

## **EMPLOYEE SILENCE AND EMPLOYEE VOICE AS DISTINCT CONSTRUCTS: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW**

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**Abstract:** A debate among researchers that employee voice and employee silence are distinct constructs is going on for two decades. Furthermore, since 2021 studies are challenging, claimed, and demonstrated through empirical research that voice and silence are independent constructs. In addition, the idea of strategic silence was also presented in the year 2022, supporting this narrative. Hence the main aim of the current study is to provide a holistic picture of all those studies published in the last two decades (2003–2023) claiming voice and silence as unique concepts. For this purpose, the systematic literature review has been developed to know broadly used methodologies, theories, and concepts used in these studies. Furthermore, research gaps have been highlighted where future research is needed. Data were collected through two research databases, Scopus and Web of Science. This paper has expanded the literature in organizing the factual and theoretical knowledge through a systematic literature review for the first time. Thus, it will provide a roadmap for future researchers, human resource practitioners, and managers to understand the concept of voice and silence being unitary constructs and will open future avenues to work on in this sphere.

**Keywords:** Employee voice, Employee silence, Distinct, Construct, Systematic literature review.

**JEL Classification:** M54.

### **Introduction**

Employee voice is not about speaking anything (Morrison, 2011); not all voices are always useful (Parke et al., 2022). Rather, it is meaningful ideas of work or admissible input for the organizational setting that indicates either the innovation of the procedures or the discontinuance of existing processes (Morrison, 2011). Efficient organizations appreciate their employee's recommendations and opinions because employee voice is crucial for the growth of organizations (Fast et al., 2014). On the other hand, employee silence does not merely mean less voice, sometimes less or no speaking occurs when for instance, there is nothing worthwhile to say (Morrison, 2014). Additionally, it refers to the unwillingness to share knowledge or talk about organizational problems (Van Dyne et al., 2003).

The dominant point of view is that voice is useful while silence is detrimental (Parke et al., 2022) as a result teams and managers may miss crucial facts and consequently they may be unable to identify errors or

take corrective actions which results in blunders and diminishing performance (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). On the other hand when employees speak up about issues, in this way they only not support their teammates, but also demonstrate their competencies and stand out from the crowd as valuable assets to the managers who evaluate their performances for rewards (Morrison, 2014).

There is another narrative, according to Stouten et al., (2019), the voice may be problematic if employees carelessly speak without knowing all facts and figures. Moreover, not all staff members seem to have excellent voices (Brykman & Raver, 2021). Sometimes employees may raise visionary concerns that management cannot address because of resource limitations they face (Burriss et al., 2017; Sherf et al., 2019). On the contrary, silence may serve strategic purposes for instance, if employees feel that a leader's attitude is truly damaging, then by deciding to be silent in the first place they may wait for the appropriate time to speak about the issues (Stouten et al., 2019).

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In the academic literature, it is pertinent to point out that there is a continuous debate among researchers about whether voice and silence should be seen as unique constructs or opposite to each other (Morrison, 2011). In the past, scholars have frequently believed that voice and silence are opposite constructs, as employees either choose to speak up or remain silent (Morrison, 2014). In other words, they advocated that when there is no voice, it means there is silence. Considering this perspective, former literature supported the idea that “it is most appropriate to view voice and silence as opposites” (Morrison, 2011). Furthermore, Ashford et al. (2009) strongly compelled not to have distinct literature for voice and silence and consider these constructs as “different sides of the same coin” (p. 178).

There is another stream of research that considers voice and silence as independent concepts (Brinsfield et al., 2009; Sherf et al., 2021; Van Dyne et al., 2003). One viewpoint is that, unlike voice which is a purposeful choice, silence may be an automatic resignation reaction or a deep-rooted attitude (Kish-Gephart et al., 2009; Pinder & Harlos, 2001). Another logic put forth is that employees may use their voice extensively generally, simultaneously they also withhold some kind of information (Detert & Edmondson, 2011) in other words they are advocating that voice and silence can happen at the same time (Morrison, 2011). Furthermore, Sherf et al. (2021) found “that employee voice and silence (a) are independent, (b) are differentially predicted by perceived impact and psychological safety, and (c) have different effects on employee burnout”. Their research, in particular, indicates that employees generally talk about those issues they consider are practical at the same time they remain silent in those matters they feel unsafe raising (Sherf, Parke, & Isaakyan, 2021). Following the same point of view Parke et al., (2022) also advocated that at times silence is not only useful yet crucial and presented a theoretically novel description that not merely silence and voice are unique constructs additionally it is a distinct type of silence termed as strategic silence – that is, to hold voice to suppress arising issues strategically and wait for the right time to speak up about these.

There is literature exists that advocates that employee voice and employee silence are unique constructs (e.g., Sherf et al., 2021; Parke et al., 2022) but a stream of literature mostly studied silence as a harmful construct rather than supportive (Stouten et al., 2019) the prevailing narrative is that voice and silence are opposite attitudinal choices (Sherf et al., 2021). It shows that much more work is needed to establish the former narrative that employee voice and silence are separate constructs.

Despite the significance and requirement to study employee voice and employee silence as distinct constructs, there is no recent systematic literature review on this topic.

