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# The Social Dynamics of Employee Silence: A Qualitative Meta-Synthesis of Organizational Culture, Psychological Safety, and Voice Behavior

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## ABSTRACT

Employee silence represents a critical organizational phenomenon wherein employees deliberately withhold work-related ideas, concerns, suggestions, and information from individuals who could effect change. This systematic literature review employs a qualitative meta-synthesis approach to integrate research findings on the social dynamics underlying employee silence, with particular emphasis on the interrelationships among organizational culture, psychological safety, and voice behavior. A comprehensive search of eight academic databases (Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, Emerald Insight, SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis, Wiley Online Library, and Google Scholar) was conducted using predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria, yielding 48 studies for final analysis. The thematic synthesis revealed six primary themes: (1) organizational culture as a social context of silence, (2) psychological safety as a mediating mechanism, (3) fear and power distance in defensive silence, (4) leadership and silence climate, (5) voice behavior as a counterforce to silence, and (6) social norms and the institutionalization of silence. The findings demonstrate that employee silence is fundamentally a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by cultural values, power dynamics, leadership behaviors, and communication norms rather than merely an individual decision. The proposed conceptual framework illustrates a pathway wherein organizational culture influences psychological safety, which subsequently affects voice behavior and ultimately determines the prevalence of employee silence. This study contributes to organizational behavior theory by providing an integrated understanding of the social dynamics of silence and offers practical implications for organizational leaders seeking to cultivate speak-up cultures.

**Keywords:** Employee Silence, Organizational Culture, Psychological Safety, Voice Behavior.

## I. Introduction

Employee silence has emerged as a significant concern in contemporary organizational research, representing a pervasive phenomenon with far-reaching consequences for organizational effectiveness, innovation, learning, and decision-making quality (Morrison, 2022). When employees deliberately withhold work-related ideas, questions, or concerns from individuals who could potentially effect change, organizations are deprived of valuable information that could enhance problem-solving, error detection, and continuous improvement (Morrison, 2014). The systematic examination of employee silence has revealed that this behavior can hamper both individual and collective learning while impeding the detection of errors and



unethical behaviors across various organizational contexts worldwide (Knoll et al., 2021). The contemporary business environment, characterized by rapid technological disruption, increasing complexity, and heightened competition, demands open communication channels that facilitate the flow of critical information from frontline employees to decision-makers (Westover, 2025). Organizational silence threatens business success precisely because employee reluctance to voice concerns impedes innovation, problem-solving, and the organization's capacity to adapt to environmental changes. Research has consistently demonstrated that the hidden costs of silence manifest through withheld information, diminished employee engagement, and compromised decision-making processes (Westover, 2026). Furthermore, the accumulated evidence regarding speaking-up interventions indicates that they often achieve disappointing outcomes because of professional and organizational cultures that fail to support voice behavior (Lainidi et al., 2023a).

A critical insight emerging from recent scholarship is that employee silence should not be conceptualized merely as an individual decision but rather as a socially constructed phenomenon embedded within complex organizational dynamics (Gharehdaghi et al., 2024). The formation and perpetuation of silence behavior are fundamentally shaped by organizational culture, psychological safety perceptions, power relations, leadership practices, and prevailing communication norms. Factors such as fear of negative consequences, distrust in management, and perceived inequality have been identified as key antecedents that drive employees toward silence, while variables such as trust and psychological safety function as preventive factors (Vakkala et al., 2026). The paradox of silence emerges when individual and organizational needs and expectations become intertwined, creating unresolved tensions that manifest most acutely during crisis situations. Psychological safety has been established as a critical determinant of whether employees feel secure enough to take interpersonal risks such as voicing concerns, asking questions, and providing feedback (O'Donovan et al., 2021). Healthcare professionals who perceive their work environment as psychologically safe believe it is permissible to engage in such interpersonal risk-taking behaviors. However, psychological safety represents a complex, dynamic phenomenon influenced by organizational, team, and individual-level factors, necessitating multi-level analysis to understand its role in shaping voice and silence decisions (O'Donovan & McAuliffe, 2020).

