

Cost of Silence: Exploring the Impact of Organisational Silence on Employee Engagement

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ABSTRACT

In most organisations, silence speaks louder than words. When employees choose to withhold ideas, feedback, or concerns, organisational silence can quietly undermine the foundations of employee engagement, eroding trust, collaboration, and performance. Although this relationship has been studied internationally, its dynamics within the Malaysian private information technology (IT) sector remain underexplored, where the nature of work may intensify silence. This study aims to investigate the impact of three types of organisational silence—acquiescent, defensive, and prosocial—on employee engagement. Established frameworks on silence and employee engagement will guide the study. A quantitative approach will be employed, using a structured online questionnaire distributed to purposively selected IT private sector employees within Klang Valley. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression analyses will be utilised to identify patterns, relationships, and the type of silence that contributes most to employee engagement. The study is expected to provide both theoretical and practical contributions by offering culturally relevant insights for Malaysian organisations. Findings are anticipated to guide leaders and human resource professionals in mitigating the adverse effects of silence.

Keywords: Organisational Silence, Employee Engagement, Information Technology

INTRODUCTION

Employees are regarded as the driving force behind an organisation's performance and productivity. The statement suggests that employees share their opinions either individually or collectively to resolve issues, and their insights are valuable for enhancing the organisation (Al-Abbrow, 2022). However, when an employee chooses to remain silent, the organisation misses out on valuable opportunities to learn from mistakes and improve operations (Montgomery et al., 2023). Morrison and Milliken (2000) first defined and introduced the concept of organisational silence, or "climate of silence," as the situation where employees refrain from speaking up because it is seen as pointless or risky. Pinder and Harlos (2001) further conceptualised employee silence as deliberately withholding opinions or concerns from individuals who could potentially instigate change.

Meanwhile, Van Dyne et al. (2003) added that employee silence depends on whether they feel motivated enough to express their thoughts, concerns, or ideas for workplace improvement. Thus, it is also important to note that the terms 'organisational silence' and 'employee silence' are often used interchangeably; they involve complex behavioural dimensions. Accordingly, Van Dyne et al. (2003) identifies three types of silence that can be categorised as organisational silence. These are acquiescent silence, defensive silence, and prosocial silence. In recent years, the issue of employee silence has gained relevance due to its potential

impact on employee engagement. Organisations recognise the need to work closely with their employees to succeed, but a culture of silence can develop if employees choose to remain silent (Cetin, 2020).

Employee engagement is crucial within an organisation and depends on various factors such as communication, leadership skills, and workplace culture (Tham et al., 2022). These factors can be negatively affected by the presence of silence. Kahn (1990) introduced a framework of employee engagement, which occurs when employees experience a sense of meaningfulness, safety, and availability. Few studies directly explore the relationship between organisational silence and employee engagement. However, some research suggests that silence can hinder the psychological needs of employees, as described by Kahn (1990). For example, a study on doctors and silence in Ireland found that speaking up about concerns or issues could harm their career prospects (Creese et al., 2021). This study demonstrates that when their safety needs are unmet, employees are less likely to be engaged. Another study by Cetin (2020) in Turkey indicated a close relationship between organisational silence and employee commitment, highlighting the complexity of silence as a behavioural phenomenon.

Since silence is a complex behaviour, this calls for further investigation into the different types of organisational silence in Malaysia and the connection between organisational silence and employee engagement. Additionally, most existing studies are conducted in Western countries; therefore, it is essential to explore the context within Malaysia to ensure cultural relevance (Yen & Yeong, 2024). This study will focus on employees from the private information technology (IT) sector in Malaysia, especially in the Klang Valley, to gain a deeper understanding, as previous research has primarily concentrated on general professions, such as teachers and doctors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Organisational Silence

Organisational silence (OS) has emerged as a significant yet complex issue in the study of organisational behaviour. Morrison and Milliken (2000) initially describe it as a collective phenomenon where employees refrain from raising concerns, and over time, this restraint becomes an accepted organisational norm. The underlying reasons often include a fear of negative consequences and a belief that one's input will not influence organisational outcomes. The term organisational silence is also used interchangeably with 'employee silence' (Cetin, 2020). Building on this, Morrison and Milliken (2000) argue that silence is not an individual weakness but is shaped by organisational factors, such as leadership behaviour, cultural norms, and restrictive communication structures.

Building on this foundation, Wen et al. (2025), in their systematic review and meta-analysis of organisational silence among nursing professionals, highlight that organisational silence involves employees refraining from voicing concerns due to feelings of powerlessness, fear, and perceived organisational injustice. It emphasises the harmful impact of silence as a form of coded protest and defensive behaviour in such contexts. They note that silence is often a defensive response to an environment perceived as unjust, unwelcoming, or unreceptive. In this context, employees silence their voices not out of ignorance or apathy, but as a coded protest fear, betrayal, or feelings of powerlessness within organisational settings.