Previously systematic literature reviews, meta-analyses, and reviews have been published in the domain of employee voice and employee silence. For instance, a review

article was published in 2014 which incorporated voice and silence both concepts (Morrison, 2014). Another review was written in the domain of employee voice during the year 2011 (Morrison, 2011). A systematic literature review was published in the year 2022 that focused employee silence concept (Lotfi Dehkharghani et al., 2022) and another systematic literature review was published in 2022 on organizational voice (Hosseini & Sabokro, 2021). Regarding meta-analysis, two meta-analyses were published on the concept of employee silence in 2019 and 2022 (Sharu & Manikandan, 2019; Hao et al., 2022). A meta-analysis that was published in 2017 catering the concept of “voice” (Chamberlinet et al., 2017). The most recent meta-analysis that integrated both concepts, voice, and silence was published during the year 2021. It demonstrated that employee voice and employee silence are separate constructs by focusing on the variables: Psychological safety, perceived impact, and burnout (Sherf et al., 2021).

It has been evident from the literature review that most of the former reviews either it is a simple review, systematic literature or meta-analysis examined employee silence and employee voice separately. Furthermore, very few reviews integrated voice and silence, both of the concepts but any of them did not provide a holistic picture of the concepts: employee voice and employee silence as distinct constructs studied during the last two decades (2003–2023). Considering the inconsistencies prevail in the literature in understanding the concept of silence and voice that how these are different or distinct constructs and the absence of a comprehensive review of these concepts as distinct constructs. It has been pertinent to conduct a systematic literature review to shed light on the previous empirical and conceptual studies during the last two decades (2003–2023) which demonstrated or discussed that concepts, employee voice, and employee silence are different from each other. To establish this narrative, far more research is needed, and for that, we need to dig out where the conceptual, methodological, theoretical, and other research gaps exist in this stream of research. Without knowing the current state of this underpinned topic, further meaningful research is not possible. Hence, the current study is an effort to point out the relevant literature that is previously done in the domain of employee silence and employee voice as unique constructs. It will not only shed light on the existing literature on the topic but also will open new avenues for future research that is needed in this sphere.

The rest of the article proceeds with a literature review – previous literature in the domain of voice and silence as unique constructs. The next part describes the methodology of the study followed by findings. In the end, the conclusion is stated which also illustrates the limitations of the study and future recommendations.

## 1. Literature Review

Hirschman describes voice as a “messy concept because it can be graduated, all the way from faint grumbling to violent protest; it implies articulation of one’s critical

opinions rather than a private, secret vote [. . .] and finally, it is direct and straightforward rather than round about” (Hirschman, 1970, as cited in Chamberlin et al., 2017). He further argued that when employees are not satisfied they either leave the organization, or they speak about the problems they face in the organization contrary of avoiding them (Hirschman, 1970). In addition, employees are likely to be involved in speaking up because they think that they will be evaluated positively by engaging themselves in a voice (Chamberlin et al., 2018). However, management may only not be concerned that the voice is delivered (Burris, 2012) but rather the value of the message that the voice consists of is valuable for managers for implementation purposes (Burris et al., 2017).

Nechanska et al. (2020) stated that employee silence is a more recent notion in the existing literature than its related concept, employee voice. Additionally, they added when there are difficult circumstances in the organization then staying silent is an employee choice. Van Dyne et al., (2003) expressed that this approach on the part of employees clearly states that they deliberately refrain from communicating their views, information, and details. This information could help to solve organizational problems; nevertheless, employees decide to remain silent, and this behavior can hinder organizational success (Lotfi Dehkharghani et al., 2022). They further added that in many situations organizational climate also forces them to remain silent. On the contrary, Stouten et al. (2019) stated that there is always a right time to break the silence because raising issues is generally seen as a brave act but sometimes it can be a political suicide hence silence may be a courageous act at least at the initial stage.

Furthermore, according to Van Dyne et al. (2003) sometimes employee silence can be constructive as it may assist in lessening administrative information burden, decrease relational clashes, and enhance co-workers’ work-related privacy.

Another debate that is continuously going on among researchers is whether silence and voice are independent constructs or are opposite to each other in one construct (Heo et al., 2022). The prevailing point of view in the literature is that voice and silence are opposite to each other (Hao et al., 2022; Sherf et al., 2021). Therefore, considering that voice and silence are antagonistic options, in such a manner the same predictor may anticipate voice and silence as opposite however alternatively the same way (Detert & Edmondson, 2011). Following the same perspective scholars stated that whenever an opportunity arises to speak up, employees who want to see positive change in the organization speak or remain silent to avoid consequences linked with voice (Detert & Burris, 2007; Tangirala et al., 2013).

However, Hao et al. (2022) stated that their findings do not support these assumptions, particularly it was found that some variables behave this way but the same is not correct for related variables anticipating employee voice and silence. They further explored and expressed

similar views that the results of dominance analysis showed that employee voice and silence are independent of each other. Van Dyne et al. (2003) also argued that voice is not opposite to silence and suggested that employee silence and employee voice are unique constructs. They also indicated that employee silence is a complex construct hence if deliberate silence is non-existent, it does not essentially mean that there should be deliberate voice presence.

