Employee Voice in Hybrid Higher Education Workplaces: A Qualitative Document Analysis of Trust, Silence, and Managerial Engagement

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ABSTRACT

As hybrid and remote work become the new normal, how employees express their voice sharing ideas, concerns, or feedback has become both more important and more complicated. This paper explores how employee voice operates in digitally mediated workplaces, particularly within private higher education institutions. Using a qualitative approach, we analyzed organizational documents, HR policies, and sector reports to identify common challenges and patterns. While digital platforms have opened up new channels for communication, many employees still face barriers like unclear feedback processes, limited psychological safety, and inconsistent managerial engagement. The study draws on Social Exchange Theory to explain how trust, reciprocity, and recognition shape whether employees feel safe to speak up. Beyond identifying these barriers, the paper offers practical strategies for organizations looking to foster more inclusive and responsive communication. We suggest that digital tools alone aren't enough—organizations must actively build cultures of openness and trust. To deepen understanding, future research should consider combining qualitative and quantitative methods, engaging directly with employees through surveys or interviews. Case studies of organizations that have successfully created space for employee voice could also provide valuable insights. Exploring other theoretical perspectives alongside Social Exchange Theory may offer a broader understanding of how voice functions in complex, hybrid work settings.

Keywords: employee voice, modern organization, digitalization, workplace, human resource

INTRODUCTION

In today's increasingly hybrid and remote work environments, the ability for employees to speak up to offer feedback, raise concerns, or share ideas is often assumed to be enhanced by technology. Digital platforms promise open channels, instant messaging, and asynchronous communication. However, beneath this promise lies a more complex reality: the presence of digital tools does not automatically translate into employee voice. Especially within structured environments like private higher education institutions, employees frequently report feeling disconnected, unheard, or uncertain about the consequences of speaking up (Morse, 2022; Nikolic & Holster, 2025).

At the heart of this issue is the relational dynamic between managers and employees. Communication may be technologically enabled, but voice is socially earned shaped by trust, psychological safety, and mutual respect. In digitally mediated spaces, these relational signals are often muted. Employees begin to ask: Will my voice be taken seriously? Will speaking up damage my standing? Is there any real benefit to contributing? When these questions go unanswered, silence becomes the default, not because people have nothing to say, but because the conditions to say it do not exist.

By analyzing institutional documents, sector reports, and HR guidelines, this research surfaces a key tension: the gap between the promise of voice and the reality of silence. It raises a critical question for both scholars

and practitioners: Are current hybrid workplace structures truly designed to enable voice—or do they merely simulate inclusion while leaving core relational dynamics unaddressed?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Employee Voice in Private Higher Education Institution

Employee voice, defined as the discretionary communication of ideas, suggestions, concerns, or opinions intended to improve organizational functioning, is increasingly viewed as essential to engagement and innovation (Morrison, 2014). In modern organizations, especially within knowledge-based sectors like higher education, voice practices are being re-evaluated due to changing employee expectations and flattened hierarchies. However, contemporary research shows that despite mechanisms being in place, employees often feel unheard, especially in organizations with rigid hierarchies or opaque communication channels (Kalfa et al., 2025). Moreover, Kougiannou and Holland (2022) note that digitalization has brought new complexities to the voice landscape some employees feel liberated to speak up through digital platforms, while others experience increased silence due to surveillance, technological fatigue, or limited emotional connection.

Private universities around the world have increasingly recognized the importance of employee voice, particularly under the shifting dynamics of hybrid work. A study conducted at United Arab Emirates University found that over 60% of academic and administrative staff viewed flexible work arrangements as a positive influence on their well-being and productivity. However, only 38.4% believed their concerns were seriously considered by leadership (Athalage, 2024). Similarly, research conducted in Australian private higher education institutions revealed that 72% of faculty members valued hybrid flexibility but noted reduced informal interaction with management, which they felt limited their ability to raise issues spontaneously (Basheer, 2023). These statistics highlight that while the infrastructure for remote communication has improved, managerial responsiveness and genuine receptiveness remain inconsistent.

