

IMPACT OF ORGANISATIONAL SILENCE ON EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT AMONG BANKING SECTOR EMPLOYEES

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Abstract

This research examines the association between Organisational Silence and Employee Engagement, as well as the variation in Organisational Silence among employees based on demographic factors (gender, marital status, age, level of management, and educational qualifications). The study was conducted among employees working in the banking sector. The association between Organisation Silence and Employee Engagement was investigated using correlation and regression analysis. Statistical techniques, T-Test, and ANOVA were used to examine variations in organisational silence across demographic groups. The results reveal that organisational silence significantly varies across age, level of management, and educational qualifications. Furthermore, the study reveals a significant inverse relationship and effect of Organisational silence on employee engagement.

Keywords: *Organisational Silence, Employee Engagement, Banking Employees, Demographics.*

Introduction

Organisations are seeking highly skilled professionals who exhibit proactivity, initiative, and responsiveness to meet increasing competitiveness and consumer expectations. These attributes often stem from self-efficacy, persistence, autonomy, and openness to share knowledge and expertise. Even though organisations promote these characteristics, silence, which is described as an unwillingness to communicate or withholding of information due to fear of being misunderstood by superiors, is a major obstacle (Milliken & Wolfe Morsrison, 2003). This unwillingness to communicate may be the result of organisational circumstances or an individual preference (Prouska, & Psychogios, 2018).

The notion of silence emerges from the theory of the ELVN model, which lists four responses that employees adopt when they are dissatisfied in the organisation, which are Exit, Loyalty, Voice, and Neglect. Here, Silence was often associated with loyalty, where employees remained patient and refrained from voicing concerns, hoping that problems would resolve independently or through the efforts of others (Hirschman, 1970). The paradigm was then extended to EVLNS, where silence is denoted by the letter "S" (Sabino et al., 2019). Initially, silence was viewed as the antithesis of voice and passive conduct, implying that it is okay for employees to stay silent and refrain from expressing their thoughts (Milliken & Morrison, 2000; Nikaeen et al., 2012; Scott, 1993). Further research indicates that silence can be proactive and function as a communication tool influenced by a range of cognitions, feelings, and intentions, such as either supporting or opposing certain situations. (Pinder & Harlos, 2001). Regardless of organisational issues, it may be a deliberate decision based on individual preferences and characteristics (Chou & Chang, 2020).

Milliken and Morrison (2000) introduced the concept of Organisational Silence in management literature and defined silence as the withholding of information about potential problems and issues by employees as a response to fear of negative behaviour from powerful forces in the organisation, while, (Pinder & Harlos, 2001) focused on "intentionally withholding of work-related ideas, information, and opinions" as a response to injustice. The article adheres to the definition given by (Van Dyne et al., 2003) i.e., "intentional withholding ideas, information, and opinions with relevance to improving work and work organisations".

Chou and Chang (2020) categorised silence in three different forms- A) "Unsolicited Predetermined Employee Silence" contends that an intentional silence decision is brought about by an employee's innate desire to keep quiet, which is

independent of the context of the organisational problem and depends on the individual's subjective assessment of the benefits of keeping quiet versus the potential risks of expressing up. B) "Unsolicited Issue-Based Employee Silence" is chosen only when an employee observes or believes that there is an Organisational problem which may be arising or already exists, that may need addressing or keeping quiet. It depends on the employee's subjective and individual assessment of the benefits of keeping quiet versus the risks of voicing it out. C) Solicited Target-Based Employee Silence: Silence that occurs when feedback or ideas are explicitly solicited. This type of silence often results from employees' cost-benefit evaluations and their relationships with the individual or group seeking input. Employees may use silence to safeguard and maintain their connections with the target.

Review of Literature

It has been discovered that silence reduces the belief of individuals in their ability to articulate what they believe, which leads to poorer employment and individual outcomes (Vakola & Bouradas, 2005). Researchers found several reasons why workers preferred to stay silent, which were primarily divided into four categories based on individual behaviours:

1. Acquiescence Silence refers to withholding information due to a disengaged attitude and the belief that speaking or offering suggestions is useless and won't change anything in the existing organisation because there is no chance for improvement and the current situation is viewed as typical (Nafei, 2016a; Pinder & Harlos, 2001; Van Dyne et al., 2003).
2. Defensive Silence involves hiding information for personal safety and fear of punishment (Nafei, 2016a; Pinder & Harlos, 2001; Van Dyne et al., 2003).
3. Prosocial or Relational Silence results from concern for others, i.e. withholding confidential information to protect other people (Nafei, 2016a; Van Dyne et al., 2003).
4. Protective Silence is exercised to maintain good relationships, accepting the decisions of supervisors and other members to promote smooth functioning and avoid any problem in the organisation (Deniz et al., 2013; Milliken & Wolfe Morrison, 2003; Nafei, 2016a).

