



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

European Management Journal

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/emj

Employee silence in an organizational context: A review and research agenda

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Systematic literature review
Organization
Employee silence
Women's silence
Research agenda
Comparative studies

ABSTRACT

This paper conducts a systematic literature review of 92 studies that examines employee silence in an organizational context, published during the last two decades. We investigate the theories used, industries covered, methods applied, and report on the specific antecedents, mediators, moderators, and outcome variables used in silence studies. It reveals that there is a significant gap in the literature on female and “all-gender” silence studies. We find that silence studies focus on positive or negative impacts of silence, or gender aspects, and these studies are mostly conducted in the education, services, and healthcare context. Popular theoretical perspectives include social exchange theory, conservation of resources theory, and the spiral of silence theory. Two thirds of the studies reviewed used quantitative methods, whilst one third used qualitative methods. We propose a future research agenda suggesting empirical and theoretical extensions of the research literature using mixed-method approaches, which includes studying women's and employee silence during major workplace changes, in innovative firms and in a cross-cultural context. This review builds on previous work in the area and suggests a comprehensive road map to summarize the employee silence research and add new streams of research that further investigates the concept of employee silence at an organizational context.

1. Introduction

The concept of “employee silence” has been gaining importance in organizational studies lately. [Nechanska, Hughes, and Dundon \(2020\)](#) posit that employee silence is a newer construct in the extant literature than its related and opposite concept of “employee voice.” [Monzani, Braun, and van Dick \(2016\)](#) use the metaphor of the “tango dance” to describe the relationship between silence and voice in organizations, which indicates that there is constant movement between people who use silence and have a voice ([Bruneau, 1973](#)). Despite this relationship, we solely focus on silence, particularly among employees in organizations in this study.

It is worth noting that there are many definitions of the concept “employee silence” in an organization. For instance, silence in organizations can be equal to doing or saying nothing ([Kivlighan & Tibbitts, 2012](#)), or it can be seen as a rational behavior that employees use to find

balance between costs and benefits ([An & Bramble, 2017](#)). It is important to conduct a review on employee silence in an organizational context for many reasons. Keeping silent is a decision that employees make when facing problematic situations in organizations ([Nechanska et al., 2020](#)), which means that people intentionally abstain from expressing their opinions, ideas, information, and knowledge ([Dyne, Van, & Botero, 2003](#)). This information and knowledge could be used to solve problems in the organization; however, this is prevented by their decision to remain silent. The result of silence and refusal to participate in solving organizational problems may negatively affect organizational performance. In some cases, the context of organizational hierarchy encourages employees to keep silent because management does not care about bad news coming from their “self-led collective.” In this context, this review discusses three types of employee silence in organizations: quiet mouth (avoiding speaking), quiet mind (withdrawing from communication), and quiet self (maintaining inner silence within

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emj.2022.12.004>

Received 15 March 2022; Received in revised form 29 September 2022; Accepted 2 December 2022

Available online 17 December 2022

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oneself) (Bigo, 2018; Phillips, 2014). Assuming these simple definitions of the three types of silence, researchers usually argue that silence is a type of aural blindness.

The first wave of empirical studies in the field of employee silence in organizational context dates back to 2000 when researchers Morrison and Milliken (2000) examined this concept. During the last two decades, the number of employee silence studies has increased significantly. Employee silence literature follows several approaches: finding different types of employee silence; running various models to demonstrate the relationships between variables with employee silence (at both group and individual levels); or classifying employee silence among target groups such as women, gays, and lesbians.

The main goal of this review is to expand the current theoretical understanding of employee silence and the associated variables in an organizational context. There are different approaches found in employee silence literature. The first approach studies the theoretical underpinnings of employee silence to discover what employee's silence is. The second approach is grounded in the most favored approach, which considers the concept of employee silence in the macro, meso, and micro levels of the organization. Studies exploring the types of people using employee silence based on the classification of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) can be classified as a third category of research (Bell, Özbilgin, Beauregard, & Sürgevil, 2011;

Felix, Mello, & Borell, 2018; Priola, Lasio, De Simone, & Serri, 2014). This approach is often explored in Western countries, mainly because most Western countries officially accept and recognize these groups, whilst employee silence for women is still an emerging topic in Asian countries (An & Bramble, 2017; Inandi, Gün, & Giliç, 2017; Madichie & Gallant, 2012).

Despite the importance and need for studying employee silence in an organizational context, there has been no recent comprehensive review article on employee silence. The only two reviews on this topic were published in 2009 and 2014, which were both integrated employee voice and silence papers (Greenberg & Edwards, 2009; Morrison, 2014). Given this, we conduct a review that focuses on just employee silence as employee silence is now a sufficiently developed research stream to merit one just dedicated to this topic. Furthermore, the above mentioned studies are both outdated, and there have been many significant events that are demanding a reexamination of the topic, namely, a greater push toward achieving greater gender equality through the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Roy & Xiaoling, 2022), the #MeToo movement (Al-wazedi, 2020), the Black Lives Matter movement (Alfred, 2021), and, finally, the need to understand the silencing issues of members from the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) communities (Priola et al., 2014). These issues provide a greater impetus to understand silence in an organizational setting. This review

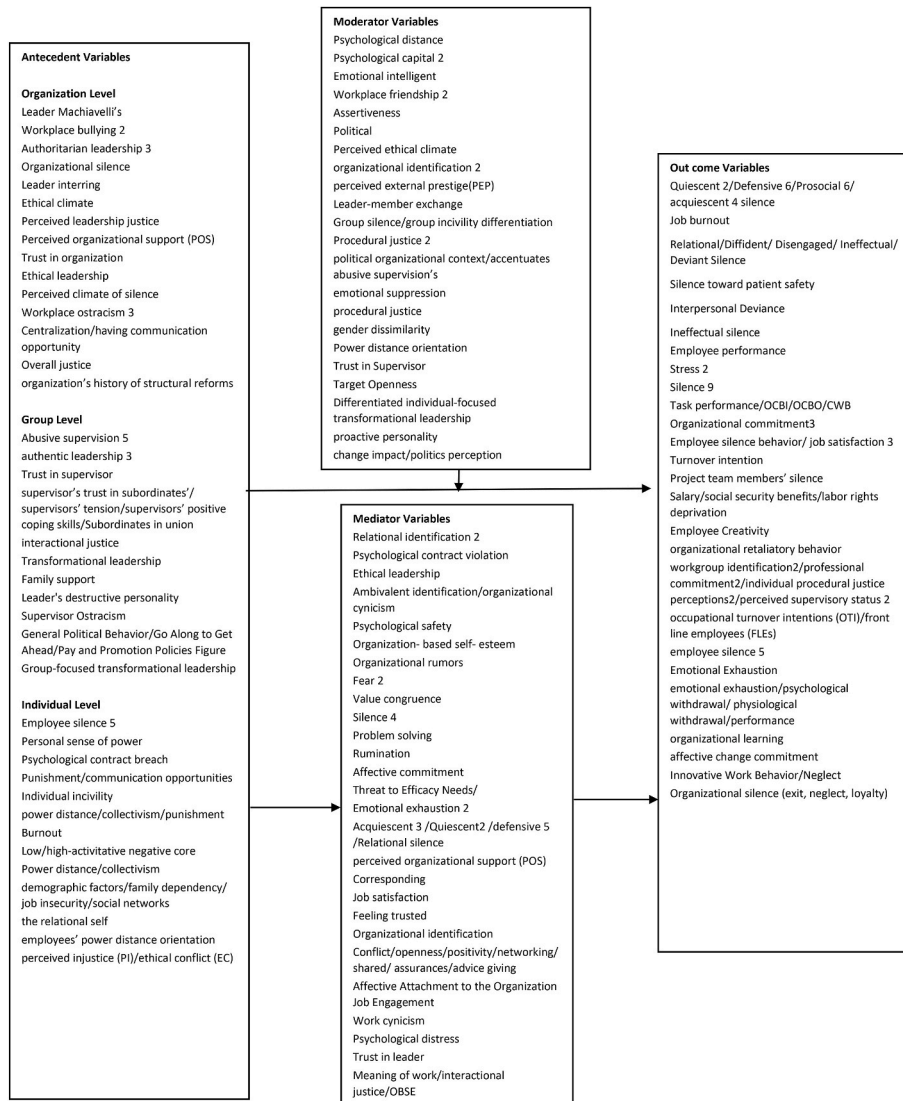


Fig. 1. Antecedent, moderator, mediator, and outcome variables for employee silence literature.