Furthermore, studies in Polish and Middle Eastern private universities suggest that although institutions invest in digital tools and policies, the social mechanisms for enabling voice such as trust, psychological safety, and authentic feedback loops are often underdeveloped (Przytuła et al., 2024). According to research by Burton (2024), only 41% of staff in hybrid work settings felt that their managers made an active effort to engage with employee concerns beyond routine reporting systems. The lack of informal "corridor conversations" in hybrid models has significantly impacted spontaneous feedback, creating a need for managers to intentionally reintroduce channels for voice, both synchronously and asynchronously. Managers often overestimate the effectiveness of formal systems without understanding the nuanced barriers that digital environments create for expression, visibility, and perceived inclusion. As such, universities that integrate employee voice within both strategic HR practices and daily operational routines tend to outperform others in retaining talent, improving morale, and driving innovation.

Digitalization in Communication: The Hybrid Condition

The shift to hybrid working environments—where employees toggle between physical and remote spaces—has created both opportunities and constraints for employee voice. Digital platforms like Slack, Teams, and Zoom offer avenues for asynchronous and real-time expression, yet they can also dilute psychological safety, hinder trust-building, and limit informal voice opportunities (Wu et al., 2023). Studies have shown that voice tends to be more reserved in digital environments due to concerns over message permanence and misinterpretation (Zhu, 2025). In Malaysia's private higher education context, where academic and administrative roles often operate under tight schedules and bureaucratic pressure, hybrid communication further complicates visibility and influence, especially for non-leadership staff.

The post-COVID acceleration of digitalization has profoundly altered how communication and voice function within private higher education institutions. While digital tools such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom have enabled task completion and coordination, they have largely replaced the spontaneous, relationship-based conversations that traditionally built trust and openness in academic settings (Zhu, 2025). This shift from relational to transactional communication has theoretical implications: under Social Exchange Theory, employees are more likely to engage in voice when they perceive mutual respect and support from their managers (Blau, 1964). In digital settings, this reciprocity is easily eroded when feedback is delayed,

depersonalized, or routinized through formal surveys and automated responses. Research shows that in institutions where communication becomes overly digitized without maintaining interpersonal dynamics, employee engagement drops and silence increases (Wu et al., 2023). Thus, while digitalization offers logistical flexibility, it can compromise communicative authenticity unless leadership strategies adapt accordingly.

This challenge is especially pronounced in Malaysian private universities, which rapidly transitioned into hybrid or fully remote models during and after the pandemic. While this enabled continuity of academic operations, many staff members—particularly those in non-leadership roles report feelings of isolation, reduced voice, and poor recognition in virtual meetings (Basheer, 2023). Managers, often lacking in digital leadership competencies, are unequipped to foster inclusive and psychologically safe communication in these environments (Przytuła et al., 2024). Without intentional effort to redesign communication flows—such as incorporating synchronous voice touchpoints, feedback loops, and open virtual forums—the digital infrastructure risks reinforcing hierarchy and muting voice from the periphery of organizational structures. Consequently, universities that view hybrid communication as a strategic culture-building tool, rather than just a logistical necessity, are more likely to retain engaged staff and foster innovation.

Theoretical Foundation: Social Exchange Theory and Manager-Employee Relations

Social Exchange Theory (SET), first introduced by Blau (1964), offers a powerful lens to interpret the nuances of manager-employee relationships in evolving organizational structures. At its core, SET proposes that social behavior arises from an exchange process aimed at maximizing benefits while minimizing costs. In workplace dynamics, this theory translates into the idea that employees are more likely to engage in constructive behaviors such as expressing voice when they perceive fair treatment, trust, and reciprocal support from their managers (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

In hybrid work environments, where digital mediation substitutes physical presence, the mechanics of social exchange change significantly. Research shows that in the absence of daily face-to-face interactions, employees rely more heavily on perceived managerial support, consistency, and digital responsiveness to determine whether to speak up or remain silent (Akritidis, 2025; Hasle, 2025). Trust becomes the currency of exchange in such environments, and it is often built through consistent digital communication, recognition, and inclusive decision making opportunities (De Winne et al., 2025).