These aspects were further developed by Brinsfield (2012), who introduced Deviant Silence (caused by wilful defiance), Disengaged Silence (caused by apathy), and Diffident Silence (caused by lack of confidence).

Apart from individual factors, managerial practices were also observed to foster a climate of silence. Employees feared negative feedback from supervisors and perceived employees as distrusting or self-serving (Milliken & Morrison, 2000). Decision-making processes often reinforced silence, as it was assumed that management knew best and dissenting opinions were deemed worthless (Milliken & Morrison, 2000; Nafei, 2016b; Vakola & Bouradas, 2005). Such environments led to dissatisfaction, demotivation, stress, cynicism, and disengagement, ultimately resisting change and innovation (Erdoğan, 2018; Gambarotto & Cammozzo, 2010; Nafei, 2016a; Ölçer & Coşkun, 2024; Pope, 2019; Vakola & Bouradas, 2005). Studies demonstrated that a culture of silence negatively affected organisational performance by suppressing constructive criticism and hindering necessary improvements (Milliken & Morrison, 2000). Employee engagement, defined as "a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind characterised by vigor, dedication, and absorption," (Schaufeli et al., 2002) was identified as an essential factor in workplace success. Engagement involved maintaining an optimistic outlook, with vigor representing energy and willingness to excel, dedication reflecting enthusiasm and pride in work, and absorption referring to intense focus on tasks.

Earlier research emphasised that Organisational silence significantly influenced employees' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours (Sadeghi & Razavi, 2020). It has been demonstrated to impede decision-making, problem identification, and employee trust in the Organisation (Dedahanov & Rhee, 2015; Milliken & Wolfe Morrison, 2003; Nikolaou et al., 2011). Silence in the workplace acted as a barrier to growth, reduced commitment, job satisfaction, productivity, and other positive attitudes (Parlar Kılıç et al., 2021; Sadeghi & Razavi, 2020); Nafei, 2016b; Brinsfield, 2012; Vakola & Bouradas, 2005). A few researchers in western contexts found that Organisational silence was linked to employee engagement (Kim & Wang, 2024; Morrison, 2014; Nafei, 2016a; Yağar & Dökme Yağar, 2023). However, studies examining this relationship, particularly in the banking sector and Indian contexts, were not found.

When communication gaps exist in organisations and employees refrain from voicing their opinions, Employee Engagement suffers. The research is grounded in the theory of conservation of resources, which suggests that individuals work to preserve and safeguard their existing resources while acquiring new ones (Hobfoll, 1989). When employees experience silence, it leads to demotivation, emotional exhaustion, and lack of autonomy, which are the key cognitive resources required for engagement (Jahanzeb & Fatima, 2018; Rodrigues et al., 2018; Stander & Rothmann, 2010).

Wang et al. (2020) suggested that organisational silence reduces motivation and autonomy, leaving employees feeling undervalued. Morrison (2014) argued that employees believe their suggestions are ignored and feel incapable of influencing organisational decisions, leading to cognitive inconsistency (Nafei, 2016b). This cognitive inconsistency between employees' beliefs and behaviours can lead to disengagement and affect their overall engagement levels

(Mangi et al., 2021). Such an environment ultimately hinders organisational growth and effectiveness (Gambarotto & Cammozzo, 2010; Ighiebemhe, 2019).

The current study aimed to analyse differences in Organisational Silence considering demographic factors such as gender, age, income level, and management level, and to measure the relationship and impact of Organisational Silence on Employee Engagement.

Research Methodology

The sample for the study consisted of 198 employees working in the banks. Convenience sampling was used to gather data from the respondents. T-test and ANOVA were used to measure the differences in Organisational silence with respect to gender, age, income levels, management levels, etc. Pearson correlation and regression analysis were performed to identify the association and impact of Organisational silence on employee engagement.

Organisational Silence was assessed using the Organisational Silence Survey developed by Çakıcı (2008). The survey was designed to determine the reason behind employees' decision to stay silent at the workplace. The survey consisted of 30 items and was classified into five dimensions, namely 'administrative and organisational reasons', 'fears related to work, lack of experience', 'fear of isolation', and 'fear of damaging relationships. Each question in the survey was measured using a five-point Likert scale that varies from Strongly Agree (5) to Strongly Disagree (1). The Cronbach's Alpha of Organisational Silence for the current study was 0.94, indicating high internal consistency.

Employee engagement was assessed using the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale developed by Schaufeli et al. (2002). The scale was designed to measure employee engagement in the workplace. The survey consisted of 17 items and three dimensions: Vigor, Dedication, and Absorption. Each item was measured using a seven-point Likert scale varying from Never (0) to Always (6). The Cronbach's Alpha of Employee Engagement for the current study was 0.89, indicating good internal consistency.