Despite the substantial body of research on employee silence, organizational culture, psychological safety, and voice behavior, the existing literature remains fragmented, with these constructs typically examined in isolation rather than through an integrated lens (Akbar et al., 2026). This fragmentation has prevented meaningful theoretical advancements about the social dynamics that collectively shape employees' decisions to speak up or remain silent. There is a notable gap regarding our understanding of employee voice and silence, particularly concerning the complex and differentiated relationship between withholding information and organizational outcomes (Lainidi et al., 2023b). The prevailing theoretical ambiguity regarding whether voice and silence represent opposite ends of a single continuum or distinct constructs has further complicated efforts to develop comprehensive explanatory frameworks (Sherf et al., 2020). This systematic literature review addresses these gaps by employing a qualitative meta-synthesis approach to integrate findings across studies examining employee silence, organizational culture, psychological safety, and voice behavior. The primary objectives are: (1) to synthesize qualitative evidence on the social dynamics underlying employee silence; (2) to elucidate the mechanisms through which organizational culture and psychological safety influence silence behavior; (3) to develop an integrated conceptual framework that explains the interrelationships among these constructs; and (4) to provide evidence-based recommendations for organizational practice and future research.

## II. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

### 2.1. Conceptualizing Employee Silence

Employee silence is defined as the deliberate withholding of ideas, suggestions, concerns, or information about problems from individuals who are perceived as capable of effecting change (Morrison,

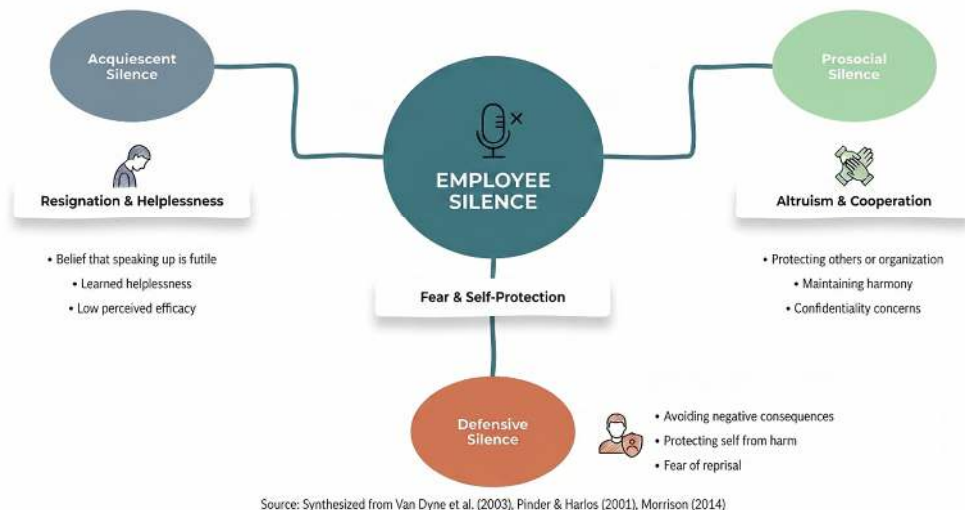
2014). This conceptualization emphasizes the intentional nature of silence, distinguishing it from situations where employees simply lack relevant information to share. Employee silence has been proposed to hamper individual and collective learning as well as the detection of errors and unethical behaviors in many areas of the world (Knoll et al., 2021). The phenomenon extends beyond mere absence of voice to encompass strategic decisions by employees to remain silent despite possessing potentially valuable information. Research has established that employee silence, when conceptualized as a distinct behavior rather than simply the absence of voice, demonstrates unique relationships with key organizational antecedents and outcomes (Sherf et al., 2020). Meta-analytic evidence demonstrates that voice and silence are empirically independent constructs rather than polar opposites, with perceived impact more strongly relating to voice while psychological safety more strongly relates to silence. This distinction has important implications for understanding the differential mechanisms driving each behavior and their respective consequences for employee well-being and organizational effectiveness.

## 2.2. Types of Employee Silence

Contemporary research distinguishes among multiple forms of employee silence, each characterized by distinct underlying motivations (Rakshani & Hosseini, 2025). Organizational silence can be divided into three primary types: acquiescent silence, defensive silence, and prosocial silence. These different forms emerge from fundamentally different psychological processes and carry distinct implications for both individuals and organizations. The categorization of silence types helps managers adopt different methods to encourage employee voice depending on the specific form of organizational silence prevalent within their context. Acquiescent silence represents withdrawal behavior rooted in resignation and the belief that speaking up would be futile (Knoll et al., 2019). Employees engaging in acquiescent silence have essentially given up on the possibility that their voice could make a difference, reflecting learned helplessness or disengagement from organizational processes. This form of silence is particularly problematic as it signals a fundamental breakdown in the psychological contract between employees and their organizations. Research with Korean public officials demonstrated that citizenship pressure had a positive relationship with acquiescent silence, while job engagement had a negative relationship, suggesting that engaged employees are less likely to succumb to resignation-based silence (Han & Lah, 2023).