Following the same perspective, Sherf et al. (2021) stated that despite the fact, the majority of research literature treats voice and silence as opposites, our findings challenged this narrative. Sherf et al. found that employee voice and silence are distinct constructs. These results broaden the academic literature by demonstrating that prevailing predictors distinctively predict both of the constructs, voice, and silence, in other words illustrating that voice and silence are independent concepts (Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Hao et al., 2022; Sherf et al., 2021). Hence many scholars have viewed employee silence as a unitary construct (Chou & Chang, 2017).

Stouten et al. (2019) also stated the same viewpoint that voice and silence are closely associated with each other, for instance, employees may use both as an approach to congregate more details and developments of solid judgments thus making voice more useful and effective. Considering the importance of the quality of voice, Brykman, and Raver (2021) identified four voice quality message traits from the literature: first is the rationale that refers to that type of voice which is based on solid information and which is logical as well. The Second is feasibility, which refers to a voice that is realistic and achievable considering time and resources. Third is Organizational – focus, which means the voice is aligned with the vision of the organization. Fourth is a novelty, this refers to the uniqueness of voice for instance doing things differently than the normal routine. However, Stouten et al. (2019) argued that whenever there is something wrong within the organization, the voice may not always be the first response rather silence should be the first reaction to evaluate the situation correctly.

Furthermore, Parke et al. (2022) challenged the dominant narrative in the academic literature that employee silence is detrimental and presented the idea of strategic silence, which refers to the deliberate withholding of problems instead of merely a noncommunication. They further stated that if employees are not sharing their views maybe they do not have anything relevant to say at that time thus they are not involved in the intentional withholding of fruitful ideas. In other words, strategic silence means the deliberate withholding of untimely issues and ideas (Parke et al., 2022). Scholars emphasized on the importance of silence at the initial level and the correct timing to break the silence about the issues (Parke et al., 2022; Stouten et al., 2019). Moreover, strategic silence may also be a way to achieve recognition of an idea rather than helping and cooperating with others in the organization (Parke et al., 2022).

Van Dyne et al. (2003) pointed out that other than management literature, few other research domains for instance ethics and communication literature also do not consider that silence is the absence of voice or they are opposite to each other, instead, they highlight the situations when silence is important and needed. For instance, in the domain of ethics research, Bok emphasized using personal intelligence and ethical standards to decide what should we say and where we should remain silent (Bok, 1983 as cited in Van Dyne et al., 2003).

Moreover, in the body of communication research, positive elements of silence have been highlighted as well and silence is seen as a crucial aspect of social encounters (Van Dyne et al., 2003). For instance, Scott (1993) stated that voice and silence both are dialectical elements of efficient conversation and silence is not a static state instead it is active. Scott also supports the view that silence connects with voice, each is indispensable for the existence of the other. Moreover, silence and voice are concurrent and occur in order (Scott, 1993). Hence, it is noteworthy that neither ethics research nor communication research considers silence as a passive construct or is opposed to voice rather it is an active state and distinct from voice. Nevertheless this viewpoint second the point of view of those authors who advocate the idea that voice and silence are distinct constructs.

It is obvious from the literature that much more work is required to establish the narrative that voice and silence should be viewed as separate constructs. Moreover, during the years 2021 and 2022, some studies have challenged the prevailing point of view that employee silence is atrocious and presented and demonstrated through their findings that silence and voice are independent constructs. Moreover, the idea of strategic silence is also presented which supports the concept that there can be silence and voice at the same time and it allows employees' voices to be evaluated by managers positively and enable them to get rewards. Based on the literature review, it is pertinent to note that no systematic literature review was previously available that presents a holistic picture of the stream of research which claims that voice and silence are independent constructs and holds relevant points of view.

Furthermore, as mentioned in the literature review, other disciplines of research like ethics and communication literature also consider that voice and silence are separate constructs. This gives more weightage to the opinions of management scholars who claim that voice and silence are unique to each other and it enhances the value of this stream of research. Hence to establish this narrative more meaningful research is needed. Therefore, an effort is required to aggregate the research work in this domain of research so that a broader understanding could be developed and areas will be identified where more work is needed. It will facilitate not only future researchers and academicians but also managers and administrators will understand the phenomenon of employee voice and silence in a better way.

The following research questions are formulated:

RQ1: What are the arguments/logic behind the author's claim that employee silence and employee voice are independent/distinct constructs in the literature?

RQ2: Which methodologies, industries, and theories have been used and future recommendations are given in the literature while examining the concept of employee silence and voice as independent constructs?

Hence, the objective of this article is to develop a systematic literature review of empirical and conceptual studies on the narrative that employee voice and employee silence are distinct constructs to figure out which theories, methodologies, logic, and arguments have been used in this stream of research. Moreover, what are those areas mentioned in these studies where gaps need to be filled? With this holistic information, it will be possible to develop more empirical studies based on sound theoretical approaches. Moreover, the systematic literature review will help managers and policymakers to understand the phenomenon thoroughly of how silence and voice can happen at the same time and what is the ideology behind this. Moreover, it will enable them to consider what areas can benefit from additional study to completely capitalize on employees' strategic silence and better meet the organization's objectives.