Results

To measure the difference in Organisation Silence with respect to level of management, age, and level of qualification, ANOVA was administered. As Table 1 shows that the p-value of the Organisational Silence with respect to level of management, age, and qualification level is < 0.05 , which means that there exists a statistically significant difference between Organisational Silence among different management levels, employees with different age groups, and with different qualification levels. A t-test was also conducted to measure the difference in Organisation Silence with respect to gender and marital status, but the results are insignificant.

Level of Management		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
	Between Groups	1129.060	2	564.530	4.587	.011
Within Groups	23996.480	195	123.059			
Total	25125.540	197				
Age	Between Groups	2110.540	5	422.108	3.521	.005
	Within Groups	23015.000	192	119.870		
	Total	25125.540	197			
Qualification	Between Groups	1540.536	3	513.512	4.224	.006
	Within Groups	23585.004	194	121.572		
	Total	25125.540	197			

Table 1

Correlation Analysis

As shown in Table 2, the p-value of Organisational Silence and employee engagement is <0.05 with a correlation value $-.169^*$, which shows that there exists a statistically significant negative correlation of Organisation Silence with Employee Engagement.

		Organisation Silence	Employee Engagement
Organisation Silence	Pearson Correlation	1	$-.169^*$
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.018
	N	198	198

Table 2

Regression Analysis

As shown in Table 3, the R2 value of the Organisation Silence for Employee engagement is found to be .024, which means that the linear regression explains 2.4% of the variance in Employee engagement, i.e., there is 2.4% impact of Organisational Silence on Employee Engagement.

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.169a	.028	.024	8.62947

a. Predictors: (Constant), Organisation Silence

Table 3

As shown in Table 4, the F-ratio of model 1[1, 197(5.795, $p= 0.018$)] shows that the independent variable Organisational Silence significantly predicts Employee Engagement, which means this regression model is a good fit for the data.

Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1. Regression	427.585	1	427.585	5.742	.018b
Residual	14595.688	196	74.468		
Total	15023.273	197			

Table 4

As shown in Table 5, the unstandardized coefficient B is $-.130$, which means that with an increase in Organisation Silence, there is a 13.0% decrease in Employee engagement. Further, the p-value of these variables is <0.05 , which means that Organisational Silence significantly contributes to the model.

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1(Constant)	96.944	4.771		20.318	.000
Organisation Silence	$-.130$.054	$-.169$	-2.396	.018

Table 5

Conclusion and Discussions

The terms Organisational Silence and Employee Silence have been used interchangeably in the management literature (Chou & Chang, 2020; John & Manikandan, 2019). However, (Kim & Wang, 2024) distinguished between the two, describing Organisational Silence as a collective phenomenon influenced by intrinsic and extrinsic factors at multiple levels. Employee Silence occurs at the individual level, affecting personal productivity and cognitive well-being, and is shaped by organisational characteristics such as workplace atmosphere, operations, and employee perceptions. The results of this study revealed a significant negative relationship between Organisational Silence and Employee Engagement and a negative impact of Organisational Silence on Employee Engagement. These results are consistent with previous studies conducted by (Nafei, 2016a; Wang et al., 2020; Yağar & Dökme Yağar, 2023)

Silence often signals anxiety, hopelessness, and low self-esteem, which have psychological repercussions (Cortina & Magley, 2014). Described as a “silent killer,” silence is associated with employee disengagement, impeding organisational change and development by reducing productivity, creativity, and knowledge generation (Vemuri, 2019b). Recognising silence within an organisation is challenging; both supervisors and subordinates need to proactively investigate and address the root causes of silence to benefit growth (Vemuri, 2019a)

Limitations and Future Research

Further research is needed to explore Organisational Silence at the organisational level, especially focusing on its positive aspects, as most studies have concentrated on its negative implications and the individual level of silence (Oyerinde, 2020). Organisational Silence can also serve as a strategy or mechanism to avoid potential disputes, stress, or errors that may arise from speaking out and preserve confidentiality (Kim & Wang, 2024).

Given that psychological well-being is a prominent consequence of silence, it is recommended that organisations emphasise this aspect in future studies (Kim & Wang, 2024). The present study only examined one form of silence without considering its dimensions. Future research could explore various dimensions and types of silence (Knoll & Redman, 2015).

The study relied on convenience sampling, which may increase the likelihood of bias. Additionally, the sample consisted exclusively of banking employees, limiting the generalizability of the findings. To improve the generalizability and applicability of results, future studies should include larger and more diverse samples across multiple sectors.

Implications

An organisation’s ability to confront and address its shortcomings determines its journey from being good to great (Vakola & Bouradas, 2005). Explicit confrontation between superiors and subordinates regarding organisational issues is essential to address the status quo effectively. Such interactions can enhance organisational efficiency, performance, and growth.

Organisations need to foster an atmosphere of openness and trust that encourages employees to voice their opinions without fear (Piderit & Ashford, 2003). Employees should feel assured that their suggestions are valued and considered important for organisational improvement. By creating a culture of mutual respect and communication, organisations can reduce silence and enhance employee engagement, ultimately driving innovation and success.

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