However, although the two terms 'organisational silence' and 'employee silence' are often used interchangeably, they are not defined in the same way. Organisational silence is defined as a collective state where the entire organisation remains silent. Employee silence, conversely, refers to an individual's choice not to provide feedback or to withhold feedback. Noting this difference is significant, as it helps determine whether silence stems from organisational culture or personal choice.

Dimensions of Organisational Silence

Alongside Morrison and Milliken's (2000) concept of organisational silence, Van Dyne et al. (2003) provided a clearer understanding of this complex behaviour by examining silence and its underlying causes. Van Dyne et al. (2003) proposed that silence arises from various reasons and can be categorised into three types: acquiescent silence, defensive silence, and prosocial silence.

Acquiescent silence, as described by Van Dyne et al. (2003), occurs when employees choose to remain silent because they believe speaking up will not make a difference. This type of silence often occurs in organisations with strict hierarchies, where leaders frequently disregard feedback or engage in unethical behaviour. As a result, employees may feel angry, but instead of speaking out, they opt to stay quiet due to the belief that no action will be taken or out of fear of repercussions (Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009). Over time, this silent behaviour, driven by feelings of frustration or hopelessness, can lead to employees feeling disconnected. Furthermore, when concerns are left unspoken, it can cause stress, reduce productivity, and even increase turnover, which can harm both employees and organisations (Hamouche, 2021).

Van Dyne et al. (2003) then identified a second type of silence, known as defensive silence. Defensive silence occurs when employees choose to remain silent out of fear. It is often driven by fear and self-protection (Yang et al., 2025). Employees may fear losing their jobs or becoming entangled in issues. Those employing defensive silence go out of their way to stay quiet to avoid potential consequences (Wang et al., 2024). Such silence within an organisation is unhealthy because it can foster a company culture where employees are hesitant to speak up, which can lead to low productivity and diminished workforce engagement (Wang et al., 2024). Additionally, defensive silence may also negatively impact organisational performance.

Finally, unlike acquiescent silence and defensive silence, the last type of silence introduced by Van Dyne et al. (2003) is prosocial silence. According to the suggested dimensions, prosocial silence is when workers remain silent to protect their colleagues or the organisation. A 2025 conceptual model studied by Hosseini & Rakhshani (2025) also describes prosocial silence as withholding information out of loyalty, altruism, or to avoid burdening others. It recognises the positive intentions but warns of possible negative effects like delayed interventions or suppressed ideas, highlighting the need for a balance between silence and communication. For example, an employee might choose not to disclose a colleague's mistake to prevent conflicts and protect relationships within the team. However, despite prosocial silence being motivated by employees' good intentions to maintain harmony, it can also lead to negative outcomes for both staff and organisations (Lainidi et al., 2025). For instance, efforts to sustain harmony may result in unresolved issues if employees remain silent. This could affect organisational performance, as problems remain unaddressed (Joseph & Shetty, 2022).

The dimensions of silence by Van Dyne et al. (2003) have multiple definitions. Although all three types of silence involve the suppression of voice, they differ in motives. It is essential to recognise these differences, especially for leaders seeking to foster a collaborative environment within an organisation. Team leaders could address these issues directly and implement strategies tailored to improve the situation.

Employee Engagement

Employee engagement can be defined as the extent to which employees are emotionally, cognitively, and behaviourally invested in their work and committed to achieving organisational goals (Kaur, 2023). It is a condition where employees are more than just satisfied with their work; they are committed and actively engaged in achieving organisational objectives. The foundational definition of employee engagement was

introduced by Kahn (1990), who described engagement as the "harnessing of employees' selves to their work." He proposed that engagement occurs when employees invest their physical, emotional, and cognitive energy into their work. Building on Kahn's framework, Saks (2006) conceptualised employee engagement as a measurable and differentiated construct. He argued that engagement is a response to the perceived value of organisational support. When employees perceive fairness, recognition, and support, they are more likely to reciprocate with increased engagement. Finally, these two frameworks have demonstrated that engagement is more than just being satisfied or motivated at work; it is a two-way relationship between employees and their organisations.

Kahn's (1990) Framework of Employee Engagement

Employee engagement, as proposed by Kahn (1990), emphasises the significance of psychological presence within the organisation. He argued that employees are most engaged when they can fully invest themselves physically, emotionally, and mentally in their jobs. These three conditions which are meaningfulness (feeling that work matters), safety (feeling free to express oneself without fear of repercussions), and availability (having the energy and resources to engage) are essential for sustained engagement (Kahn, 1990). When these conditions are not met, employees are more likely to disengage.

Firstly, he defined meaningfulness as the sense when employees see their work as purposeful and aligned with personal and organisational goals. When employees find meaning in what they do, they are more likely to be engaged. However, when employees feel their work lacks meaning or goes unrecognised, they may lose motivation. Employees who feel their contributions are undervalued may become disengaged, which in turn leads to them putting in minimal effort and becoming emotionally detached from work.