## 2. Methodology

The authors of the study chose a systematic literature review approach to conduct the review study. PRISMA which is termed the preferred reporting item for systematic reviews and meta-analysis procedures was used as a guide. This approach covers all the elements which are helpful to conduct review research systematically and transparently. See Fig.1 for the flow diagram (PRISMA).

### 2.1. Inclusion criteria

In the earlier stages, the authors of the study decided on the protocols to conduct the review study, for instance, the purpose of the study, selection of databases, duration of past literature, inclusion criteria, etc. The main objective of the study was to conduct a systematic literature review to better understand the phenomenon of employee voice and silence as independent constructs. Data was compiled through the search for scientific papers from two databases: Scopus and Web of Science. The thought that employee voice and employee silence are independent and multidimensional concepts were first developed in the year 2003 (Van Dyne et al., 2003). Based on this we searched for the research papers published between Jan 2003 – Feb 2023. To ensure the quality only peer-reviewed journal articles were included. Regarding the language, articles in the English language were included only.

### 2.2. Search strategy

Records were collected through the use of keywords. Keywords are: "Employee silence", "employee voice",

“organizational silence”, “organizational voice”, “independent”, “unique”, “different”, “unitary”, “construct”, “concept”, “distinct”, and “idea”. Following combinations of keywords were used to search for articles with the help of Boolean search terms: “(organizational AND silence OR employee AND silence) AND (organizational AND voice OR employee AND voice) AND (independent OR unique OR different OR unitary OR distinct OR construct OR concept OR idea)”.

### 2.3. Study selection

Articles were selected in three stages (Fig. 1). In the first phase we searched for relevant articles based on titles and abstracts from both of the databases, Scopus and Web of Science. A primary search was done on February 14, 2023. Initial data containing names of the authors, titles of the articles, date of publishing, and abstract was transferred to an Excel sheet through databases. In total 237 articles were searched using the search expressions mentioned above. We found 193 and 44 articles from the Web of Science and Scopus respectively. Out of these 30 duplicate articles were excluded manually. After removing the duplicates, in the second phase, abstracts of 207 articles were screened. Abstract screening led to 179 articles being excluded due to lacking relevance. In the third phase, the remaining 38 articles were read and investigated in detail and 22 articles were excluded as those were not according to our study objectives. Lastly, 18 articles were used for the final analysis to explain the voice and silence paradox as a distinct construct.

## 3. Findings

After reviewing 18 articles that were included for analysis it was discovered that 15 were empirical (quantitative

and qualitative) studies and 2 were conceptual and 1 was a review study supporting/discussing the idea of employee silence and voice as distinct constructs.

This section will demonstrate the finding of the study. Starting from empirical and conceptual demonstration and investigation of arguments of the authors in support of the idea presented why employee voice and employee silence should be conceptualized as independent constructs. The rest of the part contains an investigation of methodologies, industries, and theories studied in reviewed articles followed by research gaps mentioned in examined articles.

### 3.1 Empirical (quantitative) demonstration that voice and silence are independent constructs

The review of the empirical studies highlighted the narratives of the authors' claims that both of the concepts (silence and voice) are unique. For example, Şahin et al. (2021) investigated the impact of two sub-domains of implicit voice theories 1) “do not embarrass the boss in public” and 2) “negative career consequences of voice” on voice and silence of employees. Findings demonstrated that the first sub-dimension significantly and positively effected both of the variables (employee constructive voice and defensive silence). At the same time, the second sub-dimension had a negative and substantial impact on employee defensive silence but there was no significant effect was found on voice. Therefore, findings confirmed that voice and silence are different concepts and should be studied separately.

In another empirical study, Richard et al. (2017) assessed three elements of speaking up among healthcare staff: 1) Perceived concerns, 2) Withholding voice (silence) and, 3) Speaking up (voice). Findings of principle component analysis demonstrated that the scales determining the frequencies of safety concerns, speaking up, and withholding voice are certainly distinct from each other and are in line with Van Dyne's (2003) conceptual framework that supports the same ideology.

Sherf et al. (2021) adopted the behavioral activation system (BAS) and behavioral inhibition system (BIS) to differentiate employee silence from employee voice. BIS is related to the stimuli that encourage one to avoid harmful situations and BAS is related to stimuli that motivate one to achieve goal-oriented results. Moreover, BAS and BIS are independent of each other (Hao et al., 2022). According to this approach, voice corresponds to BAS and silence corresponds to BIS and based on these approaches (BAS and BIS) a theoretical framework was presented to demonstrate the differentiation between voice and silence (Sherf et al., 2021).

Sherf et al. (2021), in study 1 through meta-analysis demonstrated this distinction that voice and silence are unique concepts ( $Mp = -.15$ ). Results showed that perceived impact strongly correlated to voice than silence and psychological safety strongly correlated to silence than voice. Results also presented that silence is more strongly associated with employee burnout than voice.