provides a comprehensive road map to summarize the employee silence research, it suggests new streams of research that can examine the concept of employee silence and establishes a platform for future research. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive review highlighting what is known about employee silence studies, theories used, industries covered, methods applied, report findings, antecedents, mediators, moderators, and outcome variables, particularly considering the abovementioned movements.

This paper is divided into six sections. Section 1 explains the methods used to identify all relevant articles using article selection criteria, whereas section 2 proposes a theoretical model of employee silence (Fig. 1). The findings of the review are discussed in detail in section 3, while the directions for future research are suggested in section 4 and the limitations are outlined in section 5. The discussion is concluded in section 6.

2. Method

The main purpose of a review is to critically analyze the findings of the literature, theories, and methods used, and contexts studied (Paul & Ralp-Criado, 2020). Based on this, we identify the research gaps and set a future research agenda. Systematic review papers can be of several types, namely; (1) a structured review focusing on widely used methods, theories, and constructs (Canabal & White, 2008; Paul & Singh, 2017; Rosado-Serrano, Paul, & Dikova, 2018); (2) framework-based review (Paul & Benito, 2018); (3) hybrid narrative with a framework for setting future research agenda (Dabić et al., 2020; Kumar, Paul, & Unnithan, 2020; Paul, Parthasarathy, & Gupta, 2017); (4) theory-based review (Paul & Rosado-Serrano, 2019); (5) meta-analysis (Knoll & Matthes, 2017); (6) bibliometric review (Klona, Menzies, & Zutshi, 2021); and (7) a review aiming at model/framework development (Paul & Mas, 2020). In this paper, we follow the methodology of a structured review. Williams, Clark, Clark, and Raffo (2021) believe that conducting a systematic literature review approach is one of the best methods for overviewing and strengthening a field of research by identifying the shortcomings of that research. We conduct this systematic literature to gain a better understanding of the employee silence literature and make suggestions for future research.

To conduct this review, we followed the best practice suggested in the literature for systematic reviews (Paul & Ralp-Criado, 2020; Williams et al., 2021), with the aim of focusing on employee silence in the organizational context. First, we compiled a comprehensive list of academic journals included in the Web of Science. Then, a search was conducted on the Web of Science to identify all research papers on the topic. We limited the search to employee silence in the organization's studies, although the concept of silence has communicational and psychological roots (Bruneau, 1973). Brinsfield (2013), in his review of silence and voice, has indicated that studies on employee silence in the organizational context have been gaining momentum since 2000. Based on this, we searched employee silence articles published between 2000 and 2019 (two decades). The keywords used in the search included employee silence + *organizational silence, gender, a culture of silence, strategy, culture, knowledge, policy, tactic, woman, leader, change, fear, error, HRM, ethics, management, innovation, justice, creativities, cross-culture, censor, moral, and stress*, resulting in a total of 145 articles.

After reading all the papers, the authors filtered them according to the research objective of the paper, which was to review the literature on employee silence. Even though 145 articles were found in our search, only 92 papers were chosen for review, and papers that did not meet our criteria for inclusion, that is, papers that were not on "employee silence in an organizational context," were excluded from the research. Furthermore, we excluded articles that considered silence and voice together because of the dual focus of silence/voice as we were only focusing on silence studies. We also excluded papers if they were not conducted in an organizational context, for example, there were a number of papers on gender, silence, and the #MeToo movement, but

were not conducted in an organizational context, and were hence excluded. The final filter applied was the impact factor of the journal where the articles were published. Having an impact factor is often associated with validity and acceptability in a research field. For this reason, we decided to limit the reviewed articles to those published in journals that have an impact factor indexed in either Sage or ISI. As a result, the articles that were included came from 68 different academic journals from various scientific backgrounds. All searches and filtering were conducted by the first author and double-checked by the second author to ensure all articles were appropriately included or excluded in the review according to search terms and criteria for inclusion.

We then proceeded to organize this paper according to the 4Ws of the 6W framework (Paul & Ralp-Criado, 2020), namely, what, why, where, and which; these are explained below.

What do we need to know about silence? Under the first W, we provide an overview of the employee silence research in an organizational setting. Tables 4 and 5 show the quantitative and qualitative research in this area.

Why is it necessary to know about silence? After researching silence in an organizational context, it becomes clear that management and all other organizational structures are affected by employee silence. This behavior may bring irreparable damage to organizational goals. In the theoretical background section, we discuss the theories to explain various aspects of this phenomenon. Table 2 gives an overview of the theories used in this area.

Where was the research conducted, and which methods were used to do it? Context is one of the most crucial parts of the research. Findings indicate that silence is a contextual phenomenon and needs to be examined within various contexts (of countries, industries, organizations, and groups). Table 3 provides information about where this research has been conducted, and Table 4 focuses on the methodologies, variables, and results used by researchers to determine the impact of employee silence in different industries and demonstrates how data were gathered and analyzed around silence.

The main goal of a review paper is to identify research gaps and provide directions for future research with reference to theories, methods, contexts, and constructs. At the end of this paper, we have provided comprehensive suggestions for future researchers of the employee silence phenomenon.

2.1. Findings and discussion

We discovered that there are three streams of research in this area. After reviewing all papers that had been selected in the search, it was found that most studies followed a negative view on employee silence (69 papers), while 9 papers followed a positive view, and 14 papers had a gender focus. This means that the concept of employee silence is meaningful in the organizational context in these three categories, which supports the conclusion reached by some studies (Dyne et al., 2003) that silence is a multidimensional concept. As the results show in Table 1, numerous studies (Maree, 2016; Perlow & Williams, 2003) have observed that the dominant approach to the concept of employee silence emphasizes its negative aspect (Erkutlu & Chafra, 2019; Knoll et al., 2018; Madrid, Patterson, & Leiva, 2015; Prouska & Psychogios, 2016).

A small percentage of studies addressed the positive influence of this phenomenon in certain rare situations, such as an economic crisis affecting an organization, when silence can be a good thing. However, there has been little discussion about women's studies. This stream only comprised 14 papers, meaning that there has been a lack of attention given to this category. Several studies have argued that silence is a culturally oriented issue within organization, for example, in countries where the culture of censorship is dominant, employees prefer to hide their ideas and keep silent (Sheriff, 2000). Similarly, research has shown that cultures high on power distance lead to systematic silence in the organization (Huang, Vliert, & Vegt, 2005).

It should also be noted that numerous studies about silence examine

Table 1
Determinants of employee silence.