Defensive silence is motivated primarily by fear of negative consequences, retaliation, or damage to one's career or interpersonal relationships (Qiu et al., 2026). Employees engage in defensive silence as a self-protective mechanism when they perceive that speaking up could expose them to risk. Studies have consistently found that defensive silence increases under conditions of abusive supervision, workplace conflict, and bullying (Kusum & Yadav, 2024). The defensive form of silence has been found to have significant negative impacts on job satisfaction and organizational outcomes, as employees withhold critical information that could benefit organizational functioning (Maaty & Fayyad, 2018). Prosocial silence emerges from altruistic or cooperative motives, wherein employees withhold information to protect others, maintain organizational harmony, or preserve confidentiality (Lho et al., 2025). Unlike acquiescent and defensive silence, prosocial silence may sometimes serve organizational interests by reducing information overload or preventing unnecessary conflict. However, research on nurses' organizational silence found that prosocial silence, when driven by ethical concerns during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, can reflect employees' attempts to reduce conflicts in the face of sudden uncertainties (Karatepe, 2022). Authentic leadership has been positively associated with prosocial silence while negatively associated with acquiescent and defensive silence, indicating that leadership behaviors differentially influence various silence forms.

### Types of Employee Silence: Motivations and Characteristics



**Figure 1. Types of Employee Silence and Their Underlying Motivations**

#### 2.3. Organizational Culture and Silence

Organizational culture represents the shared values, beliefs, assumptions, and norms that shape behavior within organizations and fundamentally influences whether employees feel encouraged or discouraged to speak up (Kim & Ko, 2021). When professors perceived innovative and collective cultures, their defensive silence decreased while prosocial silence increased, whereas perceptions of rational culture led to increased defensive silence and decreased prosocial silence. The hierarchical culture was associated with increased acquiescent silence and decreased prosocial silence, demonstrating the powerful influence of cultural orientations on silence behaviors. Research has established that a favorable organizational climate is vital for effective organizational functioning as it promotes the exchange of knowledge and information, develops employee competencies, and motivates employees to participate in organizational management (Kettaf et al., 2024). Organizational silence can lead to suppression of the collective voice, limited upward communication, decreased employee engagement, reduced effectiveness of organizational change initiatives, explicit or latent organizational conflicts, deformations in organizational culture, and inhibition of decision-making dynamics. The evidence consistently indicates that the organizational environment influences organizational silence, with leadership emerging as the most significant determinant for reducing silence.

Cultural factors extend beyond the organizational level to encompass national and societal dimensions. A large-scale cross-cultural study across 33 countries found significant relationships between employee silence motives and societal cultural practices, including power distance, institutional collectivism, and uncertainty avoidance (Knoll et al., 2021). Importantly, these findings suggest that cultural influences on silence are more complex than commonly assumed, challenging stereotypical assumptions about silence patterns in different national contexts. The research revealed both similarities and differences in silence prevalence between countries that did not necessarily support cultural stereotypes.

#### 2.4. Psychological Safety: The Critical Mediator

Psychological safety is defined as the shared belief that a team or work environment is safe for interpersonal risk-taking (Grailey et al., 2021). The presence of psychological safety is critical for delivering

quality patient care in healthcare contexts, supporting innovation and error prevention across organizational settings. Psychological safety enables employees to voice concerns, ask questions, admit mistakes, and suggest improvements without fear of negative consequences to their self-image, status, or career. Systematic reviews have consistently demonstrated that psychological safety primarily serves as a mediator linking leadership style, organizational systems, and social relationships with employee voice (Akbar et al., 2026). Several studies have also identified psychological safety as a moderator that strengthens or weakens the effectiveness of organizational practices in encouraging employee voice. Employees are more likely to voice ideas, suggestions, and concerns when they perceive a psychologically safe work environment. The role of silence has been identified as central to psychological safety management, functioning almost as an indicator, wherein a strong sense of psychological safety is reflected in trust in social interaction, making voice behavior stronger (Vakkala et al., 2026).