Notably, SET helps explain why some managers struggle to maintain engagement and voice among employees in remote or hybrid conditions. The reduced visibility of employees may lead to decreased reciprocal exchanges, particularly when managers do not proactively bridge this gap through intentional strategies like virtual checkins, recognition in online spaces, or participatory platforms. As Gyllenhammar Byström (2023) argues, digital communication can foster or fracture social exchange, depending on how well psychological safety and trust are cultivated.

Moreover, the application of SET in private higher education institutions is particularly relevant. Faculty and administrative staff often operate in distinct silos, and the absence of a physical campus presence has weakened informal exchanges. Unless leaders in these institutions reconfigure digital feedback mechanisms and reinforce reciprocal support structures, the risk of employee silence increases—especially among junior or contract staff (Lee, 2024; Perry, 2025). Consequently, SET provides not only a theoretical framework but also a strategic lens through which to evaluate policy interventions and digital managerial practices.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive methodology aimed at understanding the evolving challenges and expectations surrounding employee voice in hybrid workplaces. Given the exploratory nature of the research and the focus on organizational culture and policy, document analysis was employed as the primary data collection method. This included analysis of secondary data such as HR policy documents, white papers, organizational guidelines, and sector-specific global reports published by credible institutions (e.g., CIPD, OECD, Work Institute). In addition, verified news features and practitioner commentary were included to capture recent insights related to post-pandemic digitalization in higher education.

The data were purposively sampled to ensure relevance to the context of private higher education institutions,

especially in Malaysia and comparable systems undergoing hybrid transformation. Sources were selected based on four criteria: (1) direct relevance to employee voice or hybrid work communication, (2) publication after 2020, (3) sectoral focus on education or knowledge work, and (4) availability from reputable, traceable platforms. This triangulation of policy texts, scholarly secondary data, and grey literature provided a multilayered perspective on both managerial practices and employee experiences in hybrid settings.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which involved coding, categorizing, and synthesizing emerging patterns across documents. Themes such as "trust gaps in digital spaces," "invisibility of remote employees," and "managerial overreliance on formal channels" were identified and interpreted through the lens of Social Exchange Theory.

The collected documents and reports were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Themes such as "*trust gaps in digital environments*," "*voice dilution in hybrid meetings*," and "*managerial blind spots in digital leadership*" were identified. These themes were then interpreted using the lens of Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) to understand how perceived reciprocity and trust impact the willingness of employees to speak up in digitally mediated workplaces.

To strengthen credibility, the thematic findings were validated through informal consultations with three experienced HR or academic managers from private universities in Malaysia. Their perspectives offered feedback on the practical resonance of the emergent themes and served as an additional layer of validation for pattern interpretation. This methodology enabled the integration of policy insights, managerial perspectives, and theoretical reflection, creating a well-rounded analysis of employee voice within dynamic, digitally transformed organizational environments.

Findings and Data Analysis

This methodology enabled the integration of policy insights, managerial perspectives, and theoretical reflection, creating a well-rounded analysis of employee voice within dynamic, digitally transformed organizational environments.

Table 1: Secondary Data Sources Reviewed in Document Analysis

Source / Document Title	Industry / Organization	Justification for Inclusion	Hyperlink
Employee Voice Factsheet	CIPD (UK – Human Resources)	Provides evidence-based insights into employee voice frameworks and policies in HRM.	https://www.cipd.org/en/knowledge/factsheets/voice-factsheet/
Voice of the Employee (VoE) Report	Work Institute (USA – Workforce Research)	Explains the importance of employee voice from organizational effectiveness and retention standpoints.	https://workinstitute.com/blog/defining-of-voice-of-the-employee-why-it-is-important/
State of the Global Workplace Report 2023	Gallup (Global – Employee Engagement)	Presents global quantitative data on employee engagement and voice under hybrid work.	https://www.gallup.com/workplace/349484/state-of-the-global-workplace.aspx
The State of Organizations 2023	McKinsey & Company (Global – Management Consulting)	Details organizational design trends and leadership challenges in digital-first workplaces.	https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/the-state-of-organizations-2023