Stream	Articles	References
Negative effects		
Individual	29	(Jones & Kelly, 2014); (Srivastava, Jain, & Sullivan, 2019); (Kirrane et al., 2017); (Kiewitz et al., 2016); (Dedahanov, Lee, Rhee, & Yoon, 2016); (Brinsfield, 2013); (Zehir & Erdogan, 2011); (Pinder & Harlos, 2001); (Erkutlu & Chafra, 2019); (Rhee, Dedahanov, & Lee, 2014); (Hawass, 2016); (Timming & Johnstone, 2015); (Maree, 2016); (Rana & Kashif, 2019); (Hess, Treviño, Chen, & Cross, 2019); (Sabino, Nogueira, & Cesário, 2019); (Jahanzeb & Fatima, 2017); (Manley, Roderick, & Parker, 2016) (Knoll & Redman, 2016); (Knoll & Van Dick, 2013); (Rybnikova, 2016); (Morrow, Gustavson, & Jones, 2016); (Wang & Hsieh, 2014); (Morrison, See, & Pan, 2015); (Madrid et al., 2015); (Knoll et al., 2018); (Phillips, 2014); (Dyne et al., 2003); (Zhou et al., 2005)
Group	17	(Bowen & Blackmon, 2003); (Madrid et al., 2016); (Vakola & Bouradas, 2005); (Jain, 2015); (Zhu et al., 2019); (Guo, Decoster, Babalola, Leander De Schutter, & Riisla, 2018); (Hall, 2008); (Perkins, 2014); (Lam & Xu, 2019); (Jahanzeb, Fatima, & Malik, 2018); (Huang & Huang, 2016); (Meinecke et al., 2016); (Guenter, Schreurs, van Emmerik, & Sun, 2017); (Schlosser & Zolin, 2012); (Rafferty & Restubog, 2011); (Wang, Hsieh, Tsai, & Cheng, 2011); (Erkutlu & Chafra, 2018) (Morrison & Milliken, 2000); (Dedahanov, Lee, & Rhee, 2016); (Rhee & Dedahanov, 2015); (Vakola & Bouradas, 2005); (Pirie, 2016); (Wieslander, 2018); (Imran et al., 2019); (Wynen, Kleizen, Verhoest, Læg Reid, & Rolland, 2020); (Rai & Agarwal, 2018); (Hozouri, Yaghmaei, & Bordbar, 2018); (Duan, Bao, Huang, & Brinsfield, 2017); (Mignonac, Herrbach, Serrano Archimi, & Manville, 2018); (Khalid & Ahmed, 2016); (Donovan et al., 2016); (Monzani et al., 2016); (Gkorezis, Panagiotou, & Theodorou, 2016); (Dedahanov et al., 2015); (Whiteside & Barclay, 2013); (Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008); (Prouska & Psychogios, 2016); (Huang et al., 2005) (Rai & Agarwal, 2018); (Duan, Lam, Chen, & Zhong, 2010)
Organizational	23	(Morrison & Milliken, 2000); (Dedahanov, Lee, & Rhee, 2016); (Rhee & Dedahanov, 2015); (Vakola & Bouradas, 2005); (Pirie, 2016); (Wieslander, 2018); (Imran et al., 2019); (Wynen, Kleizen, Verhoest, Læg Reid, & Rolland, 2020); (Rai & Agarwal, 2018); (Hozouri, Yaghmaei, & Bordbar, 2018); (Duan, Bao, Huang, & Brinsfield, 2017); (Mignonac, Herrbach, Serrano Archimi, & Manville, 2018); (Khalid & Ahmed, 2016); (Donovan et al., 2016); (Monzani et al., 2016); (Gkorezis, Panagiotou, & Theodorou, 2016); (Dedahanov et al., 2015); (Whiteside & Barclay, 2013); (Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008); (Prouska & Psychogios, 2016); (Huang et al., 2005) (Rai & Agarwal, 2018); (Duan, Lam, Chen, & Zhong, 2010)
Positive effects		
Individual	4	(Kirrane et al., 2017); (An & Bramble, 2017); (Fuji, 2004); (Ganguly, 2015)
Group	1	Kivlighan and Tibbits (2012)
Organization	4	(Tripp, 2019); (Le et al., 2018); (Kawabata & Gastaldo, 2015); (Wynen et al., 2020)
Gender-based		
Women's studies	8	(Pinder & Harlos, 2001); (Piderit & Ashford, 2003); (An & Bramble, 2017); (Fitzgerald, 2003); (Hazen, 2006); (Kamsteeg & Wels, 2014); (Inandi et al., 2017); (Madichie & Gallant, 2012) (Beauregard et al., 2018); (Felix et al., 2018); (Priola et al., 2014); (Simpson & Lewis, 2005); (Zhang et al., 2019); (Park, Carter, DeFrank, & Deng, 2018);
Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT)	3	(Simpson & Lewis, 2005); (Zhang et al., 2019); (Park, Carter, DeFrank, & Deng, 2018);
Gender and organization studies (GOS)	3	(Simpson & Lewis, 2005); (Zhang et al., 2019); (Park, Carter, DeFrank, & Deng, 2018);

it from a psychological perspective (Valle, 2019) and also regarding women's silence – from perspectives related to rape and violence (Rodriguez, Quiroga, Bauer, & Flow, 1996), racism (Houston & Kra-marae, 1991), and more.

To answer the first question, “What do we know about employee

Table 2
Theories used in employee silence studies.

Theory	Articles	References
Social exchange theory	9	(Erkutlu & Chafra, 2018); (Erkutlu & Chafra, 2019); (Zhu et al., 2019); (Hawass, 2016); (Imran et al., 2019); (Gkorezis et al., 2016); (Wang & Hsieh, 2014); (Rafferty & Restubog, 2011); (Duan et al., 2010)
Conservation of resources (COR)	7	(Xu et al., 2015); (Knoll et al., 2018); (Li et al., 2018); (Srivastava et al., 2022); (Hyung Park, Carter, DeFrank, & Deng, 2016); (Rai & Agarwal, 2018)
The spiral of silence	4	(Prouska & Psychogios, 2016); (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003); (Hüsrevşahi, 2015); (Matthes et al., 2012)
Expectancy theory	4	(Hüsrevşahi, 2015); (Piderit & Ashford, 2003); (Rhee et al., 2014); (Duan et al., 2010)
Social identity theory	4	(Knoll et al., 2018); (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003); (Monzani et al., 2016); (Duan et al., 2010)
Core affect	2	(Madrid et al., 2015); (Huang et al., 2005)
Communication theory	2	(Donaghey Jimmy, Tony, & Adrian, 2011); (Perkins, 2014)
Transactional theory	2	(Guo et al., 2018); (Jahanzeb & Fatima, 2017)
Cognitive appraisal	1	Madrid et al. (2015)
Self-regulation theory	1	Jahanzeb et al. (2018)
Approach-inhibition theory of power	1	(Morrison et al., 2015)
Equity theory	1	Jahanzeb et al. (2018)
Self-determination theory (SDT)	1	Knoll et al. (2018)
Job demands – resources	1	Knoll et al. (2018)
Thematic	1	Prouska and Psychogios (2016)
Social learning theory (SLT)	1	Bormann and Rowold (2016)
Uncertainty management theory (UMT)	1	Khalid and Ahmed (2016)
Group dynamic theory	1	Kivlighan and Tibbits (2012)
Behavioral plasticity theory	1	Guenter et al. (2017)
Social information processing	1	Huang et al. (2005)
Threat-rigidity theory	1	Wynen et al. (2020)
Occupational stress theory	1	Mao et al. (2019)
Trait activation theory	1	Lam and Xu (2019)
Biological theory	1	Kiewitz et al. (2016)
Spillover theory	1	Zhang et al. (2019)
Person–environment fit theory	1	Dedahanov, Lee, and Rhee (2016)
Self-efficacy	1	Piderit and Ashford (2003)
Self-affirmation	1	Jain (2015)
Negotiation theory	1	Dedahanov, Lee, and Rhee (2016)
Cognitive dissonance theory	1	Dedahanov, Lee, and Rhee (2016)
Contingency theory	1	Le et al. (2018)
Authoritarian personality theory	1	Timming and Johnstone (2015)

silence in an organizational context?” we have outlined the above-mentioned three main streams in Table 1.