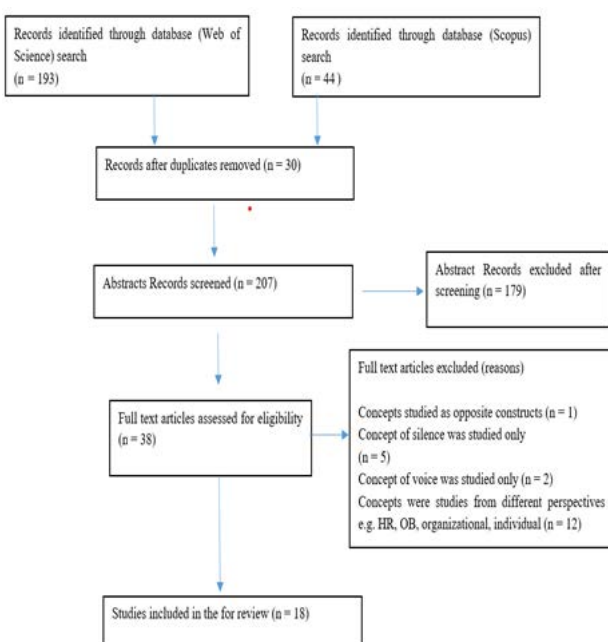


Fig.1. Selection of articles based on PRISMA methodology

In other words, according to the theorizing perceived impact which correlates to voice is related to the behavioral activation system on the other hand psychological safety that correlates to silence is related to the behavioral inhibition system and confirmed the distinction between voice and silence concepts. Results of Study 1 were replicated for Study 2 at the person level. Consistent with the theorizing based on BAS and BIS approach results showed the differentiation between voice and silence constructs. Moreover, study 2 confirmed all the relationships and correlations of Study 1. Lastly, silence predicted withdrawal (an indicator of employee burnout) and voice did not.

Shahjehan & Yasir, (2016) while investigating the conceptualization of voice and silence paradoxes at the surface level found that organizational silence and organizational voice are independently associated with counterproductive work behaviors. Moreover, Lee and Dahinten (2021) examined the role of psychological safety as a mediator between inclusive leadership and voice behaviors. Results demonstrated the significance of inclusive leadership for nurses to speak up, withhold their voices, and their intentions to report errors. Moreover, low correlations were found among all three dependent variables (Error reporting intention, speaking up, withholding voice) showing that voice (speaking up) and silence (withholding voice) are distinct constructs. In this study silence and speaking up were considered voice behaviors.

EVLN a behavioral model (Rusbult et al., 1982; Farrell, 1983 as cited in Sabino et al. 2019) classified four ways that employees can use to respond to job dissatisfaction: Exit, Voice, Loyalty, and Neglect. Sabino et al. (2019) studied silence to make it part of the EVLN model as the fifth response to job dissatisfaction. Findings revealed that adherence silence had a positive correlation with loyalty and a negative correlation with neglect etc. On the contrary rejection silence had a negative association with voice and a positive association with neglect. Hence the results demonstrated that silence and voice are independent of each other therefore two facets of silence – adherence silence and rejection silence can be added to the EVLN model as a fifth response (Sabino et al., 2019).

Continuing with the explanation of employee and voice as distinct constructs Wang et al. (2012) found that transformational leadership positively correlated to cooperative silence and cooperative voice. Thus, results revealed that cooperative voice and silence both of the constructs are unique hence transformational leadership encourages voice and silence both. Knoll and Redman (2016) explored those employees who raise their voices through ESVPs called Employer sponsored voice practices are engaged in silence behavior as well. Moreover, findings showed that ESVP was positively correlated with promotive voice and cooperative silence, demonstrating the uniqueness of the concept of silence and voice. (ESVPs) are utilized by the human resource department to

enhance employee voice in the organization and increase their participation. Hence use of ESVP does not rule out the possibility of silence. Therefore, findings emphasized that it is important to understand employees' motives behind voice or silence to know that employees are engaged with voice or silence (Knoll & Redman, 2016).

A review of the literature revealed another study challenging the viewpoint that employee voice and employee silence are not opposite to each other. Based on issue-selling literature Parke et al. (2022) presented the idea of strategic silence – it is the deliberate effort to withhold information that is considered untimely on the part of employees. They further argued that employees' opinions will be valued by the managers when they voice their opinions in a combination of strategic silence. Hence employees may receive rewards and positive evaluation by the managers as a result of valuable input (Parke et al., 2022).

Results of their qualitative study 1 demonstrated that strategic silence is present in the workplace and appears to be helpful for employees' voices to receive a positive response from supervisors (Parke et al., 2022). These relationships have been tested in the next 3 studies. Parke et al. demonstrated through empirical studies – study 2a (quantitative – Confirmatory Factor Analysis) that not only voice and silence are unique constructs rather strategic silence is the form of silence. Moreover, strategic silence is positively correlated with voice quality. For Study 2b two sets of confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted. This time findings of study 2a were replicated. Interestingly results of study 2b showed a negative correlation between strategic silence with voice quality. However, regardless of the dissimilarity of correlations in studies 2a and 2b, the mutual impact of voice and strategic silence to anticipate the quality of voice has been constant among studies. Results of study 3 which was a scenario-based experiment showed strong internal validity and also supported the theory – the use of strategic silence enhances voice quality and thereafter employees achieve greater evaluations and benefits.