Deloitte Human Capital Trends – The Boundaryless Workplace	Deloitte (Global – Human Capital)	Highlights the shift toward boundaryless, digitally fluid workplaces and the impact on trust and voice.	https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/focus/human-capital-trends/2023.html
MOHE Malaysia Policy Circular on Hybrid Learning (2022)	Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia	Governs digital education and remote work practices for Malaysian private HE institutions.	https://www.mohe.gov.my/en/announcement/1437-garis-panduan-pelaksanaan-pembelajaran-dan-pengajaran-hibrid-di-ipt
ScholarWorks UAEU – HRM Theses	United Arab Emirates University	Contains region-specific HR studies focusing on hybrid work, trust, and employee relations.	https://scholarworks.uaeu.ac.ae/all_dissertations/
University of Bath Research Portal – DBA Theses	University of Bath (UK)	Features doctoral-level research on employee voice, digital work, and communication in HEIs.	https://researchportal.bath.ac.uk/en/

The secondary data sources were purposively selected based on their credibility, relevance to the research context, and accessibility. These sources, detailed in Table X (Appendix A), were categorized to ensure comprehensive coverage of the key dimensions underpinning employee voice in hybrid workplaces. Their selection was strategically aligned with the study's two core research questions: (1) identifying the organizational, cultural, and technological barriers that inhibit employee voice in hybrid workplaces, and (2) exploring strategies that foster more visible and effective employee voice in digitally mediated work environments (Morrison, 2014; Prouska & Psychogios, 2022).

First, professional HR and policy-based resources were drawn from reputable institutions such as the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD, 2023) and the Work Institute (2023). These documents provided evidence-based insights into employee voice frameworks, organizational transparency, psychological safety, and evolving work trends. They were instrumental in addressing Research Question 1, as they highlighted structural and behavioral barriers such as digital silence, reduced feedback loops, and perceived leadership inaccessibility that hinder employee voice in flexible work environments (Gallup, 2023; McKinsey & Company, 2023).

Second, sector-specific reports and guidelines were sourced from government and higher education bodies. The Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (2022) issued policy circulars outlining hybrid teaching and administrative practices, which were crucial in understanding how hybrid structures have been institutionalized within Malaysian private universities. In parallel, academic repositories such as Scholar Works UAEU and the University of Bath Research Portal were consulted to include region-specific and doctoral-level research on communication, leadership, and employee engagement (Basheer, 2023; Athalage, 2024). These sources informed both research questions by contextualizing the institutional voice culture, highlighting communication breakdowns, and exposing relational dynamics within the higher education sector.

Finally, industry white papers and global trend reports were reviewed from leading consultancies such as Deloitte (2023), McKinsey & Company (2023), and Gallup (2023). These sources offered a strategic-level perspective on digital leadership, virtual team dynamics, and trust-building mechanisms. They directly supported Research Question 2 by identifying real-world managerial practices and digital tools used to improve voice visibility and employee involvement. These industry insights helped triangulate academic and policy-based findings with practical innovations in communication management, leadership responsiveness, and organizational openness (De Winne et al., 2025; Gyllenhammar Byström, 2023).

Through a triangulated document analysis of these diverse yet interconnected sources, the study offers a well rounded view of employee voice in hybrid and digitally transformed institutions. The analysis not only surfaces core challenges but also recommends actionable strategies for managers, aligned with the principles of Social Exchange Theory, which emphasizes trust, reciprocity, and perceived support as enablers of voice behaviour in both physical and digital work environments (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