2.1.1. Negative effect

One popular research theme discussed in the literature is the negative effect of employee silence on different management functions (Knoll & Van Dick, 2013). This effect can be observed and analyzed at three general levels of organizational study: individual, group, and organization (Lu & Xie, 2013). The reviewed studies that discuss the effect of employee silence at the micro level (individual level) show that the decision to keep silent typically results from a negative emotion felt by the employee (Kirrane, O’Shea, Buckley, Grazi, & Prout, 2017; Timming & Johnstone, 2015), usually fear (Kiewitz et al., 2016) or stress (Dedahanov, Lee, & Rhee, 2016).

At the meso level (group level), employee silence was studied by

Table 3
Industries in silence studies.

Industry	Articles	Author(s)
Education	25	(Madrid et al., 2015); (Knoll et al., 2018); (Zhou et al., 2005); (Kivlighan & Tibbits, 2012); (Tuafuti, 2010); (Kerrane et al., 2017); (Knoll & Van Dick, 2013); (Hüsrevşahi, 2015); (Brinsfield, 2013); (Piderit & Ashford, 2003); (Erkutlu & Chafra, 2019); (Fitzgerald, 2003); (Kamsteeg & Wels, 2014); (Lam & Xu, 2019); (Sabino et al., 2019); (Mignonac et al., 2018); (Park et al., 2018); (Khalid & Ahmed, 2016); (Guenther et al., 2017); (Knoll & Van Dick, 2013); (Inandi et al., 2017); (Morrison et al., 2015); (Whiteside & Barclay, 2013); (Wang, 2013)
Service industry	18	(Xu et al., 2015); (Madrid et al., 2016); (Jain, 2015); (Emelifeonwu & Valk, 2018); (Franklin, 2014); (Guo et al., 2018); (Pirie, 2016); (Zhang et al., 2019); (Jahanzeb & Fatima, 2017); (Jahanzeb et al., 2018); (Donovan et al., 2016); (Meinecke et al., 2016); (Song, Qian, Wang, Yang, & Zhai, 2017); (Rybnikova, 2016); (Priola et al., 2014); (Monzani et al., 2016); (Wang et al., 2011); (Milliken et al., 2003)
Health services	9	(Erkutlu & Chafra, 2018); (Jones & Kelly, 2014); (Anderson, 2018); (Hall, 2008); (Hess et al., 2019); (Behetoui, Boréus, Neergaard, & Yazdanpanah, 2017); (Morrow et al., 2016); (Gkorezis et al., 2016); (Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008)
Public section	6	(Hawass, 2016); (Wieslander, 2018); (Wynen et al., 2020); (Hozouri et al., 2018); (Bell, Özbilgin, Beauregard, & Sürgevil, 2011); (Schlosser & Zolin, 2012)
Heavy industry	5	(Dedahanov, Lee, & Rhee, 2016); (Dedahanov et al., 2015); (Rhee & Dedahanov, 2015); (Rhee et al., 2014); (Huang & Huang, 2016);
Enterprises	5	(Prouska & Alexandros, 2018); (Prouska & Psychogios, 2016); (Lu & Xie, 2013) (Duan et al., 2010) (Duan et al., 2017)
IT industry	4	(Nikolaou, Vakola, & Bourantas, 2011); (Knoll & Redman, 2016); (Mannan & Kashif, 2019); (Wang & Hsieh, 2014)
Manufacturing	4	(Li et al., 2018); (Kiewitz et al., 2016); (Jain, 2015); (Manley et al., 2016)

Bowen and Blackmon (2003), who used the spiral of silence theory to describe the nature of silence within invisible minority groups such as LGBTQ in the organization. They discussed emotions such as fear, threat, or loneliness, which are dominant emotions when employees feel motivated to be silent. In addition, when researching silence at this level, some papers emphasize the role of leadership and try to identify the characteristics of managers that lead to subordinates and employees keeping silent (Madrid, Totterdell, & Niven, 2016). Finally, at the macro level (organizational level), factors such as justice, workplace climate, and organizational structure have been identified as encouraging the system rather than the individuals to make decisions, which may result in their silence (Felix et al., 2018; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008; Whiteside & Barclay, 2013; Zill, Knoll, & Cook, 2020).

2.1.2. Positive effect

The existing research also demonstrates that there is a positive view of silence. For example, Bruneau (1973) mentions that silence gives employees freedom and security. Another relevant study that identifies the positive impact of silence is Tripp (2019), who examined silence in different cultures. For instance, in Japan's collective culture, silence is not equal to a lack of communication, but it is part of the communicative strategy. This strategy, which involves body language, seeks to transfer meaning to others without speaking; indeed, in keeping with community values and respect for collectivistic cultures (Kawabata & Gastaldo, 2015). Some philosophers believe that silence enhances culture and helps people avoid conflict, which is another positive view of the concept of silence (Ganguly, 2015).

Alternatively, Kirrane et al. (2017) found that at times management will support their employees' silence because they think silence is rooted in wisdom. Kivlighan and Tibbits (2012) found that at the meso level, a leader may decide to keep silent when employees engage in some wrong behavior rather than verbally reprimand them. This may give the employees time to think about their behavior and change or improve it.

In contrast, one of the qualitative studies on employee silence, conducted by Prouska and Psychogios (2016), explored how small enterprises react to long-term turbulent economic conditions. The results of this study show new kinds of employee silence, for instance, *social empathy silence*, which refers to the situation of keeping silent rather than communicating with employees and thereby putting pressure on them. Prouska and Psychogios (2016) also developed a conceptual framework for a long-term crisis. Others have investigated the effect of line managers' understanding of the organizational context, identifying a new kind of silence framework named *cynical silence*. This kind of silence is also observed in times of economic crisis. In the same category, *strategic silence* at the organizational level is another type of silence with potentially positive effects, which can be used by managers to help reduce the level of damage by keeping silent until the crisis decreases.

2.1.3. Gender-based

The last stream of research in the employee silence literature are gender-based studies. This category can be divided into three sub-categories. As Table 1 shows, almost one tenth of studies conducted on employee silence are about female issues. Most of them are related to the concept of the "glass ceiling" as they focus on the management or leadership level in the organization. Most of them are also qualitative in nature, which means that they are limited to analyzing interview data rather than conducting tests of specific models in different organizations or contexts.

Another category is that of employee silence of LGBTQ individuals. In this field, most studies identify aspects of silence for an employee who identifies as LGBTQ (Beauregard, Arevshatian, Booth, & Whittle, 2018; Felix et al., 2018) and, like gender research, use a qualitative approach to investigate the factors that force LGBTQ employees to keep silent.