Research examining antecedents of psychological safety in high-risk workplaces identified three primary categories: (1) inclusive and transformational leadership styles, (2) hierarchical structures and power dynamics, and (3) workplace climate and communication culture (Ip et al., 2025). Studies consistently found that inclusive leadership, ethical integrity, and transformational leadership were strongly associated with higher psychological safety levels. While hierarchical structures provided necessary organizational coordination, overly rigid hierarchies often suppressed employee voice and innovation. A workplace culture characterized by trust, transparency, and open communication fostered greater psychological safety, improved teamwork, and enhanced well-being.

## 2.5. Voice Behavior: Speaking Up in Organizations

Voice behavior refers to employees' discretionary communication of ideas, suggestions, concerns, or opinions about work-related issues to persons who might be able to take appropriate action (Morrison, 2022). Over the past decade, hundreds of studies have been published on employee voice and silence, substantially advancing our understanding of when and why employees choose to speak up or remain silent, as well as the individual and organizational implications of these choices. Voice behavior represents a proactive, constructive form of employee behavior that can contribute significantly to organizational learning, innovation, and problem-solving. The examination of employee voice in the Chinese context revealed key antecedents including high power distance, psychological safety, and leader-member relationships as principal drivers (Sun et al., 2025). Within Western multinational enterprises, leaders' supportive responses foster employees' self-identification, promoting both direct voice and indirect forms such as voice drifting or third-party voice. The synthesis of dominant mechanisms rooted in culture, psychology, cognition, emotional resources, and leadership dynamics demonstrates the complex interplay of factors shaping voice expression, voice endorsement, innovation, and performance appraisal.

Research on promotive voice behavior among nurses found that individual-level characteristics (age, unit tenure, power distance orientation) and unit-level factors (leadership style, work climate) significantly influenced promotive voice (Lee et al., 2025). Power distance orientation was negatively associated with promotive voice, while inclusive leadership style and a positive speaking-up work climate were significantly related to higher levels of promotive voice. These findings suggest that fostering inclusive leadership and a supportive climate for speaking up, while addressing hierarchical barriers, can enhance employees' propensity to engage in voice behavior.

## III. Research Method

### 3.1. Research Design

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology combined with a Qualitative Meta-Synthesis approach to synthesize existing research findings on employee silence, organizational culture,

psychological safety, and voice behavior. The systematic review methodology was selected to ensure comprehensiveness, transparency, and replicability in identifying, evaluating, and integrating relevant research (O'Donovan & McAuliffe, 2020). The qualitative meta-synthesis technique enables the integration of findings from multiple qualitative studies to generate new interpretive insights beyond those present in any individual study (Gharehdaghi et al., 2024). The review followed established guidelines for systematic reviews in management and organizational research, incorporating elements from the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework to ensure methodological rigor (Akbar et al., 2026). This approach facilitates the identification of patterns, relationships, and mechanisms across studies while acknowledging the contextual richness of qualitative research findings.

### 3.2. Search Strategy and Data Sources

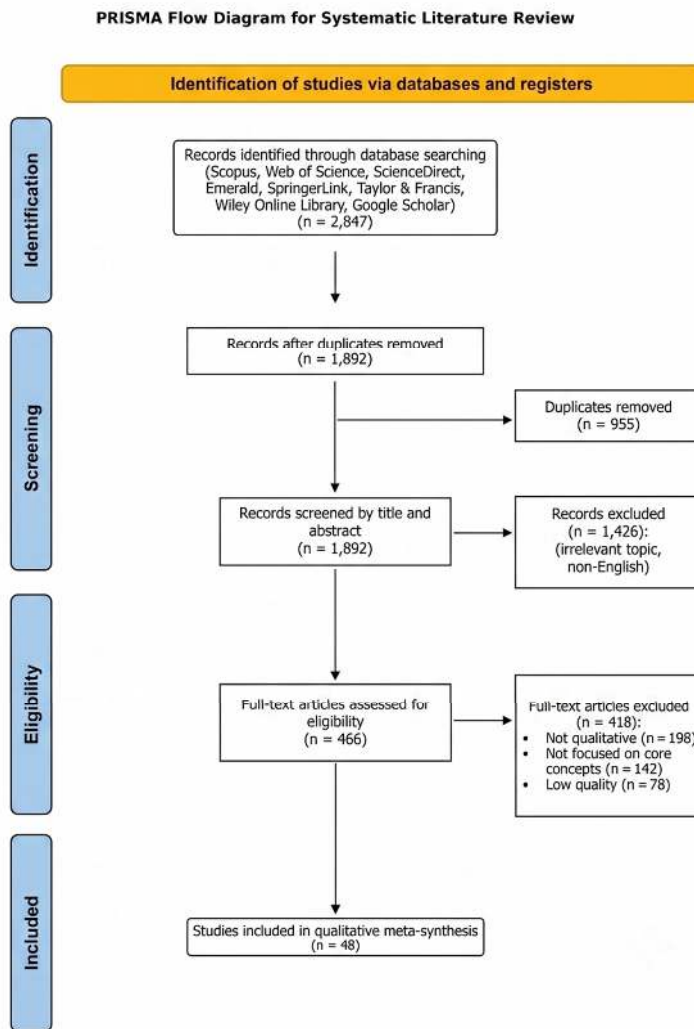
A comprehensive literature search was conducted across eight major academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, Emerald Insight, SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis, Wiley Online Library, and Google Scholar. The search strategy utilized Boolean operators to combine keywords related to the core constructs of interest. The primary search terms included: "employee silence" OR "organizational silence" AND "organizational culture" AND "psychological safety" AND "employee voice" AND "voice behavior." Additional search terms were employed to capture related concepts: "speak-up behavior," "silence climate," "workplace voice," "withholding information," "interpersonal risk-taking," and "communication climate." The search was initially unrestricted by date to capture foundational theoretical works, with particular emphasis on studies published from 2015 to 2025 to ensure currency of findings. Reference lists of included studies were manually searched to identify additional relevant publications not captured through database searches.

