim, 2020), supervisors and subordinates responded differently to the same feedback scenario (Sheer, 2012), and recipients' feedback orientation, growth mindset, proactive personality, and challenge or threat appraisal changed how feedback was received (Li et al., 2024; Su & Jiang, 2023; Wei et al., 2024; Xiao et al., 2021). *Fourth*, replication in other cultures and sectors would establish boundary conditions, including culture as a moderator of feedback seeking and responses to negative feedback (Stone-Romero & Stone, 2002; Sully De Luque & Sommer, 2000). *Fifth*, a subsequent meta-analysis, once effect sizes can be extracted from full texts of database-identified studies, would quantify the contingent effects described here.

9. Implications for HRM Practice

For HR specialists and managers, the choice between positive and negative feedback should not be treated as a dichotomy. The benefits of positive feedback for motivation, feedback seeking, and creativity appear relatively stable (Liu et al., 2026; Su & Jiang, 2023; Su & Xiao, 2022; Wondim et al., 2021; Zhou, 1998). Negative feedback is more likely to work in a respectful relationship (Heine et al., 2025; Sommer & Kulkarni, 2012), when it is appraised as a challenge rather than a threat (Li et al., 2024), when it is clear and informative (Park et al., 2019; Zhou, 1998), and when it does not flow downward on creative tasks (Kim & Kim, 2020). Richer, synchronous channels suit sensitive feedback (Sheer, 2012; Westerman et al., 2014), and AI-delivered feedback should complement, not replace, human feedback (Hein et al., 2024). Organizations should therefore build trust, specificity, and channel richness into performance-management systems, 360-degree processes, and manager training, and support managers who find negative feedback stressful (Gonzalez-Montero & Maydell, 2025).

10. Limitations

Several limitations apply. First, the search used a web-based tool rather than a comprehensive search of Scopus or Web of Science, so coverage and reproducibility are lower than in a database-indexed review. Second, a single reviewer screened the records with AI assistance, no inter-rater agreement was calculated, and eligibility was judged largely at the abstract and record level; 10 reports could not be retrieved. Third, no risk-of-bias appraisal or protocol registration was undertaken, and vote counting ignores study size and precision. Fourth, only English-language, peer-reviewed journal articles were included, and two included studies relied on student participants in work-simulation tasks (Kim & Kim, 2020; Liu et al., 2022). Finally, as a narrative synthesis and not a meta-analysis, the review provides no pooled effect sizes.

12. Conclusion

The valence of feedback may be one of the most intuitively obvious yet empirically complex constructs in HRM and organizational behavior. Over 40 years of research shows that positive and negative feedback are not simple opposites in their effects on performance, creativity, feedback-seeking, and well-being, depending on the receiver's agency, the nature of the relationship, the style and channel of delivery, and the surrounding culture. In the 21 studies synthesized here, positive feedback was generally favorable across most tests, whereas negative feedback yielded adverse, mixed, favorable, or null results depending on the conditions. This review clarified what is known, mapped the theoretical foundations, integrated mechanisms and boundary conditions, and outlined a research agenda for the future.

Author's Contributions

Both authors participated in all stages and approved the final manuscript.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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Data Availability

The datasets generated and analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The authors are committed to transparency and will provide detailed methodological information and analysis protocols upon request.

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- Note. References marked with an asterisk (*) are the 21 studies included in the synthesis.*