Furthermore, Plessis and Beer (2022) studied the relationship between affective rumination with voice and silence. Findings showed that affective rumination did not significantly associate with employee voice but is positively and substantially associated with employee silence, supporting the idea that employees who are engaged with affective rumination most likely will not active in speaking up. These results emphasized to study voice and silence as separate constructs even if both are strongly connected.

Schlosser and Zolin (2012) examined the situations where managers are most likely to hear employees' prosocial voice (cooperation) and pay attention to their defensive silence (based on fear). Findings indicated that if the supervisor is in tension due to the economic condition of the organization and there is trust in employees then the prosocial voice is enhanced. On the other hand, if there is trust in employees and they are associated with unions then the supervisor perceived less defensive silence but

it is enhanced because of supervisor tension. Hence, results pointed out that voice and silence are independent of each other and not opposites of the same continuum.

The spiral of voice theory introduced by Madsen and Johansen (2019) is an extension of “a spiral of silence” theory which explains that people avoid expressing opinions if they think that they hold an unpopular opinion and they are scared of being socially isolated (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, as cited in Madsen & Johansen, 2019). Moreover, this theory also explains that people ought to express opinions in a hope that they will become a public voice in the future. A person may not express the point of view of the majority, but the presence of conversation on internal social media (ISM) can be the reason to grab the support of colleagues (Van Osch & Steinfield, 2018 as cited in Madsen & Johansen, 2019). Hence, raising issues on ISM may be explained as “a spiral of voice” (Madsen & Johansen, 2019).

Moreover, this study’s finding has indicated that the presence and consistency of holding conversations on ISM may encourage “a spiral of voice” at least in those organizational environments where open communication is a norm and supervisors are open to new ideas. Madsen & Johansen (2019) further added that voice and silence are distinct concepts (Van Dyne et al., 2003) similarly spiral of voice and spiral of silence theories in internal social media are dissimilar dimensions with regards to administrations and organizations’ openness.

BAS is a positive emotional condition that encourages one to achieve goals and BIS is a negative emotional condition that is triggered by potential fears (Sherf et al., 2021). Consistent with this approach, Hao et al. (2022) found that antecedents associated with BAS are correlated with a voice more, and antecedents associated with BIS are correlated with silence. These results showed that coexistent predictors predict voice and silence in different ways hence indicating that voice and silence are independent concepts (Hao et al., 2022).

Additionally, Huang et al. (2023) are also with the viewpoint that voice and silence do not inevitably work opposite to each other in their association with antecedents related to trust. They further found that reliance-based trust in the employee, felt disclosure, and reliance-based trust in the supervisor differently predicted voice and silence hence results suggested that different variables associated with a trust may generate psychological reactions differently for silence and voice. This is consistent with the narrative that voice and silence have unique predictors Huang et al. (2023).

Lastly, Frömmer et al. (2021) investigated authentic leadership with moral employee behavior by focusing on employee voice, quiescent (fear-based), and acquiescent silence (withdrawing behavior). Evidence supported the theoretical inference that authentic leadership is positively related to employee moral behavior and differently affects moral voice and silence. In other words, authentic leadership supports employees to voice their concerns, and in reducing silencing

behavior that is based on fear and resignation (Frömmer et al., 2021).

### 3.2 Conceptual demonstration of the narrative that employee silence and voice are distinct constructs

The review of the conceptual studies highlighted the narratives of authors claiming employee voice and silence are distinct constructs. For instance, Van Dyne et al. (2003) argued that employee voice and silence are not opposite to each other because silence can also be understood as deliberate withholding of ideas, knowledge, and opinion. They developed a conceptual framework to understand the employee voice and silence aspects as an independent multidimensional concept.

Van Dyne et al. (2003) framework presents three motives of employees: 1) Self-protection behavior where the employee prefers to save him/herself first because of fear, 2) Other-oriented attitude for example cooperative behavior, 3) Withdrawal/ resignation from the situation). Based upon these motives they distinguished three types of silence: 1) Acquiescent silence, 2) Defensive silence and, 3) Prosocial silence, and three parallel forms of voice: 1) Acquiescent voice, 2) Defensive voice and, 3) Prosocial voice where withholding information does not mean that there is no voice. They argued that these behaviors can be varied based on motives for instance withdrawing from the situation. Van Dyne et al., further explained that employees may be motivated to speak up or remain silent based on different factors for instance perceived organizational justice, reliable management, and advantages of speaking up as well.

Moreover, there is another study supported this framework, Knoll et al. (2016) in their study expressed that there are at least three arguments why silence cannot be considered the absence of voice: 1) if the employee does not speak it does not mean that the employee has nothing to say. 2) simply because the employee does not raise his voice is not giving us the information that voice should be facilitated, there may be other motives behind silence for example they are protecting their colleagues, etc. 3) viewing these concepts as voice vs silence cannot show working environment realities. Employees may be willing to speak in one situation but prefer to remain silent in other situations as explained by Van Dyne et al. (2003). Knoll et al. (2016), further explained that voice and silence may shape independent elements that lead to four quarters, and every concept has either lower or higher severity.