The final stream of research presented in Table 1 are gender and organization studies (GOS). Specifically, this research explores the causes and the functions of silence, and how it differs between men and women (An & Bramble, 2017). There have been only 3 studies in this category out of the 92 reviewed, and they have used quantitative methods. The limited number of studies in this area shows a considerable lack of attention to gender in the employee silence research area.

While employees keep silent because of the cultural context, fear, stress, and other reasons mentioned in Fig. 1, Jones and Kelly (2014) argue that organizations are also deaf when it comes to listening to their employees. Anderson (2018) and Harlos (2016) believe that if we assume that employees are expert in their duties, when employees are silent, this may be an ethical issue because they choose silence over solving the organization's problems.

2.2. Theories/theoretical models used in the literature

Our review of the literature has revealed that several studies did not use any specific theory to test their hypotheses, which is a serious limitation of this research. In the 92 papers reviewed, there were at least three popular theories used to study employee silence, including social exchange theory (9 papers), the conservation of resources theory (7 papers), and the spiral of silence theory (4 studies). These theories and how they have been used in employee silence research are explained below.

Regarding social exchange theory, researchers have used this theory to explain why an employee might use silence if they feel that leaders are not concerned about their well-being. In this case, followers will tend to decrease their effort due to psychological strain (Erkutlu & Chafra, 2018), and employees' silence is rooted in the leaders' nonprotective

Table 4
Summary of quantitative methods and findings in employee silence studies.

Author	Models and Estimation Methods	Dependent Variables	Independent Variables	Findings
Tangirala and Ramanujam (2008)	Hierarchical Linear Modeling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Workgroup identification - Professional commitment - Individual procedural justice perceptions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Procedural justice climate - Employee silence 	Examine the cross-level effects of procedural justice climate on employee silence
Duan et al. (2010)	CFA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Perceived supervisory status - Affective commitment - Organizational retaliatory behavior 	Perceived leadership justice	Study on leadership justice and employee silence
Wang et al. (2011)	ANOVA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Employee silence - Value congruence - Cooperative voice and silence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Group-focused transformational leadership. - Differentiated individual-focused transformational leadership 	Study on the coexistence of cooperative silence and voice
Rafferty and Restubog (2011)	SEM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Meaning of work - Interactional justice - Organization-based self-esteem (OBSE) - Prosocial voice/silence 	Abusive supervision	Study on the hidden cost of abusive supervision and impact on silence and voice
Schlosser and Zolin (2012)	Linear Regression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Prosocial voice - Defensive silence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The supervisor's trust in subordinates - Supervisors' tension - Supervisors' use of positive coping skills - Subordinates in union 	Study on silence in a problematic situation
Wang (2013)	CFA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Caring climate - An instrumental climate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Perceived organizational support POS - Acquiescent silence - Defensive silence 	Examine the ethical climate cross-level relationship on employee silence
Whiteside and Barclay (2013)	CFA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Acquiescent silence - Quiescent silence - Emotional exhaustion - Psychological withdrawal - Physiological withdrawal - Performance 	Overall justification perceptions	Design 2 study to measure antecedents of silence
Dedahanov, Lee, and Rhee (2016)	CFA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Acquiescent silence - Prosocial silence 	- Centralization	Examine the effect of centralization on silence
Morrison et al. (2015)	ANOVA	Silence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Target openness - Personal sense of power 	Examine approach-inhibition theory of power
Wang and Hsieh (2014)	CFA	Psychological contract breach (PCB)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Job satisfaction Acquiescent silence Perceived ethical climate (PEC) 	Examine the role of psychological contract breach (PCB) on silence
Gkorezis et al. (2016)	CFA	Employee silence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Organizational identification - Workplace ostracism 	Workplace ostracism through nurses' impact on nurses' attitudes and behavior and employee silence.
Bormann and Rowold (2016)	CFAs	-Affective change commitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Employee silence - Ethical leadership - Politics perceptions - Change impact 	Examine four forms of silence on dimensions of ethical leadership
Monzani et al. (2016)	Ordinary Least Squares (OLS)	Silence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Authentic leadership - Organizational identification 	Design scenario between voice and silence
Guenter et al. (2017)	Multilevel Analysis	Employee silence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Authentic leadership - Proactive personality 	Testing the role of followers on employee silence
Song et al. (2017)	CFA	Employee silence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leader's destructive personality trust in the leader - Procedural justice - Interactional justice 	Leader's destructive personality has a positive impact on employee silence, Study on the impact of interactional justice on employee silence
Huang and Huang (2016)	CFA	Silence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - General Political Behavior - Go Along to Get Ahead - Pay and Promotion Policies Figure - Trust in Supervisor 	Study on contextual factors of an organization which influence employee silence
Khalid and Ahmed (2016)	Path Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Relational Silence - Diffident Silence - Defensive Silence - Disengaged Silence - Ineffectual Silence - Deviant Silence 		
Mignonac et al. (2018)	ANOVA	Silence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Perceived organizational cynicism - Ambivalent identification - Perceived external prestige - Perceived organizational support 	Study on the dynamics of individuals' social work
Duan et al. (2010)	CFA	Employee silence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Authoritarian leadership, -psychological safety, organization-based self-esteem 	Study on moderated-mediation analyses of employee silence

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Table 4 (continued)

Author	Models and Estimation Methods	Dependent Variables	Independent Variables	Findings
Hozouri et al. (2018)	CFA	Organizational commitment	- Power distance orientation - Organizational silence - Organizational rumors	Focus on rumors and silence in an organization
Jahanzeb et al. (2018)	SEM	Emotional Exhaustion	- Supervisor Ostracism - Threat to Efficacy Needs - Defensive Silence	Study on need-threat/need-fortification framework
Rai and Agarwal (2018)	ANOVA	- Innovative work behavior - Neglect	- Workplace bullying - Defensive silence - Workplace friendship	Defensive silence mediated bullying- outcomes relationships and impact on workplace bullying
Jahanzeb and Fatima (2017)	CFA	Interpersonal Deviance	- Workplace Ostracism - Defensive Silence - Emotional Exhaustion	The study on the underlying cognitive and emotional mechanisms between ostracism and interpersonal deviance
Hyung Park et al. (2016)	CFA	Silence	- Abusive Supervision - Gender dissimilarity - Psychological distress	The moderation role of gender dissimilarity
Wynen et al. (2020)	The intra-class correlation coefficient (ICC)	Defensive silence	Organization's history of structural reforms	The positive effect of repetitive structural reforms on defensive silence
Imran et al. (2019)	CFA	Organizational learning	- Workplace ostracism - Emotional suppression - Employee silence	The negative effect of emotional suppression on organizational learning
Zhang et al. (2019)	Multi-group- SEM	Employee silence	- Family support - Work cynicism	Moderating gender in employee silence and cynicism
Sabino et al. (2019)	SEM	Job satisfaction	Employee silence	Silence is more than absent of voice
Mannan and Kashif (2019)	SEM	- Abusive supervision (AS) - Perceived injustice (PI) - Ethical conflict (EC) - Quiescent silence	- Occupational turnover intentions (OTI) - Frontline employees (FLEs)	Finding the relationship between QS and occupational turnover among FLEs
Lam and Xu (2019)	CFA	Acquiescent silence Defensive silence	- Abusive supervision - Political organizational context - Employees' power distance orientation - Political organizational context	Defensive silence according to fear/acquiescent silence based on resignation
Hawass (2016)	CFA	Prosocial silence	- Abusive supervision - The relational self-identity - The networking strategy - The shared task strategy - The openness strategy - The advice giving strategy - The positivity strategy - The assurances strategy - The conflict management strategy	Study on prosocial silence as a significant element of employee well-being
Rhee et al. (2014)	SEMA	- Acquiescent silence - Defensive silence - Prosocial silence	- Power distance - Collectivism - Punishment	Examine Hofstede dimension on the multidimensional construct of silence
An and Bramble (2017)	OLS analysis	- Salary - Social security benefits - Labor rights deprivation	- Demographic factors - Family dependency job insecurity social networks - Silence	Silence can survival workers in their workplace
Zhu et al. (2019)	Hierarchical regression analysis	- Project Team Members' - Acquiescence/Defensive/ Prosocial Silence	- Transformational leadership - Feeling trusted	The impact of silence concept on project context
Jain (2015)	CFA	Turnover	- Silence - Job satisfaction	Silence has a positive impact on satisfaction
Dedahanov, Lee, and Rhee (2016)	CFA	Stress	- Relational silence - Power distance - Culture	Relational silence increases the level of stress
Vakola and Bouradas (2005)	Hierarchical regression analysis	Organizational commitment job satisfaction	Perceived climate of silence - Employee silence behavior	Three dimensions of silence effect on organizational commitment and job satisfaction
Rhee and Dedahanov (2015)	SEM	Organizational commitment	- Trust in organization - Trust in supervisor - Acquiescent silence - Defensive silence	Lack of trust increase silence
Erkutlu and Chafra (2019)	Hierarchical multiple regression analysis	Quiescent silence	- Leader Machiavellianism - Relational identification - Psychological distance	Positive Individual relationship leads to a decrease in silence
Zehir and Erdogan (2011)	Factor analysis & Correlations	Employee Performance	- Employee Silence - Employee Voice - Ethical leadership	The positive effect of ethical leadership on voice and silence
Piderit and Ashford (2003)	VARIMAX rotation	Gender-equity issues	Four tactics	Four clusters about issue-selling tactics
Brinsfield (2013)	EFA/CFA	- Employee voice,	Silence motives	