Discussion: Interpreting Findings Through Social Exchange Theory

This study applied Social Exchange Theory (SET) as a theoretical lens to understand how employee voice is fostered or inhibited in hybrid organizational settings. As SET posits, individuals engage in social behaviours including voice based on perceived reciprocity, trust, and mutual obligation (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). The findings from secondary document analysis reinforce and extend SET's applicability in modern, digitally mediated workplaces.
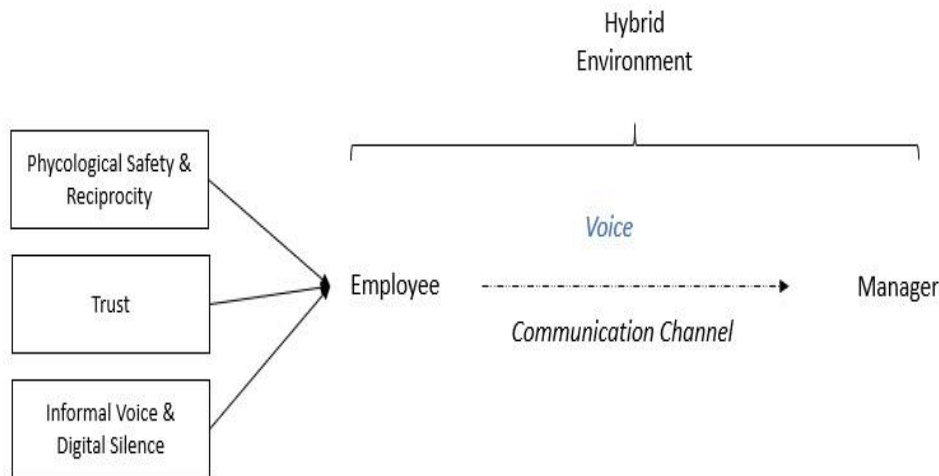

Figure 1: Illustrate on of Employee Voice in Hybrid Organization Settings

Psychological Safety and Reciprocity in Digital Voice

The theme of voice dilution in digital environments reflects a breakdown in perceived reciprocity. As highlighted by CIPD (2023) and Gallup (2023), employees are less likely to speak up when virtual interactions reduce the immediacy of feedback, weaken social bonds, or amplify risks associated with digital traceability. According to SET, this withdrawal of voice can be seen as a rational response to an imbalance in the social exchange where employees perceive limited returns (e.g., acknowledgement, support, or action) in exchange for the risk of expressing themselves (Morrison, 2014).

In hybrid structures, the absence of physical proximity removes many informal cues of managerial support, which SET identifies as central to trust-based exchanges (De Winne et al., 2025). Without frequent positive reinforcements (e.g., recognition, listening, follow-up), employees begin to perceive a lack of benefit in offering their perspectives.

Trust as a Mediator of Voice Behavior

Trust emerged as a core enabling condition for employee voice in hybrid settings, aligning strongly with SET's emphasis on relational exchange. As Deloitte (2023) and McKinsey & Company (2023) note, employees engage in voice when they believe their managers will act in good faith, listen meaningfully, and not retaliate even in digital environments.

This perception of managerial responsiveness represents a form of "emotional currency" within the exchange system. When trust is consistently reinforced through check-ins, inclusive platforms, and open leadership styles employees perceive the "cost" of speaking up as lower, and the "reward" of being heard as higher. SET thus helps explain why some organizations successfully maintain employee engagement despite physical distance: they continually reinvest in the social balance of digital communication.

Informal Voice and Digital Silence

SET also explains the limitations of relying solely on formal mechanisms for feedback. As Work Institute (2023) and CIPD (2023) emphasize, annual surveys or rigid reporting structures often feel transactional rather

than reciprocal. From a SET perspective, informal voice such as spontaneous, relational, and low-risk often thrives in spaces where social norms of trust, empathy, and shared purpose are cultivated.

The rise of "digital silence" in hybrid workplaces, therefore, is not just a function of technology but of weakened relational exchange. If employees do not perceive ongoing social reinforcement (e.g., their voice is valued or acted upon), they withdraw from the exchange system entirely. SET thus underpins the importance of embedding informal, trust-based feedback loops into organizational communication strategy.

Higher Education: A Fragile Exchange System

In the context of private higher education institutions, the SET framework is especially relevant. Policies from MOHE (2022) and findings from Scholar Works UAEU and the University of Bath indicate that academic and administrative staff often experience fragmented communication and limited participatory platforms in hybrid transitions. For contract staff or non-senior academics, the power asymmetry is further amplified in digital settings with fewer opportunities to engage in mutual exchange, be visible, or receive acknowledgment.