Secondly, as proposed by Kahn (1990), psychological safety is the belief that individuals can express themselves without fear of consequences. According to him, it is fostered through trust in supervisors, open communication, and a non-threatening environment. If an employee is in an environment where fear or criticism is common, they are less likely to speak up. Such climates limit productivity and honest dialogue, which could contribute to disengagement.

Finally, the third psychological condition in this framework is availability, which relates to how much individuals feel mentally, emotionally, and physically ready to go to work. If employees are tired, burned out, or emotionally drained, it becomes difficult for them to stay engaged. Kahn (1990) noted that employees must feel personally equipped to handle work challenges; however, when stressors surpass their capacity, employees may withdraw. This withdrawal is not caused by a lack of interest or safety, but may stem from high job strain, poor work-life balance, and ongoing stress. Therefore, when these conditions are not satisfied, employees' level of engagement may decrease. This disengagement can manifest as reduced motivation, minimal involvement in tasks, or avoidance behaviours such as absenteeism.

Kahn (1990) conceptualised disengagement as a self-protective mechanism rather than merely a lack of interest. Employees disengage from their work to safeguard themselves from stress, burnout, or other detrimental effects. That said, his theory remains central to engagement because it emphasises the internal and subjective experiences of employees within an organisation.

Organisational Silence and Employee Engagement

A 2023 study on teachers highlights that psychological safety, a key element of psychological climate mediates the relationship between employee silence and job engagement (Kassandrinou et al, 2023). According to Kahn (1990), engagement depends on three conditions: availability, safety, and meaningfulness. However, these conditions can be disrupted by silence within the organisation, especially

when driven by fear or frustration. Van Dyne et al. (2003) proposed a framework to explain this silent behaviour. They identified three types of silence: acquiescence, defensive, and prosocial silence. The framework emphasises that when employees remain silent, they are likely to start feeling disconnected. Over time, employees who consistently withhold their opinions may become disengaged and undervalued. Recognising the underlying causes of silence is essential for fostering a more engaged, productive, and psychologically healthy organisation.

Proposed Theoretical Framework

Two major theoretical frameworks that will be employed in this study include those of Van Dyne et al. (2003), Dimensions of Organisational Silence, and Kahn's (1990) Employee Engagement framework. Organisational silence will be used as an independent variable. Organisational silence will be conceptualised in three forms: acquiescence silence (feeling of helplessness), defensive silence (fear of consequences), and prosocial silence (motivated by the desire to protect others or the organisation). These various forms of silence will help explain why employees choose to remain silent in different organisational situations.

Furthermore, employee engagement, the dependent variable of this study, will be explained using Kahn's (1990) employee engagement framework. The framework identified three psychological conditions for engagement: meaningfulness, safety, and availability. According to Kahn (1990), when these conditions are met, employees will be engaged at work. However, silence can undermine these conditions, especially when a lack of psychological safety makes employees reluctant to contribute actively.

Finally, although this study does not explore moderating or mediating variables, it recognises broader contextual factors, such as hierarchical culture and leadership style, that influence how silence is expressed and the degree of employee commitment. The theoretical basis established here will inform the design of the instrument and support the use of correlational and regression analyses to assess the levels of organisational silence and employee engagement within Malaysia's private IT sector.

DISCUSSION

The anticipated findings of this study will highlight organisational silence and its diverse impacts on employee engagement in various forms. Acquiescent silence, which arises from fear, is likely to diminish employee motivation and sense of purpose. Conversely, defensive silence, driven by fear, may affect an employee's psychological safety and trust. Meanwhile, prosocial silence, although often seen as a positive type of silence, could obstruct employees' innovation and leave vital issues unresolved. By placing these dynamics within Malaysia's cultural context, the results of this study will be particularly relevant, as Malaysia's cultural values of respect and hierarchy frequently reinforce silence. These relationships will be explored through a quantitative approach using an online structured questionnaire that will be distributed to purposively selected private IT employees in Klang Valley that fit the study's criteria. A filter question will be asked before they could proceed to the next section of the survey. This is to ensure respondents fulfil the study's criteria. The collected data will then be examined using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation and multiple regression. This is to identify any significant patterns and predictors as well as strengthens the reliability of the findings. Additionally, the findings are expected to provide leaders and human resource professionals with strategies to reduce detrimental silence and enhance engagement.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study aims to emphasise the three types of silence: acquiescent silence, defensive silence, and prosocial silence and their impact on employee engagement through effects on meaningfulness, safety,

and availability. By analysing Malaysia's private IT sector, the research addresses a significant gap and offers a particularly relevant context. It will also provide recommendations, particularly in reducing harmful silence and encouraging openness among employees within organisations.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper is acknowledged as a conceptual paper rather than a completed empirical study. Therefore, the paper does not include empirical results or findings as the paper has not proceeded to the stages of data collection or analysis. As such, the brief methodology described in the discussion, is intended as preparatory guide for future research. Future research can refine and implement the proposed framework, supported by systematic data collection and evaluation to test and expand its theoretical implications established in this paper.

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