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Table 4 (continued)

Author	Models and Estimation Methods	Dependent Variables	Independent Variables	Findings
(Li et al., 2018) Dedahanov, Lee, and Rhee (2016) Xu et al. (2015)	CFA SEM Two-phase questionnaire survey	- Psychological safety, - Neuroticism, - Extraversion Employee silence Stress Silence	Compulsory citizenship behavior - Punishment - Communication opportunities - Silence - Abusive supervision, - Leader-member exchange (mode), - Emotion exhaustion (med) - Organizational silence - (Med) organization trust	Six dimensions of silence motives (ineffectual, relational, defensive, diffident, disengaged, deviant) CCB identify the employee silence Silence does not mediate the role between communication opportunities Abused subordinates resort to remain silent in the workplace due to their feelings of emotional exhaustion. Further, the presence of high LMX makes the adverse impact of abusive supervision even worse Organizational trust has a negative impact on organizational silence and a positive impact on merger attitudes. Also the role of organizational silence entirely through the specific mediating effect of silence between organizational trust and merger attitudes Low/high-activated negative affect have a strong impact on fluctuation
Nikolaou et al. (2011)	Two independent study	Employees merger attitude	- Affective Action, - Rumination, - Problem-Solving Silence	Two imposed forms of silence have shown an effect on depersonalization and emotional exhaustion.
Madrid et al. (2015)	Two-level hierarchical linear model, HLM7	Decrease and increase employee silence	- Leader's behavioral integrity - Political skill, relational identification - Creative idea generation - Leader-positive affect - Leader-negative affect - Leader-positive affective presence - Leader-negative affective presence	Interacting with subordinates decrease employee silence The impact of leader approach to creativity
Knoll et al. (2018)	An auto-regressive cross-lagged panel design in SEM	Burnout	- Formalized employee involvement - Perceived participative climate - Power distance	Countries with a small power distance culture decrease the level of silence
Erkutlu and Chafra (2018)	Hierarchical multiple regression analysis	Employee silence	- Group incivility differentiation - Group silence - Individual incivility	The impact of the contextual characteristic of group members on the response of employee and perform in incivility
Madrid et al. (2016)	CFA	Team member silence	- Workplace bullying - Psychological contract violation - Workplace friendship - Employee silence - Emotional intelligent Silence	Bulling in the workplace increase the employee silence EI has a mediating role between employee silence and job burnout Different kinds of silence make vary of emotions
Huang et al. (2005)	Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM)	Employee opinion withholding	Four forms of silence	Clarified silence scales
Mao et al. (2019)	Two-level CFA	- Task performance, Organizational Citizenship Behavior OCBI, OCBO - Counterproductive Work Behavior CWB	- Abusive supervision - Fear - Mobbing Against Communication (MAC) - Silence Based on Self-Production/Fear (SBSF)	A significant relation between fear and silence The positive relationship between (MAC) and (SBSF)
Rai and Agarwal (2018)	SPSS macro	Employee silence	- Authoritarian Leadership - Psychological Capital - Fear - Defensive Silence	Two studies in two different countries
Srivastava et al. (2019)	Common method variance	Job burnout	- Workgroup identification - Professional commitment - Individual procedural justice perceptions - Perceived supervisory status - Procedural justice	Procedural justice climate has a cross-level moderate impact on employee silence
Kirrane et al. (2017)	ANOVA	Emotions		
Knoll and Van Dick (2013)	EFA/CFA			
Kiewitz et al. (2016)	Correlation	Defensive silence		
Hüsrevşahi (2015)	Correlation And Regression Analyses	-		
Guo et al. (2018)	SPSS PROCESS	- Employee creativity		
Hall (2008)	Hierarchical Linear Modeling	Employee silence		

manner. In contrast, if a leader treats their employees in a protective manner, this will increase the willingness of the employee to speak up. Whilst this theory is useful, social exchange theory cannot explain all reasons why employees are silent. The conservation of resources theory has also been a popular theory in employee silence research (Li, He,

Wang, Wu, & Estay, 2018; Rai & Agarwal, 2018), where the theory describes the process of stress and the individual's response to it (Hobfoll, 1989; Xu, Loi, & Lam, 2015). The theory is used to explain why employees will choose silence in an attempt to protect all other resources they have in their organization (Rai & Agarwal, 2018). This is

Table 5
Summary of qualitative studies.

Author(s) and year	Methods	Research area	Finding
Milliken et al. (2003)	Interview	Generally investigate reasons for silence	Fear is one of the most critical elements for the employee to keep silence
Priola et al. (2014)	Semi-structured in-depth interviews	Management context and the sector of social cooperatives	Silence of LGBT
Morrow et al. (2016)	A meta-synthesis	Health care	The presence of caring leaders, peer support, and an organizational commitment to safe, open cultures, may decrease silence
Inandi et al. (2017)	Interview	Women study	women teachers' career barriers significantly predict dimensions of organizational silence.
Behtoui et al. (2017)	Semi-structured interview	an elderly care organization	Power differences across 'racial hierarchies' more important than differences in cultural values.
Rybnikova (2016)	Interview	Temporary agency work	Investigates temporary work deal to silence
Meinecke et al. (2016)	Observation	Consulting agency	A better understanding of silence in the observational approach
Donovan et al. (2016)	Semi-structure interview	Professional employee	Focus on the knowledge of employee rather than satisfaction or decision making
Manley et al. (2016)	Semi-structure interview	Valley FC Academy	Investigating control and 'silencing' of young English professional footballers.
Felix et al. (2018)	Grounded theory	Diversity of gender	The necessity of LGBT employee in an organization
Hess et al. (2019)	Content analysis	Friend-reporting dilemma	Ethical reasons encourage the employee to keep silence
Wieslander (2018)	Interview	Widespread fear of retaliation between employees	Learning informal cultural norms for communication and silence instead of official guidelines
Kamsteeg and Wels (2014)	Auto-ethnographic approach	Women silence	Breaking silence of women in lifelong immersion
Pirie (2016)	Phenomenological interview	Non-standard workers (NSW)	Investigate the NSW in silence climate
Perkins (2014)	Literature review	Project management	The core impact of supervisors on silence
Hazen (2006)	In-Depth interview	Women careers	Perinatal loss and effect on women careers
Fujio (2004)	In-Depth interview		