### 3.3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included in the review if they met the following criteria: (1) focused on employee silence, voice behavior, organizational culture, and/or psychological safety in workplace settings; (2) employed qualitative or mixed-methods research designs with substantial qualitative components; (3) published in peer-reviewed academic journals; (4) written in English; and (5) provided sufficient methodological detail to assess research quality. Studies were excluded if they: (1) focused exclusively on quantitative measurement development without substantive qualitative findings; (2) addressed silence in non-organizational contexts (e.g., educational settings without workplace relevance); (3) consisted of editorials, book reviews, or conference abstracts without full research reports; or (4) were inaccessible through institutional library resources.

### 3.4. Selection Process

The initial database search yielded 2,847 records. Following removal of 955 duplicates, 1,892 unique records remained for title and abstract screening. Two independent reviewers conducted the initial screening, with disagreements resolved through discussion. Title and abstract screening resulted in the exclusion of 1,426 records that were clearly irrelevant to the research questions or did not meet language requirements. Full-text assessment was conducted on 466 articles, of which 418 were excluded for the following reasons: not employing qualitative methodology (n = 198), not directly addressing the core conceptual relationships of interest (n = 142), or failing to meet quality assessment criteria (n = 78). The final sample comprised 48 studies included in the qualitative meta-synthesis.



**Figure 2. PRISMA Flow Diagram Illustrating the Article Selection Process**

### 3.5. Quality Assessment

Quality appraisal of included studies was conducted using adapted criteria from the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist for qualitative research (Javadi & Ardabili, 2025). Assessment dimensions included: (1) clarity of research aims; (2) appropriateness of qualitative methodology; (3) adequacy of sampling strategy; (4) appropriateness of data collection methods; (5) rigor of data analysis; (6) clarity of findings; and (7) value of research contribution. Studies scoring below acceptable thresholds were excluded from the final synthesis.

### 3.6. Data Extraction and Analysis

Data extraction involved systematic coding of study characteristics (authors, publication year, country, industry context, sample size, methodology) and substantive findings related to the research questions. Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns, themes, and relationships across studies (Zou et al., 2025). The meta-synthesis employed an iterative process of reading, coding, categorizing, and synthesizing findings to develop integrative themes that transcended individual study findings. The analysis

followed three sequential phases: (1) primary coding of descriptive themes directly reflecting study findings; (2) development of analytical themes through interpretation and abstraction across studies; and (3) construction of an integrated conceptual framework explaining the social dynamics of employee silence. Throughout this process, reflexive practices were employed to acknowledge the interpretive nature of the synthesis.