In a review study, Morrison (2023) reviewed the advancements that have been made in voice and silence literature during the last decade and expressed that there has been a clear development in understanding the situations and reasons why employees decide to raise or withhold their voices. Research has pointed out the significance of differentiation between promotive and prohibitive voice and expressed that there is a need to understand more that whether there are different predictors for silence and voice.

### 3.3 Methodologies used in the reviewed studies

While reviewing the articles we found that majority were the quantitative studies, with 13 out of 18 reviewed studies applying the quantitative methodology for the collection of data and analysis. As shown in Table 1, out of 13 quantitative studies three studies used confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), the other three studies used CFA-structural equation modeling, two of the studies used exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and CFA, one study adopted EFA and Component factor analysis approach, two articles used linear regression, one study adopted dominance analysis technique and lastly, one study opted principal component analysis approach.

Table 1. Number of quantitative studies and types of analysis

Type of Analysis	No. of studies
Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA)	3
Confirmatory factor analysis and Structural Equation Modelling (CFA-SEM)	3
Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA)	2
Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and Component factor analysis	1
Linear Regression	2
Dominance analysis	1
Principle component analysis	1

Regarding the rest of the 5 studies, one study used qualitative (exploratory qualitative), quantitative (CFA), and scenario-based experiments. Furthermore, another study used a solely qualitative approach and adopted text analysis and thematic analysis techniques. Moreover, two conceptual and one review study on the understudied topic were found during reviewing the literature.

### 3.4. Industries studied in the reviewed articles

As far as industries that have been studied in reviewed studies are concerned, out of 15 quantitative and qualitative studies, 4 studies collected data from the healthcare sector, 2 from higher education institutions, 2 from the banking sector, 1 from the Electronics-IT sector, 1 from the hotel sector and rest of the studies from multiple sectors.

### 3.5. Theories /Conceptual Frameworks / Models used in the Literature

A review of the literature revealed that the most popular framework that was used in most of the studies (6 studies) is Van Dyne et al. (2003) conceptual framework. This conceptual framework very first time challenged the narrative that employee voice and silence are opposite to each other and presented the idea that employee voice and silence must be conceptualized as independent constructs. Furthermore, they emphasized that employees may speak up or remain silent based on their motivations for instance to protect

themselves because of fear (Van Dyne et al., 2003). Moreover, issue selling theory, implicit voice theories, EVLN model, social exchange theory, and BAS/BIS approaches were majorly used in the studies. How these theories and models were used in the studies is explained below.

EVLN (Exit, Voice, Loyalty, and Neglect) is the model of behavior and employees can express job dissatisfaction in four ways: by exiting, raising their voice, showing loyalty, and through negligent behavior (Withey & Cooper, 1989). This model was studied by Sabino et al. (2019) to make silence a part of the EVLN model as the fifth response to job dissatisfaction.

Implicit voice theories have also been used in the silence and voice literature explaining the phenomenon that sometimes employees prefer to remain silent despite an environment that encourages voice because they think that raising their voice can be tricky (Detert & Edmondson, 2011). Regarding issue selling theory, the strategic silence concept is presented by Parker et al. (2022). Based on issue selling literature, it was suggested that employees may adopt a strategic silence approach to avoid speaking up on untimely issues when 1) if the information they have is not relevant to the situation 2) when information is not fully obtained and 3) when the supervisor is not in a mood may be emotionally or mentally (Parker et al., 2022).

BAS and BIS approaches were used in the study to explain the distinction between employee voice and silence (Sherf et al., 2021). BIS is related to the stimuli that encourage avoiding harmful situations and BAS is related to stimuli that encourage achieving goal-oriented results. Hence BIS is related to silence and BAS is related to voice (Sherf et al., 2021). Hao et al. (2022) also used BAS and BIS approaches to demonstrate that employee voice and silence are different from each other.

The spiral of silence theory explains that people avoid talking about those issues which they think are unpopular (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Based on the spiral of silence theory's approach that if people raise their voices in a hope that it will become popular in the future, the concept of the spiral of voice theory was introduced by Madsen and Johansen (2019). Social exchange theory was used in the study to identify the relationship between trust related variables (Huang et al., 2023). This theory explains the phenomenon that cooperation is consciously established when people from both sides feel the advantage of this harmony (Blau, 1964, as cited in Huang et al., 2023).

### 3.6 Future recommendations mentioned in the literature

A review of the literature highlighted several future directions where more work is needed to understand the employee voice and silence paradox as independent constructs and its relevant areas. Details of those future directions which are relevant to our study are mentioned below.



Parker et al. (2022) investigated strategic silence and indicated that as strategic silence may have a useful function, it can have a negative side as well that has not been investigated. Furthermore, strategic silence was investigated as a behavioral preference, and in the future personality characteristics of the employees who are engaged in strategic silence need attention. Moreover, the extent to which managers recognized strategic silence needs to be explored as well. This study is done in India and the future different locations and cultures need to be examined to generalize the results. Furthermore, for study 3 scenario-based experiment was used in the future real experiment approach may be used. Parker et al., (2022) in their study examined the mediator, that how supervisors honor voice. In the future lessening threat fear, and enhancing employees' authenticity as mediators should be investigated. Sherf et al. (2021) also stressed investigating personality traits as voice and silence might differ based on personality characteristics. They further recommended adopting BIS and BAS approaches to further explore whether other antecedents behave in the same way or different way to predict voice and silence.