Table 5 (continued)

Author(s) and year	Methods	Research area	Finding
		Intercultural communicative competence (ICC)	In communication, the employee should understand each other and cooperate for ICC Design model
Pinder and Harlos (2001)		Kinds of silence	
Prouska and Psychogios (2016)	Coding data	Economic context	A new framework of silence in a long term crisis
Piderit and Ashford (2003)	Coding data	Gender-equity	Clarify five tactics in speaking up
Zhou et al. (2005)	In-Depth interview	Experience of knowledge sharing	Examine the cultural aspect of silence
Kivlighan and Tibbits (2012)	Group Therapy Questionnaire	Group level	Framing error for creating a structure for target
Tuafuti (2010)	Questionnaire and semi-structured group interview	Culture of silence	Parents, social, political and educational factors impact on silencing
Morrison and Milliken (2000)	Developing contextual variables	Organizational silence	The impact of systematic silence in organization
(Prouska, & Alexandros, 2018)	Interview	Economic crisis	The framework of the line manager's understanding of silence in a context
Kirrane et al. (2017)	Visual data-mapping	Discrete emotion	RQ1: What are the employees' reasons for being silent in the workplace? RQ2: How does this silence behavior make employees feel?

because when individuals speak out, they often lose more resources than they gain. Thus, they make the trade-off and decide to remain silent (Xu et al., 2015). Finally, the spiral of silence theory explains how an individual from a minority group will engage in silence whilst interacting with the majority group because they feel that talking will cause a problematic situation due to the fact that they are different and hold different views (Fox & Holt, 2018). Other key theories used in the literature include expectancy theory (4), social identity theory (4), core affect theory (2), and communication theory (2). Several other theories are also presented in Table 2.

2.3. Context of the research

As Table 3 indicates, the educational industry has the most studies conducted on the topic of employee silence (24), followed by services (17) and then healthcare (9). Research conducted in the healthcare industry shows that silence is associated with hypersensitivity about sharing knowledge and the fear of failing, which becomes a critical problem in the healthcare industry. The educational industry (university, schools, and students) is used frequently in the employee silence literature because of the accessibility of these contexts for sampling. Other industries considered in the literature include the public service (5), heavy industry (6), enterprises (5), IT industry (3), and manufacturing companies (4).

2.4. Methodological approaches in the literature

2.4.1. Quantitative studies

In the reviewed articles, there was a predominance of quantitative

studies, with 60 out of 92 studies using quantitative methods for data collection and analysis. Of these studies, 26 used confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), 9 used structural equation modeling (SEM), and 8 used hierarchical linear modeling (HLM). Table 4 shows the variables and results of these studies. Statistical evidence indicates the comprehensiveness of the types of variables. The researchers have considered the concept of employee silence from the perspective of dependent, independent, moderator, and mediator variables.

2.4.2. Qualitative studies

Twenty-nine studies used a qualitative approach (Table 5). Eighteen percent of these were gender-biased studies, with seven studies and three papers on women's studies. The majority of this field used the interview method (semi-structured and in-depth) for data gathering. In addition, Meinecke, Klonek, and Kauffeld (2016) used the observation method, whilst Kamsteeg and Wels (2014) used the auto-ethnographic approach and Kirrane et al. (2017) used visual data mapping for their data analysis.

2.5. Directions for future research

Following classic review articles (Billore & Anisimova, 2021; Conz & Magnani, 2020; Kajol, Singh, & Paul, 2022; Khaton & Rehman, 2021; Nanda & Banerjee, 2021; Paul, Alhassan, Binsaf, & Singh, 2023; Södergren, 2021; Srivastava, Sivakumaran, Maheswarappa, & Paul, 2022), we present an agenda for the development of the research field based on the gaps identified in the literature review. We suggest that future research could benefit from increased use of the antecedents, moderators/mediators, and outcome variables. Following Kumar et al. (2020), we make suggestions for future studies in the following three areas: theory, methodology, and context.

2.6. Extending empirical work on employee silence

Future researchers are encouraged to examine a full range of variables that identify employee silence in an organizational study.

2.6.1. Antecedents/outcome variables

Although many researchers have shown that culture has a significant influence on employee silence (Zhou, Knoke, & Sakamoto, 2005), there is still a lack of studies that have measured that impact. For instance, an interesting line of research may investigate how language diversity in international organizations can influence employee silence. Closer attention could also be paid to family support (Zhang, Xu, Zhang, & Liu, 2019) and group and organization support to help employees break silence, at both group and individual levels of organizations. Researchers could investigate ethical variables influencing employee silence, including ethical climate (Wang, 2013) and ethical leadership (Bormann & Rowold, 2016). Because silence can be used as a behavioral strategy, more attention needs to be paid to future studies on how silence can be used as a political behavior at all organizational levels.

It was evident that all variables mentioned in Fig. 1 have a significant impact on both employee and organizational performance. Therefore, future studies should focus on these types of variables to measure the level of impact of employee silence on these outcomes. It has been proven that employee silence can negatively affect organizations and their performance (Wieslander, 2018), but it can affect employee performance as well (Kirrane et al., 2017; Mao, Chang, & Johnson, 2019). This is especially so when it comes to skilled workers because silence among these experts means that organizations are deprived of knowledge these people can contribute. According to our review, the study and measurement of how organizational performance is affected by employee silence continues to be a research gap, both in terms of organizational theory and conceptual models; hence, we suggest it should be a research focus in the future. Also, the institutionalization of employee silence in the organization can lead to organizational

authoritarianism. While some variables such as job burnout or organizational retaliatory behavior have already been studied, future research should examine how employee silence can be decreased especially in the face of retaliation. Another vital variable that is negatively affected by employee silence is innovation (Perkins, 2014), and only a few studies have focused on this thus far. Future research should look at the impact of employee silence on employee creativity and innovation.

2.6.2. Mediator/moderator variables

This review shows that organizational and work cynicism (Zhang et al., 2019) can play a mediating role in employee silence. At the same time, organizational norms also influence employees to keep silent, and there is a lack of empirical work in this area. At the individual level, the impact of perceptions about the job is still a significant study gap. Future research should focus more on these types of mediators, including self-esteem and self-confidence.

Job expectations, organizational hierarchy, international workplaces, and team working are invisible variables affecting employee silence. Organizational bureaucracy could be examined as a new moderator variable that influences the silence of employees, particularly in multinational companies (MNEs). In MNEs, when employees are involved in more than one country, silence could be appearance behavior. Although employee silence can be related to gender, gender dissimilarity is an important moderator variable that has only been briefly examined and merits more attention in future research. Despite the research that has been done in the field of psychology on psychological distance (Erkutlu & Chafra, 2018) and psychological capital (Guo, Decoster, Babalola, & Leander De Schutter, 2018) in the silence of employees, there is still a research gap in this area at the individual level.