## IV. Result and Discussion

### 4.1 Analysis Result

#### a. Organizational Culture as a Social Context of Silence

The synthesis revealed organizational culture as the foundational social context within which silence behaviors emerge and are sustained. Organizations characterized by hierarchical structures and closed communication patterns systematically reinforced employee silence, while cultures emphasizing openness, participation, and transparency facilitated voice behavior (Özeren, 2025). The influence of organizational power distance on communication, voice behavior, and safety-related decisions was particularly pronounced in high-risk industries where precision and collaboration are critical. Research findings consistently demonstrated that younger and less experienced workers were more likely to remain silent due to hierarchical pressures and fear of retaliation (Özeren, 2025). Power distance was found to be not static but dynamically shaped by organizational culture, self-confidence, seniority, and perceived psychological safety. Organizations must prioritize the development of participatory management practices, transparent communication structures, and environments that support speaking up without fear to reduce risks and promote both employee well-being and organizational effectiveness. The synthesis revealed that organizational silence can lead to "suppression of the collective voice," limited bottom-up communication, decreased employee engagement, reduced effectiveness of organizational change initiatives, and inhibition of decision-making dynamics (Kettaf et al., 2024). Cultural assessments examining how employees evaluate the organizational climate and whether they perceive the presence of organizational silence demonstrated moderate relationships between organizational climate and silence behaviors, with the organizational environment influencing silence rather than the reverse.

#### b. Psychological Safety as a Mediating Mechanism

Psychological safety emerged as the critical mediating mechanism explaining how organizational factors translate into individual silence or voice decisions. The synthesis consistently found that psychological safety mediated the relationship between burnout and employee silence, and more specifically between the core components of burnout and both acquiescent and quiescent silence (Kassandrinou et al., 2023). For teachers, psychological safety mediated the relationship between vigor/dedication and both quiescent and acquiescent silence, highlighting the importance of these two forms of silence rooted in fear and hopelessness respectively. Breaking employee silence requires addressing psychological safety directly through organizational interventions (Moon & Kang, 2024). Research examining dialogic employee communication found that employees were less likely to engage in acquiescent silence or defensive silence when they perceived dialogic employee communication from their leaders. Psychological safety mediated the relationship between dialogic employee communication and employee silence, demonstrating its pivotal role in voice-silence dynamics. However, psychological empowerment was not found to be a significant mediator, suggesting that the safety mechanism operates independently from empowerment perceptions.

Healthcare professionals' experiences with psychological safety revealed that the phenomenon is influenced by individual perceptions of being valued and judged appropriateness of issues or concerns (O'Donovan et al., 2021). The identified themes—personal characteristics, past experiences, individual perceptions of being valued, and judged appropriateness—capture the complexities of how professionals experience psychological safety and make decisions to engage in voice or silence behavior. These findings

extend existing theoretical frameworks by accounting for variation in safety perceptions across individuals within the same organizational context.

c. Fear and Power Distance in Defensive Silence

Fear emerged as a dominant driver of defensive silence across organizational contexts. Trade-offs between voice and silence frequently involved employees weighing the potential benefits of speaking up against anticipated negative outcomes (Schwappach & Gehring, 2014). Preventing patients from serious harm constituted a strong motivation for voice, but this motivation competed with anticipated negative outcomes including damaged relationships, career consequences, and social exclusion. Decisions about whether and how to speak up involved complex considerations and trade-offs. Workplace bullying, psychological contract breach, and abusive supervision were consistently identified as antecedents driving employees toward defensive silence (Kusum et al., 2023). The research demonstrated that workplace bullying significantly impacts employee silence while psychological contract breach partially mediates the association between bullying and silence at workplace. This finding serves as an alarm for organizations where mistreatment like bullying is rampant and silence among employees is observed.

Cross-cultural examination of silence motives across 33 countries revealed that power distance demonstrated significant relationships with employee silence (Knoll et al., 2021). Countries with higher power distance cultures showed different patterns of silence prevalence, though the relationships were more complex than commonly assumed. The findings suggest that cultural values and societal practices shape the acceptability of speaking up to authority figures and influence employees' calculations of risk and benefit when deciding whether to voice concerns.

d. Leadership and Silence Climate

Leadership emerged as the most powerful organizational factor influencing silence climate. Authentic leadership was positively associated with organizational citizenship behavior and prosocial silence, while negatively associated with acquiescent and defensive silence (Lho et al., 2025). The mediating effects of different silence types on the relationship between authentic leadership and organizational citizenship behavior varied depending on the underlying motivations of silence, as different types are induced by distinct psychological processes. Humble leadership demonstrated significant negative correlations with employee silence (Ren & Dong, 2024). Humble leadership significantly inversely predicted permissive and defensive dimensions of employee silence, while the correlation with the prosocial dimension was insignificant. Psychological contracts partially mediated the impact of humble leadership on permissive silence and defensive silence among employees, highlighting the relational mechanisms through which leadership influences voice-silence dynamics.