Moreover, to investigate the relationship between ESVPs and silence, Knoll & Redman (2016) used self-reports and data from a single source, in the future use of peer and supervisors' ratings has been recommended to have valuable insights into this relationship. While investigating the EVLN model, Sabino et al. (2019) examined only "silence" as a possible extension of the EVLN model. They proposed further investigation to expand EVLN for instance addition of cynicism (Naus et al., 2007, as cited in Sabino et al., 2019) and replacing loyalty with patience and the addition of compliance and suggesting the EVPNC model (Tucker & Turner, 2011 as cited in Sabino et al., 2019).

Shahjehan and Yasir (2016) recommended that the study of the perplexing nature of voice and silence in the context of gender is an interesting area to investigate which will provide a sound basis for more practical and theoretical work. Morrison (2023) in her review study emphasized finding out factors that cause a transformation from voice to silence and factors that are the reason, voice or silence inflates over time. Regarding the tools that are used to enhance employee voice in organizations, Knoll et al. (2016) stated that human resource management needs to investigate whether tools that have been set up to enhance voice are effective to control silence or not, for instance, it can be done with the help of measuring voice and silence through employee surveys.

Referring to the use of internal social media, Madssen and Johansen (2019) recommended investigating whether the use of internal social media to speak up is equally useful in those organizations where the culture to raise a voice is less safe. Şahin et al. (2021) encouraged to explore the sub-elements of implicit voice theories that significantly impact employee voice and silence independently.

Schlosser and Zolin (2012) recommended in their study that to understand what supports managers to hear the voice and notice silence, only the supervisor's viewpoints have been used, and in the future, more components should be supplemented. Moreover, more research is required from the manager and subordinate angle because of their important role in the organizations. Plesis and Beer (2022) emphasized conducting a study to investigate how elements of national cultures can affect factors like rumination and voice behaviors.

## Conclusions

The major aim of the paper was to conduct a systematic literature review to understand the paradox of employee voice and employee silence as an independent construct by investigating empirical and conceptual evidence of previous studies. Moreover, it is also investigated which methodologies and theories have been adopted and industries that have been studied by the researchers. Lastly, we explored those areas where more research is needed through the future recommendation given in reviewed studies.

Investigation of empirical and conceptual studies are presenting the narrative that voice is not opposite to silence rather both are distinct from each other. However, this narrative is not very much established, and much more qualitative and quantitative research is needed to establish this viewpoint. Moreover, not only voice and silence are unique constructs but also strategic silence is a form of silence and when it is used in conjunction with voice, it helps to make voice valuable.

Following the idea of strategic silence, it can be interpreted that silence is an active state for instance in a situation where an employee is silent it does not mean he/she is static, motionless, or stagnant, rather he/she is listening and comprehending that what is going on in that situation. Hence based on that situation and their information employees decide to talk about it later and later they come up with solid information in the right situation that may lead them to provide a quality voice and in return, they get value and rewards from their managers. The idea of strategic silence presents the positive side of silence and encourages the notion that silence may be beneficial as well. However, a far more qualitative and quantitative investigation is required for the generalization of this ideology. An in-depth investigation of this topic will support Human Resource Practitioners to manage silence at work in a better way.

Moreover, more work is needed to improve ESVPs (Employer-sponsored voice practices) as it is revealed through the literature that ESVPs are not accommodating voices fully and engaged in silent behaviors as well. Furthermore, an extension of the EVLN model has been recommended to fully address the declining job satisfaction on the part of employees.

Additionally, it appeared that Van Dyne's conceptual framework was mostly used to study employee voice and employee silence as unique constructs. Other theories, for example, issue selling theory, and BAS & BIS approaches have been used to distinguish voice and silence constructs but very few empirical studies have been conducted in this context till now. More studies based on the aforementioned theories will help to confirm those findings.

The literature also revealed that there is a need to investigate the personality traits of employees to know why employees engage in strategic silence or decide to speak up or remain silent. Further investigation in this area will help to understand employees and formulate strategies accordingly to manage silence in organizations. As far as industries are considered that are studied in the reviewed literature it appeared that the healthcare sector has been studied the most. Thus, focus should be given to other sectors as well for example hotel, electronics, IT, Education sector, etc. Moreover, most of the studies used a cross-sectional design hence time series, and longitudinal data collection methods should be considered in the future.

Limitations of the study. Two databases were used for the search of relevant articles, and investigation of more databases may provide more information on the under-study topic. Moreover, only peer-reviewed articles were reviewed for systematic literature review. The inclusion of books, conferences, and unpublished material may help to understand this sphere in a better way.

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Conceptualization, H.Y. and L.J.-U; methodology, H.Y. and L.J.-U; preliminary inclusion criteria (Title and keywords), H.Y. and L.J.-U; secondary inclusion criteria (Abstract Screening), H.Y. and L.J.-U; final inclusion criteria (Full-text articles), H.Y.; writing of original draft, H.Y.; reviewing and editing of the draft, L.J.-U; Envisioning, H.Y. and L.J.-U; Supervision, L.J.-U. Both of the authors agreed to publish the manuscript.

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