2.6.2.1. Theory development and theoretical extensions. Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) has resulted in structural changes in many sectors and countries (Gordon-Wilson, 2022; Kursan Milaković, 2021; Nayal, Pandey, & Paul, 2022; Rayburn, McGeorge, Anderson, & Sierra, 2022; Yap, Xu, & Tan, 2021). For example, the pandemic has changed people's way of thinking, work pattern, and consumer behavior in many sectors, including healthcare, hospitality, financial services, and food delivery (Chakraborty & Paul, 2022; Chopdar, Paul, & Prodanova, 2022; Purohit, Arora, & Paul, 2022). As an outcome, we need new theories, scales, methods, and paradigms to carry out research studies in the post-pandemic era to analyze the new processes, patterns, and problems.

2.6.3. Employee silence definition

In comparison to employee voice, employee silence is still a new phenomenon in the organizational studies research. Although there are various definitions of employee silence (Dyne et al., 2003), they do not reflect gender diversity (LGBTQ) in the context of an organization. This gap highlights the lack of theoretical studies and knowledge concerning gender-based studies, including women's, LGBTQ, and GOS.

2.6.4. Method

The study of employee silence needs more mixed-method research based on a combination of both quantitative and qualitative research methods and techniques. In addition, qualitative studies have been dominant, and future researchers are encouraged to conduct quantitative studies in the area. From a methodological point of view, it is important to conduct mixed-method research using qualitative and quantitative research to develop a more accurate picture of silence.

2.6.5. Employee silence and generalizability

One of the main methodological concerns in employee silence is the potential for weak generalizability. For instance, there have been a number of studies that used student samples and convenience samples; therefore, the results of these studies should not be generalized to other contexts (Milliken, Morrison, & Hewlin, 2003). Most of these studies

used MBA students as respondents; hence, future researchers are encouraged to focus on employees within organizations rather than student samples to ensure generalizability of their studies.

2.6.6. Employee silence and gender & LGBTQ-based studies

This review identified that most studies on women's and gender silence were qualitative, and future studies should use quantitative research to test different research models. In recent years, the LGBTQ issue has also attracted some researchers' attention; however, only 5 of the 92 studies have examined these issues. Therefore, we suggest that future researchers continue to study this area, even though this can still be a taboo subject outside Western countries (Felix et al., 2018; Priola et al., 2014). This is so because most Eastern countries still do not accept this category of employees in their culture, which makes the concept of LGBTQ in Asian countries an interesting new research area in employee silence.

2.6.7. Employee silence and duplicate variables

According to the conceptual framework developed in this paper (Fig. 1), in recent years most variables have been studied repeatedly. For example, abusive supervision has been studied five times; authentic leadership three times; and there were several studies on the characteristics of a leader. This shows a decrease in innovation in employee silence research. Thus, in future investigations, it would be recommended to use new variables at the micro, meso, and macro levels of the organization, as suggested previously.

2.6.7.1. Context. We suggest future research should focus on other contexts including comparative studies, different industry contexts, countries and cultures.

2.6.8. Employee silence and comparative studies

Previous research highlights that the concept of employee silence is influenced by the dominant culture in the context (Beamish, 2014; Maree, 2016). As a result, it is important to consider silence within the context of where it is located. We found that only 2% of the 92 articles reviewed compared employee silence across different countries. Of these, only two focused on different countries (Abril & Rojas, 2015; Le, Teo, Pang, Li, & Goh, 2018) despite the fact that employee silence can be both a cross-cultural issue (Fitzgerald, 2003; Huang et al., 2005; Matthes et al., 2012; Tuafuti, 2010; Valle, 2019) and a gender-oriented issue (Balthrop-Lewis, 2018; Piderit & Ashford, 2003). Comparative cross-cultural studies give researchers an opportunity to blend this topic with other research gaps, such as women or gender studies. Examining silence in different country contexts is also important especially from a gender perspective as different countries around the world experience differing levels of gender equality (World Economic Forum, 2021), which may influence the ability of women to speak up in the workplace (Lotfi Dehkharghani, Menzies, Suri, & Maharati, 2022).

2.6.9. Employee silence and industries

As indicated previously, a third of the employee silence studies had been conducted in the educational context (Brinsfield, 2013; Erkutlu & Chafra, 2019; Kiewitz et al., 2016; Zhu et al., 2019). Excessive focus on sampling in academic settings raises the criticism that sampling in these contexts is more accessible than research in other industry samples and makes it difficult to attribute these results to actual organizational contexts (Knoll, Unterrainer, Silva, & Jönsson, 2016; Milliken et al., 2003) while student silence should be a research field in its own right (Kamsteeg & Wels, 2014). Instead of continuing to study students and academics, researchers should rather focus on employees in new and innovative companies and industries, including cloud-based, artificial intelligence and robotics industries, to determine the effects of employee silence on innovative behavior.

2.6.10. Employee silence and country and organizational culture

Evidence suggests that there is a direct link between employee silence and country and organizational culture. These studies are known as the "culture of silence" (Beamish, 2014; Huang et al., 2005; Maree, 2016) or "cross-cultural" silence (Matthes et al., 2012). They generally examine the impact of culture on the silence and behavior of employees and individuals. The proliferation of MNEs and international organizations on the global scene has more than ever increased the need for intercultural studies examining the issue of employee silence. An examination of the available literature reveals a significant gap in intercultural studies. In addition, the new generation of studies in the field of employee silence, particularly women and LGBTQ employees, must link these two areas of employee silence and culture.

2.6.11. Employee silence and COVID-19

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, organizations across the world face new challenges, and workplaces around the world have to cope with sudden changes. As a result, digital transactions interactions and communications have gained more importance (Kajol et al., 2022). Organizations had to close their offices and send employees home to work through teleworking. In addition, some organizations had to restructure and change because of revenue losses due to country lockdown measures. These contexts provide a fruitful area for further research into employee silence. Like an "elephant in the Zoom," employees may remain silent on workplace changes that do or do not affect them for the fear of later retribution; otherwise, videoconferencing media such as Zoom can make it easier for employees to remain silent by simply turning off their mic and video functions. Future research can focus on the effects of this silence on the individual, organization, and society during periods of immense and unprecedented change.

3. Conclusion

The main purpose of this paper was to conduct a review of the literature on employee silence during the last two decades and develop an agenda for future research. This led to the following objectives: increasing knowledge about employee silence; understanding how to develop the concept of employee silence in an organizational context; analyzing the results of employee silence research projects; and gathering a comprehensive picture of employee silence research from the models, variables, and qualitative studies. We followed the 4W questions to clarify the concept of employee silence in the organizational context. As a result, this paper unifies the knowledge in this area. It highlights different ways to advance our understanding of the meaning and functions of employee silence in an organizational context. An examination of the historical evolution of data from this review suggested that the study of employee silence in recent years has shifted toward gender studies and especially LGBTQ studies. Research in this area has shown the need for a theoretical framework for gender issues.

Women and gender studies in the silence field are considerably lacking in practice and theory, and our review has identified that most of the studies on employee silence come from a Western context. When considering a new aspect of modern society, such as gender issues or ethnicity, we need to review our perspective (Fitzgerald, 2003). To solve the problem, the authors propose a new research stream on employee silence that focuses on comparative studies. In addition, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic may be a fruitful context for employee silence research as the huge impact of the virus on how people now work and issues such as organizational change may be the cause of either good or bad employee silence.

Data availability statement

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of the study are available in the article.

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