Transformational leadership was consistently associated with enhanced psychological safety and voice behavior (Asghar et al., 2025). Research demonstrated that transformational leadership significantly enhances employee voice both directly and indirectly through psychological empowerment. Transformational leaders empower employees by fostering meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact, which subsequently increase their willingness to share constructive suggestions and challenge inefficiencies. The mediation results revealed that leader-leader exchange strengthened the positive relationship between transformational leadership and psychological empowerment, indicating that strong inter-leader collaboration amplifies empowerment effects.

e. Voice Behavior as a Counterforce to Silence

Voice behavior emerged as the primary behavioral counterforce to employee silence, with interventions targeting voice behavior showing potential for breaking silence patterns (O'Donovan & McAuliffe, 2020). The review of interventions targeting psychological safety, speaking up, and voice behavior in healthcare settings revealed that while some interventions showed improvements in voice, this was not consistently demonstrated across studies. The interventions fell into five categories, with educational

approaches (simulation, video presentations, case studies, workshops) and non-educational approaches (holistic facilitation, forum play, action meetings) both represented. Social courage was identified as a significant predictor of both voice and silence behaviors (Howard & Holmes, 2019). Social courage positively related to prosocial voice and silence while negatively related to defensive voice and silence as well as acquiescent voice and silence. In other words, social courage positively relates to beneficial forms of voice and silence while negatively relating to detrimental forms. Contextual influences including top management attitudes toward voice and silence, supervisor attitudes, and communication opportunities did not significantly moderate these relationships, suggesting that social courage effects are resilient to situational factors.

Individual and unit-level factors jointly predicted promotive voice behavior (Lee et al., 2025). At the individual level, nurses' age and unit tenure were positively associated with promotive voice, while power distance orientation was negatively associated. At the unit level, inclusive leadership style and a positive speaking-up work climate were significantly related to higher levels of promotive voice. These findings highlight the multi-level nature of voice behavior and the need for interventions targeting both individual and contextual factors.

#### f. Social Norms and the Institutionalization of Silence

The synthesis revealed how silence can become institutionalized through social norms that render speaking unacceptable or futile. In some Asian cultures, there exists a norm of silence or reluctance to openly discuss work-related issues, leading to a lack of knowledge about available protections and resources for addressing risks, perpetuating a culture of silence (Idris et al., 2023). Poverty and limited employment options further compound workers' challenges, making it difficult to assert their rights and demand better working conditions. Confronting co-workers when they behave undesirably is important for well-being and organizational performance, yet in some organizations a culture of silence prevails (Hilverda et al., 2018). Using the Theory of Planned Behavior framework, research demonstrated that employee voice was significantly predicted by perceived behavioral control and injunctive norms (what is considered normal in a certain working environment). Contrary to expectations, voice was not predicted by attitude and descriptive social norms (what people observe others doing). These findings suggest that stimulating confronting skills and creating a climate in which speaking up is perceived as normal may be beneficial for organizations, particularly hierarchical ones.

After-work connectivity and technology-mediated work have created new pathways to silence through psychological resource depletion (Xu & Chen, 2026). After-work connectivity significantly and positively predicts employee silence, which in turn predicts deceptive knowledge concealment. Restorative experiences mitigate the impact of after-work connectivity on employee silence, while ethical climate weakens the promotional effect of employee silence on deceptive knowledge concealment. These findings highlight the evolving nature of silence dynamics in contemporary digital work environments.

## 4.2. Discussion

### a. Integrating the Social Dynamics of Employee Silence

The meta-synthesis findings converge to demonstrate that employee silence is fundamentally a socially constructed phenomenon emerging from the dynamic interplay between organizational culture, psychological safety, leadership practices, and prevailing voice norms. Rather than representing merely an individual decision, silence is shaped by the social context in which employees are embedded and the cultural meanings attributed to speaking up or remaining quiet (Gharehdaghi et al., 2024). The synthesis reveals that factors such as fear of negative consequences, distrust in management, and perceived inequality are key antecedents of employee silence, while trust and psychological safety function as preventive factors.