When managers fail to proactively rebuild these relational structures for example, by excluding staff from planning or failing to acknowledge their input the SET system erodes. This leads to employee silence, reduced motivation, and turnover intentions (Lee, 2024). On the other hand, when managers offer timely recognition, digital inclusion, and participatory design, the reciprocal loop is restored reinforcing voice behavior even in remote contexts.

Strategic Implications

The strategic role of employee voice in organizational resilience, emphasized by Gallup (2023) and McKinsey (2023), also resonates with SET's long-term value orientation. Voice behavior, when nurtured through ongoing relational investment, contributes to innovation, adaptability, and retention. Organizations that view voice not as a one-way input mechanism, but as a mutual exchange of value, are more likely to build cultures of trust and responsiveness essential in today's volatile, hybrid work environments.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study set out to explore the challenges and strategies surrounding employee voice in hybrid and digitalized organizational environments, with a particular focus on private higher education institutions. Guided by Social Exchange Theory (SET), the research emphasized the relational dynamics between employees and managers, especially the importance of perceived trust, reciprocity, and psychological safety in encouraging voice behavior. Through a thematic analysis of secondary data which comprising institutional policies, HR frameworks, white papers, and sector-specific reports, the study uncovered key patterns that reveal both structural and relational barriers to effective employee voice in hybrid workplaces.

The findings demonstrate that digital communication alone does not guarantee voice participation. Instead, it is the quality of managerial engagement, the intentional creation of trust-based exchanges, and the presence of informal feedback channels that determine whether employees feel safe and valued enough to speak up. This is particularly crucial in higher education, where staff often operate across layered hierarchies, bureaucratic expectations, and culturally embedded norms of silence or deference. The post-pandemic shift to hybrid and remote work has amplified these challenges, leaving many managers unprepared to navigate the emotional and interpersonal complexities of digitally mediated leadership.

From a theoretical perspective, the research reinforces the applicability of SET in modern workplaces, offering an interpretive lens to understand how hybrid work has reshaped the foundations of voice behavior. When employees perceive that their voice will lead to meaningful managerial response or mutual benefit, they are more likely to engage; conversely, perceived indifference or risk of retaliation results in digital silence, disengagement, or turnover intentions.

Based on these insights, the following recommendations are proposed for higher education institutions, particularly in the private sector, to strengthen employee voice and address managerial challenges. First, investing the digital trust-building training for managers. The managers are the gatekeeper and having them to fulfil to equip with managing the technical communication tools. These would foster psychological safety in

digital and hybrid settings. This includes how to manage tone, give inclusive feedback, and recognize subtle signs of disengagement. Leadership development should incorporate SET-informed modules on reciprocity and relational engagement. Second, we suggest that embedded technology in communication through real-time voice channels. Organizations and in this particular situation, the Higher Education Institutions focus on blended voice mechanisms such as anonymous feedback apps, virtual town halls, pulse survey and virtual forum. This would allow informal, low-risk expression from all staff levels.

Our third suggestions are to focus on involvement of staff in diverse levels to work on the hybrid work policy design. This strategy is to ensure voice is meaningful, administrative and academic employees must be part of the policy co-creation process, particularly in designing hybrid schedules, digital workflows, and wellbeing measures. Participatory approaches reinforce social exchange by showing that employee input is both valued and actioned.

We came out these recommendations is because of the transitioning from conventional voice to digital voice has change the landscape of communication in the organization. The organizational culture in embedding this strategy allows more rooms to improve. This includes the active participation and understanding skills among managers considered in adapting these changes. The dyadic relationship between manager and employee remains essentials. Acknowledging the value of voice, digitalization realms allows more significant advantage to the individual role in the organization and as the whole. By adopting these recommendations, higher education institutions can more effectively navigate the complexities of hybrid work environments and digital transformation. More importantly, they can cultivate inclusive cultures where employee voice is not just heard but actively reciprocated. This approach will strengthen institutional resilience, boost innovation capacity, and improve employee retention in an increasingly competitive academic labour market.

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