The integrated findings support a conceptual framework wherein organizational culture serves as the foundational context that shapes psychological safety perceptions, which in turn influence voice behavior,

ultimately determining the prevalence and forms of employee silence. This pathway operates through multiple mechanisms including the establishment of communication norms, leadership modeling of voice-supportive behaviors, and the cultivation of interpersonal trust (Ip et al., 2025). Organizations characterized by supportive cultures with inclusive leadership, open communication, and trust demonstrated higher levels of psychological safety and voice behavior, with corresponding lower levels of harmful silence (acquiescent and defensive forms).

b. Conceptual Framework: The Social Dynamics Model

The proposed conceptual framework illustrates the pathway from organizational culture through psychological safety and voice behavior to employee silence. Organizational culture establishes the foundational values, norms, and expectations that signal to employees whether speaking up is welcome, safe, and likely to be effective. Open, participative cultures that value employee input and tolerate dissent create conditions favorable to voice, while hierarchical, closed cultures reinforce silence (Kim & Ko, 2021). Psychological safety functions as the critical mediating mechanism translating cultural signals into individual risk assessments. When employees perceive their environment as psychologically safe, they believe that speaking up will not result in negative consequences to their self-image, status, or career (Akbar et al., 2026). This perception reduces the perceived risks associated with voice and increases employees' willingness to share ideas, concerns, and suggestions. The synthesis confirms that psychological safety mediates the relationships between leadership, organizational trust, and voice behavior.

Voice behavior represents the behavioral expression of psychological safety perceptions, wherein employees actively communicate work-related ideas, concerns, and suggestions to individuals who can effect change. The synthesis demonstrates that voice behavior serves as a counterforce to silence, with organizations that successfully cultivate voice mechanisms experiencing reduced problematic silence (O'Donovan & McAuliffe, 2020). The relationship between voice and silence is not simply inverse; rather, both can coexist as employees may voice on some issues while remaining silent on others. Employee silence represents the outcome of this dynamic process, with its specific form (acquiescent, defensive, or prosocial) determined by the underlying motivations shaped by the preceding factors. The framework acknowledges that different forms of silence have different antecedents and consequences, requiring differentiated intervention approaches.

## V. Conclusion

This qualitative meta-synthesis demonstrates that employee silence is fundamentally a social phenomenon shaped by the interplay of organizational culture, psychological safety, leadership practices, and prevailing communication norms. The synthesis of 48 studies identified six major themes explaining the social dynamics of silence behavior: organizational culture as a social context, psychological safety as a mediating mechanism, fear and power distance in defensive silence, leadership and silence climate, voice behavior as a counterforce, and social norms and the institutionalization of silence. The proposed conceptual framework shows that organizational culture influences psychological safety, which subsequently affects voice behavior and ultimately determines patterns of employee silence. Open and participative cultures characterized by trust, transparency, and inclusive leadership tend to foster psychological safety, strengthen voice behavior, and reduce harmful forms of silence, particularly acquiescent and defensive silence. Conversely, hierarchical and closed cultures weaken psychological safety and reinforce silence climates.

Employee silence is a critical organizational concern because it deprives organizations of valuable information required for problem-solving, error detection, innovation, learning, and continuous improvement. The findings indicate that silence is not merely an individual decision but a socially constructed response to perceived organizational conditions. Therefore, addressing employee silence requires systemic interventions that target organizational culture, leadership practices, communication systems, and psychological safety rather than simply urging individual employees to speak up. However, several limitations

should be acknowledged. The review was limited to English-language publications, which may have excluded relevant studies from non-Western contexts where silence dynamics may differ. In addition, the conceptualization and measurement of voice and silence remain heterogeneous across studies, and the qualitative meta-synthesis approach involves interpretive processes that may introduce researcher subjectivity. Many included studies also relied on cross-sectional designs and self-reported data, limiting causal inference and raising concerns about common method bias and social desirability effects. Furthermore, the predominance of studies from healthcare and Western organizational contexts limits the generalizability of the findings across sectors, cultures, and occupational groups.

Future research should address these limitations through longitudinal and multi-wave designs to clarify causal relationships and examine how silence dynamics evolve over time. Cross-cultural comparative studies using standardized measures are also needed to understand how cultural values and organizational practices shape silence across different national and institutional contexts. Further research should distinguish between safety voice and general employee voice, as employees may speak up on certain issues while remaining silent on others. In addition, intervention studies should move beyond single-component approaches by testing multifaceted interventions at individual, team, and organizational levels. Future studies should also explore emerging influences such as digital work environments, remote work, technology-mediated communication, after-work connectivity, and always-on work cultures, which may create new pathways to silence. Finally, greater attention should be given to the consequences of different silence types, including acquiescent, defensive, and prosocial silence, particularly in relation to employee well-being, organizational learning, and safety outcomes.

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